

Paradigm Shifts—Teaching Leaders

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Happy New Year! It's a great time to evaluate "the way we see our situations." That's a definition of "paradigm," a term used in many organizations to describe a person's perspective, viewpoint, belief, mindset, outlook, perception, understanding, assumption, mental image, theory, model, interpretation, or frame of reference.

A paradigm shift occurs when the way we see a given situation changes because we have learned new information. The fresh awareness changes our perspective and often causes us to take different action, because we now "see" the situation differently.

Memorable paradigm shifts often occur when we are not expecting new information. We are surprised at the difference between the way we had viewed the situation before, maybe for a very long time, and how we now view the situation. We have an "Aha!" experience. We are stunned at the effect the new information has on us.

An example might help. Maybe you've told racist or sexist jokes for years, and your friends laugh and enjoy them with you. Then someone tells a joke and the punch line focuses on a characteristic that partially defines you—and you feel the sting. The next day, you attend a "diversity awareness" training session. As you listen, the pain you experienced the previous day sticks with you—and you understand the point in a totally new way.

Here's another example. At the beginning of the movie "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," Robert Redford is playing blackjack. One opponent stands and accuses him of cheating. All the rest back away, expecting a gunfight. Paul Newman enters, senses the tension, and suggests that they leave. Redford resists, insisting that he did not cheat. After an unsuccessful effort, Newman says "I can't help you, Sundance." The accuser stammers, "I didn't know you were the Sundance Kid when I said you were cheating," and he immediately backs down. The card player just experienced a paradigm shift—new information that changed his perspective, and obviously changed his behavior!

As I work with leaders, I encourage them to become comfortable with paradigm shifts. You see, adults learn differently from children. Children don't have a lot of existing concepts in their brains. When you teach "1 + 1 = 2," they don't have a lifetime of experience to refute that information.

Adults, however, often require a paradigm shift. With so many years of seeing the world a certain way, we don't easily accept a new perspective. Instead, we tend to defend our existing understanding, even when we claim we want to learn.

When I teach something like "delegation skills," I'm working with individuals who have been delegating for years. They think they know how to successfully delegate already, so my efforts at providing a paradigm shift are not always successful.

My life mission is to help leaders change their perspectives from leading followers to leading leaders. That's not always an easy shift to make. A common leadership perspective is that the individuals in the organization exist to serve the leader, following his or her directives. The typical language reflects this paradigm: "These people work for me."

The best leaders, however, realize that they exist to serve those under their authority—the ones who serve the organization's customers. Leaders serve by providing resources, direction, perspective, and opportunity. One of the best ways leaders serve is to build the skills of future leaders, functioning as a role model and providing an explicit leadership development process.

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