Change with Less Pain!
by Betsi Bixby

What today’s disruption has already taught us is speeding up change in your organization is necessary to not only survive but thrive. Are you yourself or some of your employees change resistant? Whether you believe resistance to change is a learned behavior or an innate characteristic, startling research has proven that resistance to change is fear-based. Therefore, one of the best things you can do for your company is educate yourself and your staff about positive fear management, especially now.

Would you agree that each person, including yourself, has a comfort zone of behaviors? Think of it as a big circle around you. As human beings, we like being in and performing tasks within our comfort zone. Why? Because we feel safe and competent. The only problem is that all adult learning occurs outside that comfort zone. Learning requires us to step outside our comfort zone. As soon as we make that step, we immediately feel uncomfortable with anxiety and fear.

As a leader of people, you may have conquered many fear responses through your own lifetime experiences that you’ve forgotten what it’s like to be fearful! But you must understand fear and fear management to drive your company forward through willing, innovative employees.

The fears of adult learners are vast—fear of looking stupid, fear of doing the wrong thing, fear of being confused and incompetent, fear of even our own financial security (I may lose my job if I screw this up!). Depending upon our memory banks of experience, it is at the point of feeling this fear that we either retreat back to our comfort zone sacrificing all learning and needed change, or we force ourselves to hang in there until finally feeling comfortable and expanding our comfort zone.

Before we deal with proven zone-expanding techniques, understand that fear manifests itself in two ways: Fear now and anticipated fear. An example of anticipated fear is when someone worries so much about a future step out of their comfort zone that they don’t even attempt that step! Ever had something you didn’t quite know how or want to tackle, so you did everything else you possibly could at your desk? That is anticipated fear. It’s just as real to our brains as the real thing. Think for a moment about a person with fear of heights. A cliff is 20 feet ahead of them. They stop in their tracks. Why? They are imagining the fear of standing on the edge. Even though they are safely 20 feet from the edge, their heart pounds, their breathing increases, their palms are sweaty.
Before thinking all fear is a bad thing, understand that fear, both current and anticipated, is how God wired us to protect ourselves. It’s a natural, good instinct not to be pooh-poohed. But, if we are going to learn, we must positively manage non-safety fears impeding our learning and, therefore, our company’s success.

To positively manage fear, we must do only two things: 1) Move closer to what we fear and 2) stay longer. Dr. Stephanie Burns, a PhD in adult learning behavior, developed this two-prong fear management technique. What she discovered was that by understanding fear, and having ways to manage it, people became much braver in both their personal and professional lives, using tiny incremental steps out of personal comfort zones, then staying “out there” long enough for the new behavior to be comfortable. People began making leaps and bounds in their personal learning.

Let’s put this two-prong technique into a practical business application. You had gone to a tradeshow before all this disruption and found a terrific routing/tank-monitoring tool. You came home jazzed up about the cost savings. You handed the project over to your dispatcher. Months later, it’s not in use. The dispatcher tells you there were too many problems and kept, his old way. What really happened? Likely, fear of change.

Your dispatcher’s piece of mind relies on happy customers with the right product at the right time. He knows he can do that using his current system, no matter how costly or inefficient. Just the thought of angry customers may be enough to keep him from investing the time and energy out of his comfort zone to install and learn the new product. He says he didn’t have time, or it was too complicated for the drivers, or it just won’t work. How do you get him over the hump? Move closer, stay longer.

Instead of telling him it’s the new system, like it or get out, you suggest he try it on just one customer. Even if he needs a couple of months with the first customer, there will come a point where the new technology is fully within his comfort zone! By focusing on what he can do (one customer) he can expand in incremental steps, maybe five customers, then ten, etc. until your whole routing system is finally completely automated. Not only will you achieve your goal, you’ll have positioned this employee to more easily embrace change the next time.

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