

OPEN HEART SURGERY



Even in business settings, human connectedness happens heart-to-heart. Making transformational change almost like open heart surgery.

"If you want to see how indispensable you are," goes an old saying, "put your hand in a bucket of water, and then pull it out. See how big a hole you leave."

That sentiment may comfort all of us who have had to pore over staffing spreadsheets, choosing who will stay and who will go in the rounds of layoffs, downsizing, right-sizing or buzzword-du-jour that have cycled through the baby boomers' management careers. It could have been voiced, too, by a Board who recently decided to bring in an outsider to replace its departing CEO. The internal candidate considered by most to be a shoo-in for promotion to the top spot was terminated.

The outsider looks the part of CEO, acts the part, is the part. To the external world he's a great choice, who has exactly the capabilities that are needed to take the company to the proverbial "next level."

How different it looks from the inside! Although the internal candidate had known for several months that he would not be chosen, the announcement came as a shock to employees. Like the day Kennedy was shot, "where were you when you heard about the new CEO?" is something everyone shares. People's expectations and hopes for the future were in free fall, like a car breaking through the guardrail. Nothing anyone could do but wait for the inevitable crash as they hit bottom.

For a few weeks, there was a complete absence of power - as if the company were in a blackout. Someone had shut off the switch. No lights, no energy, no forward movement. Everything stopped.

The feeling went from "we are on a mission, a journey together" to one of "hey, I have got to look out for me first." Weird behaviors spread: people declaring "I am in charge," like Alexander Haig when President Ronald Reagan was shot in an assassination attempt in 1981.

Or sudden, unexplained absences from the office when overwhelmed leaders just took off for the rest of the day. Endless hallway conversations danced around the unspoken question hanging in the air, "Now what are you going to do, really?" Head hunters descended like locusts.

The new CEO showed up as billed, doing all the right things to communicate in his new domain. He held conference calls, visited business units, sat down with small groups of people in the cafeteria, sent out mass emails. Somehow, these efforts rang a bit hollow. As one business unit leader said, "It feels like we are going through the motions - he has read the same books that we have."

So what was happening? One hand had simply been pulled from the bucket, leaving no visible hole and, apparently, no cause for distress. If...if we dismiss the human dimension.

Hiring decisions involve rational decision-making. You know the drill: make a list of positives and negatives, the skills required to tackle the challenges at hand. Then score each candidate against those profiles, check references, and let the best man (or woman) win. Wall Street often rewards such moves.

The problem is: that kind of decision-making over-emphasizes the candidate's accomplishments – what it is s/he has done. Of course leaders do; insight without action is merely wishful thinking. But if we look only at what people do, our assessment is somehow bloodless. We miss the subtler nuances that elevate leaders to greatness. As important as what the leader does is the way s/he shows up: the tone the leader sets, the way s/he "holds" the space in which other people can do great work, taps into the human dimension. It's the overlay of being with doing that transforms individual efforts into effective team accomplishments.

We never see, clearly, how leaders do that. Just as we never see the endless threads that weave our lives together into a supportive net. Sometimes the net entwines us when we catch someone's glance or feel someone's touch. There's a jolt of recognition. An unspoken feeling. A sudden awareness of a deeper presence, the energy that dances in each of us.

Similarly, we can never see - exactly - our own life force. Of course, our bodies have voluntary muscles, which move when we want them to. We intend to pick up a book, and the muscles of our arm engage to do our bidding. But we also have involuntary muscles, like our hearts. If we had to consciously direct each beat, how long would we survive? We need both voluntary and involuntary muscles, seen and unseen power, to get things done.

The rejected candidate was a master of unseen power - quite simply, the heart of his organization. He didn't just pull the right levers to get things done. He was warm, engaged, present. He shared his feelings, spoke about his values, discussed his purpose. In short, staff knew him first as a person, then as an executive. And that gave vitality to the threads linking employees in a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Breaking such threads is bewildering, disorienting. It's like open-heart surgery. To the surgeon, cracking the patient's chest and stopping the heart to repair a valve or re-route an artery is just another day at the office. He's in and out in a couple of hours, and on to the next. For the patient, the procedure is a huge jolt. Healing takes weeks, even months - during which, as countless spouses will tell you, s/he is prone to inexplicable outbursts of raw emotion.

The simple truth is that we humans yearn for connection. We are not, like turtles, hatched from eggs that have been laid in the sand two months earlier by mothers who then disappeared; we do not, within days of struggling to life, find our way to the sea, swimming alone for long stretches of time. We are born in relationship; we survive only by being connected - first to our mothers, then to an ever-widening circle of fellow humans. It's obvious that a baby will die if left alone. That's equally true for executives no matter how proficient they become: get disconnected from your organization, and your business will start dying day-by-day. Unseen energy - our individual and collective spirit - dissipates when we are disconnected from each other at the level that taps our deeper intelligence, creativity, consciousness.

Human beings join institutions to accomplish things that we cannot do alone. In order to sustain performance, we must bring into play our full capacity: not just our intellect, but our hearts and our guts; not just the skills that we've honed through education and experience, but the essential "us-ness" of insights, presence, and perspectives. Up to a point, we can be motivated rationally, receiving financial rewards for meeting/exceeding expectations. But to keep us truly engaged, leaders must show us that we are valued. Valued not only for what we do, not only as one more hand in the bucket of water, but for who we are.

When we are valued, we feel connected. And where we are connected, we can achieve great things. Together.

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