

Article 36 – Understanding change

Let me begin with a story concerning two people who undergo triple bypass operations. In one case the surgeon sees the patient before the operation and says: "When you regain consciousness after the operation, you'll probably have a splitting headache, your mouth will be parched and your chest will hurt like hell"

In the other case, the patient is a farmer who has been transported to the hospital by air ambulance and is rushed immediately to theatre.

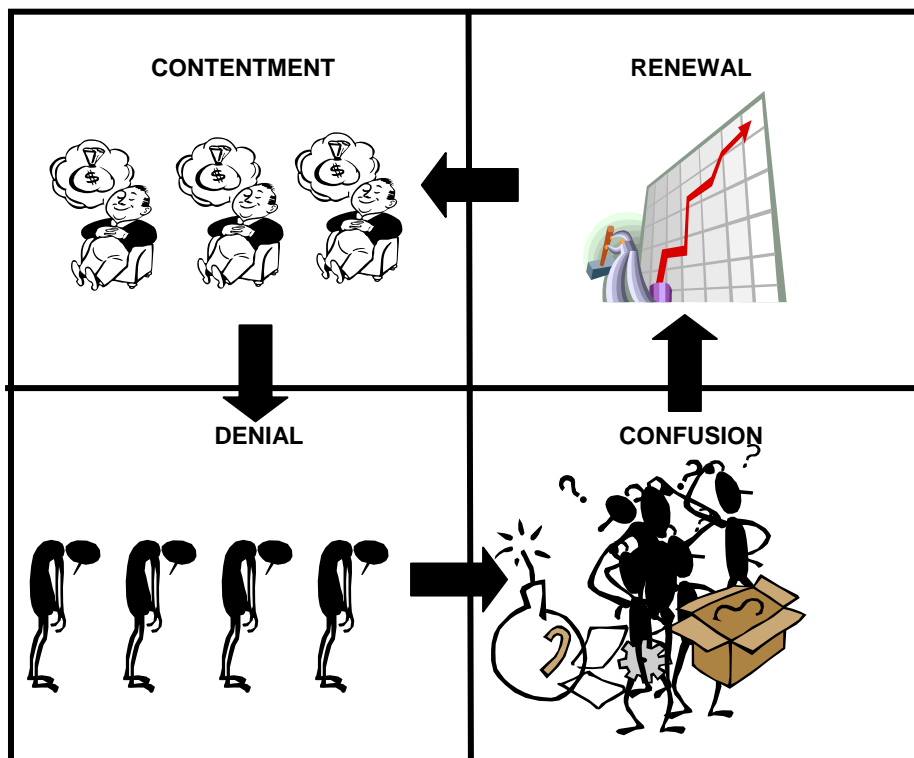
Both operations are 100% successful and the surgeon visits the patient that he had briefed beforehand. "How're you going?" the surgeon asks. "Well, Doc, I've got a splitting headache, my mouth's dry and my chest hurts like hell - just the symptoms you predicted - so I guess you would have to say I'm doing well."

He then visits the second patient - the farmer. "How are you feeling?" "Bloody terrible, Doc" he replies "I've got a splitting headache, my mouth's as dry as a bone and my chest feels as if I've been run over by a tractor. Give it to me straight, Doc am I going to pull through?"

The moral of this story is that these two patients each had a different perception of what "being normal" was - and it's much easier to cope with a stressful situation if you are told beforehand what to expect.

So it is with change.

Claes Janssen, a Swedish social psychologist postulated that every person, workgroup, department, management team, or organisation lives in a four-roomed apartment.



The four-roomed apartment

The four rooms are labelled:

π Contentment
 π Denial
 π Confusion
 π Renewal.

We circulate through these rooms in an anti-clockwise direction and when we leave one room for the next, we cannot go back – we can only enter it again by moving forwards. Once we have completed our journey and come full circle back to the Room of Contentment, we will “rest” there awhile until our environment changes and the journey begins again.

When this concept is applied to groups of people, the first thing that must be recognised is that not all group members occupy the same room at the same time. It is possible that one member of the group may be in the Room of Renewal whilst another has yet to move from the Room of Denial. The latter person, however, will *not* be in the Room of Contentment. Even subconsciously, he or she will have sensed that change is in the air, much as he or she would like the status quo to be continued.

That individuals move from room to room at a different pace actually facilitates the process of change. Those that lead the way help others move from Denial to Confusion and eventually Renewal.

To get an idea of the breakdown in terms of our adaptability to change, 3% of us are Innovators who soon get board without change, 7% are early adopters and 15% are late adopters. The vast majority – 70% - fall into the category of those who are passive about change. They will change, given a good enough reason, but would prefer to maintain the status quo. The last 5% actively resist change. They feel hurt by the change that has already taken place and want to get their own back by sabotaging future changes.

Claes Janssen also pointed out that the rooms have different levels of energy. Contentment and Denial are low energy rooms, Confusion and Renewal high energy.

Appreciating what happens in the Room of Confusion is most important in terms of understanding change.

People enter this room from the Room of Denial. They can no longer accept what they would like to believe. “It’ll sort itself out in time”. “Everybody loses major accounts”. “We are still better than our competitors”. It’s the same for everybody” “I can’t do anything – what do we employ management for?”

So when they enter the Room of Confusion they are leaving the past behind and coming to terms with the present. Initial feelings are anxiety and insecurity that different people express in different ways. Some bottle it up; others get angry and vent their frustration on those whom they might feel are responsible for the situation in which they find themselves. But if these people are to enter the Room of Renewal, they have to let go of the past as a precondition for thinking and planning for the future. And if those people leading change understand the diversity of behaviour and feelings present in the Confusion Room and recognise that as normal and explain it to those present, it can be the transition point for the great majority of occupants – that 70% who will change, given a good enough reason.

Use the “feel, felt, found” technique. “I know how you must *feel*, others have *felt* the same way but they have *found* that going through this period of anger and confusion is perfectly normal”. Knowing that your anger, frustration and anxiety are normal is often the “cure” for such behaviour.

The author of “The Change Masters” – Rosabeth Moss Kanter wrote of change: “It’s disturbing when done *to* us; exhilarating when done *by* us”. Hence the more people in your organisation that you can involve in the change process, the greater the likelihood that you will be able to successfully implement the changes that you have planned. What frequently happens in practice, though, is that the innovators and early and late adopters band together because they become frustrated by those whose journey through the Four Roomed Apartment is predicted to be much slower than theirs. “Don’t worry, we are working on a solution and we will tell you what it is as soon as we can. Then we’ll tell you what your role is in its implementation.”

Sounds reasonable enough – but will it “work”? Don’t hold your breath!

So if you are a leader of change, get everyone in the apartment that will be affected by the change required. But you need to understand and accept that not all will be in the same room at the same time.

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