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Thoughts from Staff College.....the eighth in our series of Faculty blogs

Common Practice [1]: "cobwebs at first, cables at last" [2]

Captain David Lilley Royal Navy

[1] Cambridge Dictionary, *"something that is usually or regularly done, often as a habit, tradition, or custom"*.

[2] Chinese Proverb.

Have you left behind some of your common practices over the last few months and now have feelings ranging from euphoria to grief? These practices are often difficult for us to see, even though they might be repeated weekly, daily, or even hourly. During more stable times, these actions are even more difficult to change but the current Covid crisis has shown how quickly we can adapt to a change in context. This blog examines how we, as leaders, might learn from these experiences to help us inspire and facilitate continuous change in ourselves, our teams, and organisations.

I offer a personal story where I learnt much about my beliefs and thinking errors, which might be relevant to our current situation? Flag Officer Sea Training (FOST) was established post World War II to train the Royal Navy's operational warships, responding at the time to significant changes in personnel policy. For over 40 years the headquarters (HQ) was based at Portland, in Dorset, and had established a world-wide reputation for excellence in training. In 1995, I was part of the executive team responsible for the move of this organisation to Devonport, in what was then seen by many as a retrograde step. I remember vividly a conversation with the Senior Responsible Officer soon after we had re-established the HQ. I put forward my plan to help consolidate the move and to allow time for people to recover. I was quickly rebuked and "re-educated" why, having now changed the system and gained a better understanding of how it actually worked[1], we needed to build on this knowledge and to capitalise on the opportunity for further growth. On reflection, maintaining the rate of change was the best thing to do for the system, the people working within it and, most importantly, those who were being trained. However, at the time it felt intuitively wrong and against my judgement not to look after the needs of my Staff first.

I learnt much about myself, leadership and change from that experience. Three key points come to mind: First, I had to confront the cognitive dissonance[2] that I was experiencing and challenge my own beliefs: Secondly, having accepted that I might be wrong, I realised that one could overcome the inertia of personal habits, traditions, and customs more easily through changing the context: Finally, sustaining the right pace of change might be counter to our intuition but it will always be a test of our leadership. We learn that for change to be successful, it takes a well-articulated vision, an understanding of people, demonstration of personal conviction, and communication at a level and intensity that is too easy to underestimate beforehand. However,

deciding on how quickly and where to make change happen is a function of our leadership. Great organisations build on the legacy of their past leadership, where they respect their good old habits and are not afraid to co-create new practices in a generative and innovative ways. Ask two questions of our organisations:

1. How relevant are our traditions or recently constructed routines?
2. What value do our rituals, habits or routines bring?

Whether old habits have outlived their usefulness or new ones are not fit for purpose, the following model might help us act more appropriately:

Changing Culture by Changing Rituals, Habits and Routines^[3]

	Old	New
Good	Preserve and Strengthen	Invent and Perfect
Bad	Unlearn and Leave Behind	Rethink and Try Again

If we see ourselves as stewards of our organisation, it will help detach ego and hubris from our decision making. “What you leave behind is not what that is engraved in stone monuments but what is woven into the lives of others” ^[4]. We might then strengthen our good old habits and continue to re-invent and perfect our good new ones, irrespective of the nature of our work? The All Blacks international rugby team have a phrase which epitomises this approach:

*“you don’t own the jersey, you’re just the body in the journey at the time”
(Whakapapa)^[5]*

Through our personal example and leadership, if we are aware of our underlying behavioural assumptions, we will overcome our immunity to change that manifests itself through self-protection, fear of change and relief from anxiety. By accepting the paradox that change is the only constant in life we will not let our cobwebs turn into chains. If we aspire to lead, then we have no alternative.

Good luck on your leadership journey.

References

[1] Kurt Lewin “You never fully understand a system until you try to change it”.
 [2] Leon Festinger; [A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance](#) (Stanford University Press; 1957).
 [3] Denison, Hooijberg, Lane, Lief; [Leading Culture Change in Global Organisations](#). p158. (John Wiley, San Franscisco; 2012).
 [4] Pericles.
 [5] James Kerr; [Legacy \(What the All blacks can teach us about the business of life\)](#). (Constable, UK. 2013).