

## LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE – DEALING WITH NEW REALITIES

**Annabel Beerel, Ph.D.**

Many, far too many so-called leaders truly understand the complex process of change! Since change is continuous and pervasive, we depend on leaders to help us navigate our way. Alas, only too often the changes our leaders initiate are neither effective, nor aligned with reality.

Change is the only reality, something Heraclites, the Greek philosopher told us over 2500 years ago! Despite the persistence and pervasiveness of change throughout history and certainly foremost in our minds at this time, we are not good at responding to change. Let us consider some of the reasons that contribute to our poor and reluctant performance in this critical realm of our lives.

New realities signal change, and new realities are continuously arriving. We are assailed by them. We experience them daily - I broke my tooth, my portfolio is worth half of what it used to be, I lost my job – and the media, the internet, and the cyber “twitter” keep us constantly confronted with all kinds of other new realities.

As we read the economic data and analysis in this issue of Business New Hampshire Magazine, for example, we are confronted with both new and some not so new realities. Because so many realities confront us on many levels on a daily basis, we have learned to screen out those realities we deem not relevant to us and our lives. Our screening mechanism filters out new realities we are not interested in as well as those we do not understand, or do not want to understand. We also tend to filter out those new realities we consider unpalatable, unpleasant or inconvenient in the hopes they will either go away or someone else will deal with them.

Oftentimes new realities emerge in covert and less obvious ways. Only those paying close attention to what is going on in the present will detect the early warning signals of the arrival of new realities. A good example is the whole issue concerning the perilous state of our environment. The people paying attention, such as Rachel Carlson and others saw the new reality of environmental degradation emerging at least fifty years ago. Many of us chose to deny the new reality when it was new or hoped that it would go away. Since reality by definition, never goes away, we are now confronted with the deferred reality, and many people are excitedly lamenting about it as if it were a new one. What we can learn from this is that a great deal of our lives is taken up with playing catch-up with old realities we chose to defer. Look for example at the economic crisis we are facing! No new realities there! Just a whole lot of deferred realities hitting us at once. So our first problem with change is that we do not see it coming or do not want to see it coming! What we also know is that a reality deferred always shows up later and that any serious consequences have escalated with time.

Our next problem with change and new realities is that many people in positions of authority, along with those who claim to be leaders decide for the rest of us which new realities we should respond to. In other words, they try to define our reality for us.

Unfortunately many of us collude with this behavior as we want someone else to solve the problems that difficult or unpalatable new realities bring in their wake. The problem here lies in the tendency for authorities and so called leaders to cut and paste a picture of reality that suits their agenda. Part of this agenda is to keep them looking good, competent and in power. This reality encourages them to create pictures of reality that are often warped or frequently pure fantasy. It is no surprise that so many change efforts fail. Change initiatives that are not aligned with reality are destined for disaster. It is simply a matter of time.

Identifying or framing reality is a messy business. It requires many people, especially those with differing mindsets and viewing points, to frame a reality that in any way approximates the truth. Sadly, our power hungry leaders rarely test out their versions of reality with anyone other than their like minded supporters or friends. Those who depend on others to “lead” them and to define reality for them, willingly support the creation of palatable fantasies or versions of reality that are not too uncomfortable. What we can learn from this is that aligning people in the organization to a reality that is **real** takes time and effort, and meets with resistance from those who prefer to be told what to do.

Another important aspect regarding the problem of change is that new realities always challenge us personally. They call us to account around our sense of self, our prioritization of values, our feelings of self-esteem and of competence. New realities always require us to rethink or recalibrate our self image. Some times this challenge is a big one and sometimes it is not so big. Big challenges can really rattle our cage. Because change creates this personal discomfort, big or small, we shy away from it. We deny or defer new realities, or we rely on someone else to deal with them for us, so that we can remain in our personal comfort zones. An organization with leadership that encourages this head in the sand mentality will surely die. What we can learn from this is that effective leaders understand that the very first thing that any change effort must deal with is people’s sense of self around that change and what they perceive they are giving up or having to recalibrate. Failure to attend to this adaptive work will result in at very best a mediocre change process. The greater likelihood is that it will fail as the vitality and creativity of the people involved will be diverted into their anxiety and feelings of incompetence.

The final challenge of change I would like to discuss here is that true change only occurs where there is learning. This means that successful change is dependent on people **being** different not just knowing different things. Getting people to be different is not easy. They have to shift; they have to literally **change their minds**. People only change their minds when they truly understand that the only way to exist is to align their thinking with the new reality, because reality never goes away. It just keeps changing. An example is our current financial crisis and the deep recession that is reality regardless of the reality some people wish to define for the rest of us. If we are going to successfully change and create a new future, we need to realize that a sustainable economic model depends on each one of us. There can be no bystanders. We need to grasp that economic welfare depends on a sustainable model focused on community welfare, not on excess, the pursuit

of wealth, or individual performance. Unless we truly learn from our new reality, there will be no real change. Change efforts will have the effect of moving the chairs on the Titanic.

Effective leaders know that managing change is a complex process. They know and understand that change is about learning, deep learning, not just about doing things differently. Those leaders who hold people's feet to the fire to face and respond to new realities when they are new will create good change processes that are likely to be effective. They are also ethical leaders, for what can be more ethical than seeking to align oneself and others with reality – for reality is what is true?

**Annabel Beerel. MBA, Ph.D.**

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