

GOING BELOW THE WATERLINE FOR STRATEGIC CHANGE

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In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.

~Eric Hoffer

The company had grown to 50 million in sales and over 200 employees in ten years. Then, sales slowed down, problems grew in production and product development was thin. The senior leadership team decided to embark on a significant change. They secured the blessings of Bob, the company CEO, founder and owner. Their approach was textbook perfect. They studied their market, understood their financial leverage, and involved all employees in meetings to identify opportunities and issues. All of this culminated in a senior team off-site retreat where they identified a new strategy, systems and organizational changes necessary to make it work. All employees were engaged and committed. Flash forward to several years later. The company was now in a downward spiral, revenues were down 25% and lay-offs had reduced staff by an equal amount, including most of the senior team.

What happened and how did this change fail? The truth is that the change never got off the ground. The company owner, while excited by the vision of growth, could not see that his way of leading was stifling the change that was needed to achieve the vision. After all, it was what had made him successful up to this point. This is a common story. Most entrepreneurs fail to lead their companies beyond the start-up phase. But they are not the only ones who struggle with change. All of us know areas of our lives in which we get stuck and can't seem to make the necessary changes, even when the consequences are big.

We just seem unable to see what we can't see. It is not usually the rational aspects of change management that stop us. Like the crashing Titanic, we run aground on what's below the waterline, our assumptions, beliefs and mindsets. We form these early. In fact, the human brain is designed to create patterns that filter out most sensory information. Brain researchers have counted receptor sites in the human brain for 11 million bits of data, and that's just what our sense organs are designed to take in. Out of these 11 million, our conscious brain only is aware of 40 bits. The good news is these patterns enable us to program our behavior without conscious thinking. We don't have to work through all that sensory data; the patterns help us create behavioral routines that simplify our learning and help us survive.

But the downside is when those patterns become rigid and we lose sensitivity to the early signs of change around us. We can't see what's changing and what we need to do to respond. We get fixed in our ways of seeing. And, we get into conflict with others whose mindsets are different from our own. For leaders of change, a key skill is to be able to identify the assumptions you hold, examine these in light of changes going on in your environment and be able to let go of old mindsets that are no longer serving you or your organization. Here are some ways that will help:

1. **Acknowledge Our Limits:** We each carry only a partial view of reality. Our views are limited by what we can see, by our past experiences, our emotions, our preferences, even our genetics. In times of change, we need humility to acknowledge that what we know, what worked in the past might not be the best for what we need now or going forward. The best place to start is with oneself and our own willingness to change.
2. **Widen Our View:** Our patterns become clearer when we see them in contrast to those who have a very different view. This is the true value of diversity. Rather than having our differences create conflict, we need to become more curious about how others view the world. Rather than arguing about whose way is better, we need to explore different patterns and expand our repertoire to meet changing conditions.
3. **Access Mindsets Symbolically:** Mindsets are surfaced quickly through symbols, frameworks and images. For example, how would you describe directive vs. shared leadership? Now how about if you picture an orchestra conductor vs. a jazz band? Or how does teamwork change meaning between a football team, a basketball team or a tennis team? Images and pictures help us surface and explore our differences as well as help us get everyone on the same page.
4. **Become Better Questioners:** Asking questions is a critical skill for change leaders. We are trained to have and give answers. But how often does our well intended advice really work for someone else? The natural curiosity we had as children helped us rapidly form patterns. That same curiosity can help us understand the mindsets we hold and find new mindsets that better serve us in change. Through open-ended questions, questions of genuine curiosity, we can begin to discover what's under the waterline.
5. **Get Support:** We don't see what we don't see alone. And it is difficult to challenge our own operating assumptions. More often when confronted with differing perspectives, we get defensive. We need the support of others to be able to question our mindsets, rather than just defending them. Personal coaching, learning groups and time for reflection in teams are some ways to support below the waterline learning.

When we navigate together, below the waterline, the result is:

- Awareness of the patterns we must shift to thrive in times of change.
- Connectedness and integration across the organization.
- Creativity and innovation in solving the challenges we face.

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