

The Leadership of Change

As President-elect Obama and his transition team move forward to January 20, 2009, we are continually reminded that change is HARD. The economy continues to fail, the market continues to drop, and those who have failed the most want bailout packages with few apparent plans to actually change the way they operate.

Yet objectively, most everyone can see the necessity for making changes in the way we conduct business, spend money, save and invest, conserve energy, and most importantly, for leaders at all levels, communicate more honestly and effectively.

Howard Gardner said, "A key - perhaps the key - to leadership is the effective communication of a story." (Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership, 1996)

Former Governor of Texas, Ann Richards' dogma was:

"Show up!
Know your story!
Put yourself at risk every day!"

If 'story' has been important for the last 2000+ years, then it is even more so today. As our world changes (almost hourly), the security and stability of an honest story helps to provide meaning to the changes that we will continue to experience through the foreseeable future.

So, have you asked yourself lately, "What's your story . . . and why?" Has your story changed or is it in transition? How are you communicating that story to your team, your clients, your colleagues, your family and friends?

In a recent coaching conversation with a credit union CEO, we discussed the realities of the economy and what it meant to her organization. As we discussed several scenarios and how they might play out for her credit union, I asked, "Have you communicated to your staff how the future looks for the CU?"

Because the credit union has above average capitalization, doesn't have any direct connections to sub-prime mortgages, etc., the future looks fairly positive. Given that scenario, the outlook for everyone staying employed is good and compared to many other financial services institutions, the future appears to be encouraging for those who work there.

Not having to downsize is GREAT news in this economy. That's a story that needs to be communicated. Even though the credit union in question does not anticipate major adverse effects in the coming months, the economy will definitely affect the families of the staff members, the members of the credit union, and the community it serves. The staff needs to be reassured so they can reassure their members that not only is their money safe, but they will continue to serve their community in a positive way.

By the same token, if the outlook for your organization/team is less than positive, that story should also to be communicated. If sacrifices will have to be made, your ability to communicate what they are and how this will affect everyone on the team is essential.

More than ever, everyone just wants to know what's going on. The news for our nation is not encouraging for the short term. Confidence has been lost, in part because leaders have not always communicated honestly, either by not telling the story at all, only telling part of it, or fabricating one that wasn't even close to the truth.

Never has sharing your story been more important. The story of your organization, your team, and/or your individual journey told honestly and appropriately will help everyone to have a better understanding of 'what's going on', what the path forward may look like, and how they can contribute and collaborate more appropriately. Certainly it's easier to tell a 'good news story', but told with honesty and in a compelling manner, even news that's not so great can be shared to help everyone have a better understanding of how they need to move forward. That strategy worked in the presidential campaign, and while it will not be easy after January 20, 2009, for the leadership of our country or those of us who believe in change, we will move forward because the story will continue to be told.

As we approach the holiday season, it may take a bit more thought to be grateful in this economy. Perhaps honestly identifying your story, sharing it appropriately, and listening to the stories of others will make us all grateful for the things of true value - family, friends, freedom, faith.

What's your story? Are you sharing it openly and honestly? Be grateful you have a story to share.

Happy Thanksgiving to my US colleagues & friends, & Aloha to all,

Susan