

Yahoo and Resistance to Change

Yahoo's new CEO Marissa Mayer recently decreed workers would be required to show up at the office rather than work remotely. Negative reactivity was immediate, inside and out - mostly out right now - but reactivity nevertheless.

Why the change?

A renewed emphasis on face-to-face interpersonal interactions, in-person meetings and give-and-take, on the important search for "meaning" and clarity that cannot be gleaned from an email discussion, and on impromptu get-togethers that lead to innovation provide the basic rationale and foundation for Yahoo's new strategy.

From my perspective, whether or not the new strategy to bolster Yahoo's survival, revitalization and sustainability will be successful is anybody's guess.

The important question is whether Yahoo employees will honestly commit to, sincerely engage in and self-responsibly buy into the new strategy.

Change management is not the issue here. *Conscious* change management is the issue. Meaning?

Resistance is natural – plan for it.

When human beings are exposed to changes in their workplace, resistance is a natural and common reaction. Moreover, even if change is the "solution," management needs to expect and plan for resistance. Whether people adapt to change or not, is the challenge - Yahoo's challenge.

My question, from the outside looking in, is whether Yahoo is dealing openly, honestly and directly, i.e., proactively, with resistance, and not just resistance, but the root cause of resistance – **fear**?

Smart vs. Healthy Organizations

As a "smart" company, I'm going to allow that Yahoo has their new strategic management ducks in a row – their vision, their financial, technical and marketing strategies, tactics, steps and the like – all neatly articulated, power-pointed and bound.

However, in terms of being a "healthy" company I'm curious if they expected and planned for possible "health issues" resulting from the change – e.g., low morale, increased turnover, absenteeism and presenteeism (when your body shows up, but you don't), increased confusion and politics, and reduced commitment, engagement and buy-in.

Conscious change places an equal emphasis on *both* - the smart *and* healthy aspects, the technical *and* the people. Did Yahoo? We'll see.

What's underneath resistance?

In a word, fear.

As this adventure unfolds, I'll be curious about attitudes and behaviors, e.g., disengagement, absenteeism, presenteeism, rumors and gossip, subtle or not-so-subtle sabotage, anger, passive-aggressiveness, nit-picking, acting out, wanting to revert to "old ways," old habits, old patterns of be-ing and do-ing. I'll be interested in the unhealthy tension that is part and parcel of resistance – tension that gets in the way of meaningful and productive change.

Just as a runny nose, fever, high temperature, and achiness signal an on-coming cold, the unhealthy behaviors, above, often signal ill health in the "body" of an organization. The "cold" (dis-ease) in this case is resistance and the cells (individuals) are being infected by an organism called fear - an infection that seriously undermines performance, production morale and, eventually, profits.

Treat the cause, not the symptoms.

Typical change tactics often focus on the symptoms of resistance - not the root cause. To reduce and eliminate resistance, reduce and eliminate the root cause, fear - about how folks will be affected, fear about the unknown and unfamiliar, real or potential fear of loss of control, recognition and security, fear of moving away from the status quo and fear of losing (one's own sense of) command and control. An open, healthy and honest change effort requires a conscious, compassionate, and caring focus on *people* – a proactive, honest and organizationally-responsible effort that transcends logistics, politics, market share and all the other B-school and Wall Street Journal analytics that most change management efforts focus on, almost exclusively.

Of the hundreds of comments I've read about Mayer's decision, the vast majority – the angry, the very angry, the resentful, the disrespectful, the victimized, the rumor-y, the gossipy, the belittling, the hateful, the selfish, the inane, the nostalgic – if truth be told, are largely symptomatic of fear - fear of loss in some way, shape or form.

The antidote?

Put into place short- and long-term efforts to support folks to deal with the root cause of their resistance – fear – and navigating the white water of change becomes a less harrowing experience, for the pilots and the passengers.

Proactively supporting folks to recognize, explore, own and voice their fear, and supporting them to be OK with it and to move through it, is the antidote for a smart organization that seeks to be healthy.

So, there's change management and there's change management.

One is simply smart and one is both smart and healthy. Both have consequences.

Forewarned is forearmed.

Where will the Yahoo journey lead? Stay tuned.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

Do you ever create or initiate change?

How do you generally deal with change in your life – at work, at home, at play and in relationship? What would you spouse/partner, friends, and colleagues say?

How do others experience your being resistant? What attitudes and behaviors characterize your resistance? What would others say?

Do you generally "go along to get along" in life?

Are you a creature of habit, a risk-taker?

When you experience the tension of change is it a healthy or an unhealthy tension? Do you know the difference?

Were you more or less open to change as a child? How about your parents? Were they more or less open?

What causes you to be fearful? Why?

Were you fearful as a child? Of whom or what? And why?

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