

## THE ARC OF CHANGE: Meaningful Order, Meaningful Chaos

### Fish Tales

When I was a kid, one of my favorite books was a volume entitled *Swimmy*, by Leo Lionni. In the story, Swimmy is a small fish, having underwater fun with his fishy friends, when all at once they scatter in every direction, as the shadow of one huge, dark fish looms overhead. For a period, Swimmy is disconcerted and even lonely, as the other fish hide out in little holes, waiting for the threat to pass. Ultimately, Swimmy comes up with the cleverest fish-idea ever: he gathers all the little fish together, and they swim as a unit, all aligned, resembling a big fish in their overall pattern; and only Swimmy stands out, a slightly different color, functioning as the eye of the group.

In a strikingly parallel fashion, I see people in organizations acting just like these friends of Swimmy: they are trained to recognize the threatening presence of a big, looming fish. They make themselves scarce, and wait for the danger to pass. A leader, like Swimmy, can feel completely abandoned by their constituency under certain conditions.

It's nearly palpable, that feeling when subordinates no longer align with the leader. Sometimes there is a natural dip in vision, or direction. Sometimes, the leader makes a hard call and loses popularity. In any case, people know, over a period of time, when they are operating as a purposeful unit, and when they are not. The steadiness of the paycheck covers a multitude of sins, in which people don't contribute, don't focus, don't act accountable, and don't make hard calls necessary to move down the road of choice, and change. Like other sea creatures, organizational employees are sometimes merely adrift in a sea of stuff.

### Obstacles

The clients I work with sincerely want to create cultures of excellence. They sincerely want to feel effective, be effective. For many, the primary reason for a job change is to be at a place where they can make a difference. And then they realize, with some discomfort, that all companies are alike if the little fish hide in holes every time a

big fish comes by. It's not the size of the organization that determines efficacy, it's the freedom within the working environment to exchange ideas up and down the food chain.

My clients want to change their cultures from those of blame, stagnation and bureaucracy to cultures of openness, accountability and efficacy. In order to do so, they must endure the difficulty of noticing ways in which they themselves are part of the problem. This involves a consecrated period for thoughtful feedback. Kathryn Williams, Ph.D., one of the leading organizational coaches, says that she can tell you with 90% accuracy the career prospects of an executive based upon one finding: the ease with which they give and receive feedback.

The single biggest obstacle to change, based upon my experiences, is that people don't know how to have difficult conversations: they don't know how to raise an uncomfortable topic, or how to stay calm when the person opposite them is defensive. This one area of ignorance accounts for the great majority of corporate "stuck-ness." We just don't know how to get it right; and we're too afraid to get it wrong. So.... Hidden in holes, people wait for the world to change.

Like our protagonist Swimmy, a leader has to gather themselves, and come up with a reason for those fish to come out of their holes. A leader has to give them a reason to stand together, and it has to make sense. A real leader has to communicate that they, too, are at risk, or the group will ostracize them: a small leader, when given no good reason to belong anymore, is bumped up the food chain to big-fish status, no longer trustworthy as a representative of the small-fish class.

### Navigational tools

Our corporate life resembles Swimmy's group: for a period, people are aligned, and they work well together. Then, stresses or market changes, or turnover, or the discontinuation of a business line throws people into chaos: they don't know anymore, why they come to work, except for the pay. Their motives, and their priorities scatter in all directions. So.... Where's the answer?

Half of the battle of change lies in helping people know a bit about what's ahead for them.

First, they need to know that it will seem as if they are going in all different directions, and that's a good and normal thing. People need a bit more room, and latitude with errors, during a period of change.

Second, during change, leadership should be kinder, more compassionate, about key results, because you can't repair the engine and motor across the sea at the same time.

Paralleling that, as a third key need, leadership should *make vivid* the action steps and styles needed to convert desired objectives into today's behaviors. One team was miraculously uplifted by the simple commitment to park Blackberries during meetings. People need tools for rehearsing new kinds of behaviors, and a sense of humor about helping each other, rather than blaming each other. Simulations and experiential learning techniques are great.

Finally, stakeholders need core values or qualities that bring them together. These are not key words chosen by elite committees; these are values that should be voted for by every employee, top to bottom. The best tools are online surveys that break values into personal, current, and aspirational qualities, so groups see what is missing that needs to be addressed. These words provide a kind of glue that holds people together at least theoretically until the rest of the features are in place.

### Worth the trouble?

People in organizations need to overcome the temptation to be like fish. They can understand that a feeling of chaos and queasiness means that *they've got it right*. Discomfort and a sense of un-ease are the gatekeepers of real change, and it requires nerve, and commitment, to push through to the other side of chaos.

One day, after tinkering and prodding, tweaking and whole-group insights, one day someone notices that they are swimming in the same direction. Coherence has a quiet, restful power, also noticeable.

So why would an organization endure these periods of meaningful chaos? Why bother? Simple: change is inevitable. If people are given tools to move through changes with greater ease and resilience, complaints are converted to understanding. Blame is converted into focus. Arguments grow up, and become mature discussions. And

ultimately, the company has room for innovation, room for great relations, and the ease of a real trust that hardships can be overcome with humor and patience. And vision.

One extra burden on the leader, through periods of change, is to endure the skepticism of board or other supervisory characters, while encouraging – rather than chastising – subordinates. Change can be destructive, or constructive, depending on the way in which the process occurs. A good leader allows him or herself to stand out a bit, reminding fellow travelers that the arc of change holds reward at the end, using vision to align all the small fish into a coherent whole.

Kathryn P. Davison,  
© 2007, all rights reserved  
Tonic Capital  
[www.Toniccapital.com](http://www.Toniccapital.com)