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Published Monday November 22, 2021

Can CEOs shift their understanding of change?

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Responsibility, meaning, purpose and goals are four major principles that can help people navigate change

As a behavioural consultant to a medium sized organization I was being briefed by the CEO. His briefing emphasised the point that his direct reportees were not demonstrating ‘ownership’ and they had to ‘change’ their ‘attitude’.



Immediately after my meeting with the CEO I was asked to meet his reportees. I asked the first senior manager I met ‘what need for change meant to him?’

He was affronted by the words ‘need for change’, and told me that it implied ‘what is, is not alright’. It implied, he said, ‘focus on being different from who or what we are’.

His assertion reminded me of a quote from an article I had read titled ‘The paradoxical theory of change’, which emphasises, ‘change occurs when you become who you are, rather than when you try to become who you are not’.

After speaking with all his direct reportees and experiencing resonance among them about what ‘change’ implied, I concluded that ‘perhaps the CEO could re-examine his intent in communicating what he desired from his senior colleagues?’

Barry Stevens, in her book ‘Don’t push the river: It flows by itself’, suggests that it is important for each of us to ‘go with the flow’, rather than attempt to hasten the pace.

Four principles that John Leary- Joyce, in his book *The Fertile Void*, writes about may help people navigate ‘the ever flowing river’.

- Responsibility and choice.
- Meaning
- Purpose
- Goals and objectives.

Responsibility and choice

Given the knowledge that we have no option but to navigate life’s only constant, which is change, we can either abdicate responsibility and blame fate or take responsibility and choose how we want to respond to the challenge posed. Thus, if a CEO can empathise with his managers and help them recognise how they are making choices in the manner they are demonstrating and executing their tasks; and assist them to appreciate what is functional or otherwise in the way they discharge their roles, without being either punitive or judgemental in his communication, managers will surely realise the need to respond with greater accountability.

Meaning

Existentialism emphasises that human beings are ‘hard wired’ to make meaning of their existence. Meaning, is not given or prescribed, but is discovered and realised by each of us.

We therefore tend to create our own meaning and purpose out of the contact and interactions we have.

Thus, while we may have little or no influence on environmental events, we certainly have control and choice over who we are and what life means to us.

CEOs can encourage managers to appreciate that our main motivation for living is our will to find meaning in life and that we have the freedom to find meaning.

Purpose

Purpose is knowing why we are doing something. CEOs who support managers to engage in an activity with the intent to give depth of meaning can help them create purpose. The caution, however, is to inform managers that purpose may require them to adjust their actions in response to the unfolding present.

Goals and objectives

While goals and objectives may have to be spelt out as clearly and cogently as possible, the ability to recognise and work with emerging reality is what CEOs can help their managers respond to. Thus, allowing for flexibility and adapting to changing circumstances become paramount.

If the four principles highlighted are brought to play in dealings the CEO has with his direct reportees, he will in effect help them ‘empower themselves’ and in doing so, will create the possibility of taking ownership.

CEOs should recognise that potential can only be unleashed if ‘interferences’ are minimised and the individual is allowed to expand one’s wings. Finally, as the saying in the armed forces goes, ‘invest in people, in peace time, so you will bleed less in war’.

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