

Is a Crisis Required to Initiate Change?

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I read an article that claims that a crisis is required to initiate change. Do you think that's true?

I resisted that assertion. I work with leaders who are not in crisis and who seek improvement continuously. And I point out often that "improvement" is a synonym for "beneficial change."

Once a leader has initiated an intentional process for improvement, a crisis is no longer required to stimulate improvement. Improvement becomes a routine part of the ongoing processes in that organization.

Still, I pondered the author's perspective. I thought perhaps some insight might be revealed in his contention. I sure found one!

I am not able to interest leaders in a fresh look at "improvement" until they realize that something is missing. And since we don't miss something we've never had, most leaders think that the situation they manage is "good enough."

So think with me about what might be missing in your organization. Is there a powerful, shared spirit of service? Or do you believe that those under your authority are there to serve you? Traditional leaders contend, "These people work for me!" Many leaders are not yet able to conceive of an outlook that could embody the concept of "My role is to serve these people!"

Does your culture include a clear and ongoing process for building leaders for the future? Many very successful organizations focus their energies on providing great service and high-quality products to their customers. They find themselves, however, five or twenty-five years later realizing that they have not prepared anyone to carry on the leadership of the good work of the organization.

Do all the contributing members of your organization share a compelling vision of the successful future state of the organization? We are all mired in current reality. Even if you have a clear vision of "what could be," that image is often not shared by all. Have you repeatedly communicated the future direction, such that everyone is enrolled? Is it apparent to you that everyone is engaged in moving the organization into a more effective, more satisfying, more productive future state?

Maybe you are missing a relationship with a colleague with whom you can be entirely open and genuine. Many leaders strive to portray a mythical image of strength and independence. Yet we all need acceptance and support. Can you safely blow off steam without everyone scrambling for cover? You need someone safe with whom to share frustrations, explore options for addressing hard situations, confide feelings of insecurity, etc.

I love doing good work. And I love working with organizations that are healthy and getting better. But the truth is that they have recognized a need for something more—that the way they used to function is no longer sufficient.

I hate selling. Now I understand why. Selling involves focusing potential clients on the crisis of what's missing in their organizations. To establish an intentional leadership development process requires an admission that current leaders are not being stretched. To initiate a defined process for continual improvement requires an acknowledgement that "good enough" may have been good enough then, but no longer.

A common slang greeting today is "Hey, what's happening?" I ask you, as leader of your organization, "Hey, what's missing?"

To improve your organization, you must first admit that something that could be there just isn't. And realizing that might feel a lot like a crisis!

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