

INSIGHTS

Uncommon sense: Leading Teams Through Disruption

Faster and faster waves of change and disruption are rocking our world. We're all trying to navigate the ever-increasing complexity and diversity. This is our new reality. So how can we lead through these times?

Common sense tells us that individuals deal best with change when they are positive and focused, proactive and flexible. As leaders, we can certainly aim to inspire each and every person in our organization by creating a compelling vision of the future (especially one that takes care of people and the planet). We can focus each individual's energy on what's most important by creating challenging opportunities to flex their responsibilities to meet the company's evolving needs. These directional shifts are certainly essential to the continued success of our organizations — but directional shifts alone are not enough.

Organizations are groups of individuals trying to navigate through change *together*. Uncommon sense says that we as leaders must, therefore, be incredibly concerned and focused on what happens *between* the individuals who are building our company's future.

SOUNDING THE DEATH KNELL FOR BUREAUCRACY

Why look beyond what's happening with individuals to the interpersonal relationships between our team members?

Change, no matter what it's source, threatens our individual and collective security. So even if people hate bureaucracy and crave change, they are often reluctant — sometimes even unconsciously terrified — to embrace it.

Change brings us face to face with the unknown. At work, change gifts each of us with uncertainty about our role, our right to make certain decisions, and our ability to continue to make our unique contributions and add value to our organization. Multiply that by how many people we each have to interact with during the course of our day and, there, we have it. A mess of anxiety, confusion, and

resistance at play in our interactions that silently challenges the successful execution of any carefully crafted and communicated directional shifts.

OUR LOVE/HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH CHANGE IS A PROBLEM FOR BUREAUCRACY. BECAUSE IN A DISRUPTED WORLD, COMMAND-AND-CONTROL STRUCTURES THAT MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO NO LONGER CUT IT.

These org structures don't assuage people's fear and uncertainty: they often amplify it. And they're just too slow in a dynamic, highly connected world, too painfully dependent on one person's leadership. They can't flex and respond fast enough to keep up with external disruption.

We need different organizational structures. Ones that are, as Dee Hock (founder and former CEO of VISA Inc.) said, "self-organizing, adaptive, non-linear complex systems [...] which exhibit characteristics of both order and chaos."^{*} At Ankura, we're seeing more and more companies running change initiatives that are, inherently, transformations of the organization to something that looks more like what Dee labelled "chaordic".

No need for alarm here. Changing an organization into some agile combination of order and chaos isn't revolutionary: it's evolutionary. In practice, it looks like more individuals making decisions closer to the point of challenge; more individuals taking action faster and responding with greater velocity; more individuals generating the acceleration that builds momentum.

* Dee Hock, "The Chaordic Organization: Out of Chaos and Into Order". Accessed online October 31, 2017 at https://web.archive.org/web/20131008003627if_/http://www.myrgan.com:80/Inc/Literature_files/The%20Chaordic%20Organization.pdf.

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Thinking of evolving your organization to be like this? We've learned what makes the difference between success and failure when implementing such a strategic change. It's not more control. And it's not the use of force. Evolutionary success comes down to constituting our work relationships in such a way that we can execute fast — together — in the face of change.

OPTING FOR HIGHER FUNCTIONING RELATIONSHIPS

We know this kind of speed when we see it. It's the business unit that executes on a promise to others in the organization so fast that the VP hears remarks like, "Wow! We never expected that fast a response from them". It's the team of players that, no matter what the organization structure is and no matter what the challenges, keeps operating as a group of highly interdependent players. It's the CEO who sits down with their direct report and says, "Clearly, you know what you're doing. This is an unusual circumstance, not a competency issue. Help me understand what's going on here". Bottom line: it's what we see with any *group of people in which everyone has all their one-to-one relationships worked out*.

Many of us hear the word "relationship" in a business context and automatically disengage. After all, relationships have nothing to do with work, right? Not quite. If we dig a little deeper, it's actually the quality of our work relationships that determines what we can — and cannot — accomplish together. Our relationships are the context in which we have the conversations that proceed how we perform and execute our work. As such, they are the foundation of our success, both individually and collectively.

WORK RELATIONSHIPS ARE LIKE ARRANGED MARRIAGES. THEY ARE ARRANGED BY THE LINES ON THE ORG CHART THAT CONNECT OUR ROLES.

That is, we are in these relationships by the roles that we inhabit. "Working out" these arranged marriages is not about making sure that we spend enough time and energy on them so that they're "good". As in, we can consistently be nice with each other. "Nice" is what we want for our social relationships.

At work, we want "effective" relationships. Ones in which we can candidly share our different perspectives, agree that we disagree (as we certainly will), learn from each other, and co-create new ways of moving forward together. We need much more than mere cordiality to be able to move fast together in an environment of change.



REFINE YOUR CORE

HAVE AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE THAT'S ORIENTED TO EVERYONE BEING "NICE"?

Consider the cost. Hold up "nice" as the standard and people will undoubtedly spend time and energy talking about the work relationships that aren't. Unfortunately, most of those conversations won't happen with the individual with which they have the problem. They will take place with everyone else. The more we talk about that "problem person" with third parties, the more "right" we make ourselves and the more "wrong" the other person becomes in everyone's eyes. This gossiping (i.e., triangulating) inevitably kills the prospect of us effectively working together.

Aiming for "nice" relationships at work not only slows us down but it also perpetuates the status quo. We can't get to talking about why we need to change, where, or when — never mind how we're going to adapt how things are done around here — if we're wrapped up in making everything "nice".

So how do we create higher functioning work relationships?

We take responsibility for the effectiveness of every single work relationship that we have. We stop talking "about" our colleagues with third parties. And we start speaking directly with each other.

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WHAT MIGHT THESE ONE-ON-ONE CONVERSATIONS SOUND LIKE?

Both parties will:

LISTEN WITHOUT JUDGING.

We listen to discern what we can learn from each other, not to judge each other's opinion, perspective, or ideas.

SPEAK CANDIDLY.

We know that fake communication, like fake news, destroys the possibility of a positive future for us both.

DISAGREE AS A MATTER OF COURSE.

We expect and use conflict, acknowledging and respecting our differences as a source of innovation.

STAND TOGETHER.

We stay fully present to whatever shows up in the conversation, knowing that we stand together and, if we do drift apart, we'll be able to talk about that too.

POINT OUT PROBLEMS.

We call them as we see them, confident in our ability to figure our way through any challenges together and coordinate what we're doing for the greater good.

Phenomenal organizational performance in the face of disruptive change is rooted in high functioning work relationships. Relationships built on shared commitments to candor and continual learning, to adaptation and co-evolution. It's up to us as leaders to demonstrate what these effective work relationships look like and set the cultural standards that allow our teams to discover and access their full capacity to excel.



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ABOUT US

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