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Why Change Doesn't Work

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*“Where does the end of me become the start of you?” ~ Change by **Tears for Fears***

Let's pretend that you are a caterpillar. All your life you've been comfortable climbing branches and munching on leaves. Your favorite caterpillar buddy comes up to you one day and tells you that your mom and dad weren't always butterflies, but caterpillars like you. He goes on to say that one day you are going to spin yourself into a hard cocoon and inside you will become a yellow, gooey mess as all your organs and body parts change and then you will emerge as a butterfly.

One of your first thoughts might be: “Yeah, that's great and all, but can I just skip the yellow, gooey mess inside the cocoon bit? Better yet, why can't I just stay a caterpillar?”

If you are making changes at work or are in an environment where changes are being made, don't be surprised by a couple of things. Don't be surprised that people are unenthusiastic about the changes. Don't be surprised that the changes are being met with resistance. And don't be surprised when change efforts fail.

It isn't that change itself fails. Change happens all the time and it is always successful, whether we like it or not. And that is the problem we face. When we step in and try to implement and manage change to achieve a desired result, things can look good on paper: “This study shows that if we do this, then this will happen.” But change efforts often overlook the biggest variable of all: people.

People like to feel comfortable and people like a sense of control. Note that the need is for “a sense of control”, not just for “control”. One of the most disturbing things is the feeling of powerlessness, of being unable to do anything about your circumstances. So, when people are comfortable about their situation and someone tells them that that's all going to change, resistance is the logical assertion of control. The change effort might ultimately be wonderful, but the yellow, gooey mess of the cocoon that is change can disturb people's sense of control.

Think about what a sense of control provides: certainty, consistency, understanding and survival, less worry, less pain, less risk. It isn't that if we don't have control over every little aspect of our lives that we will freak out and revolt. We often cede control to other authorities because they provide the control that we would otherwise have a difficult time providing for ourselves. We cede control to bosses, doctors, police, engineers, spouses, scientists, etc. In order to cede control a person needs to have trust in that authority.

Control and trust are embedded in much of what we do. We have rituals and schedules and social norms to provide a predictable framework to our lives. When everyone and everything in our lives follows the rules, we feel at peace because of the sense of control consistency provides. If we forget our passwords, if we get in a car accident, if the faucet doesn't turn on, if our state is facing a drought, we experience discomfort, confusion, worry, even anger that suddenly the situation that we find ourselves in has slipped out of our control.

I worked for a company that had over 1,200 employees, many of them long-term (15+ years). Not long after I joined, the company announced scheduled meetings that employees needed to sign up for so it could roll out its planned “culture change” initiative. In those meetings, representatives of management explained the things that were going to change: management was going to change how they did things, employees were going to change how they did things...the tagline was “the bus is leaving the station; you’re either on the bus or you’re off it.” Then they handed out a little swag bag to each employee containing “stuff” with the company logo on it: pens, squishy balls, a note pad, etc.

I was new, so the talk sounded good and the bag of goodies felt like a welcoming perk. But looking back, the reaction from the employees that had been there a long time was predictable, if not a little tragically amusing. One commented that this sounded like the change effort they did five years ago, and the five years before that... and the five years before that. This was just another of those uncomfortable disruptions in the employees’ lives, one that would ultimately fail again. Another employee asked why they didn’t give everyone a dollar raise instead of spending it on company logo printed baubles.

The company went ahead with its “culture change” and I worked there long enough to see it fail...again. The company failed on a number of fronts. It failed by not learning from past mistakes. It failed by not addressing employees’ concerns or interviewing them on the types of change they wanted to see. It forced a preconceived notion of change on employees, causing them discomfort. It repeated failed change efforts of the past, causing distrust. Ultimately, it took control away from employees, and employees replaced that with resistance.

It forced employees into that yellow, gooey mess of the cocoon. Instead of coming out butterflies, they remained caterpillars.

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