

Paradigm Shifts—An Explanation for Fresh Success

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The Georgia Coach Association (GCA) is a state affiliate with the International Coach Federation. Each month, about forty professional coaches within the state of Georgia gather to share insights and enjoy a program intended to advance the service we provide to our clients.

Several months ago, the speaker for the evening asked each of us to share, in small groups, a significant paradigm shift we experienced in the past. The objective was to reflect on some new awareness that has influenced everything that we've attempted since.

In debriefing the experience, one coach suggested, “It seems that whenever one of my clients shares a paradigm shift with me, he or she soon experiences some new success, a breakthrough of some sort. In addition to causing new awareness, the insight stimulates new behavior, creative experimentation, and innovative outcomes.” That comment--and the discussion that followed--has stimulated a change in the way I initiate a conversation with my clients.

I've always encouraged my clients to share their paradigm shifts with me. Usually, if some big insight occurred since our most recent conversation, the client would volunteer it. Now I make an explicit invitation at the beginning of every coaching conversation. Developing the habit of pausing to acknowledge and later share a paradigm shift is a superb discipline for any leader.

Why invite my clients to share their insights? Two reasons. First, many leaders don't have anyone within their normal circle of contacts with whom they can safely share and explore some new perspective. Some leaders have an unspoken expectation of themselves that they, above all others in their organizations, are supposed to have all the answers. Admitting to a new insight amounts to confessing ignorance of something that might already be obvious to others.

Second, sometimes a leader will experience a new perspective in the very act of describing a paradigm shift to me. It is exhilarating when a client stops right in mid-sentence, declaring, “You know what I just realized?” Then he or she continues with an idea that never would have occurred if not for the opportunity to articulate the new insight recently discovered.

Let me pause in case you're wondering, “Just what is a paradigm shift?” The word may seem a bit fancy, but a paradigm is an understanding that has guided your actions for so long that you now believe that the way you see things is the truth. In reality, the way you “see” a situation is not “the truth” but a frame of reference based on your accumulated experiences.

Synonyms for “paradigm” are many: perspective, viewpoint, belief, mindset, outlook, perception, understanding, assumption, mental image, theory, model, interpretation, frame of reference.

A “paradigm shift” occurs when a new and relevant piece of information comes to you at just the right time. The experience is often unexpected, resulting in some kind of “Aha” insight. You are left with a knowing that is deeper and of more impact than “the truth” you thought you understood before.

The new awareness you have after a paradigm shift now seems obvious. You might wonder why you had such a different perspective before. Perhaps you ask a friend, “Why didn't somebody make me aware of this earlier?” Sometimes the surprising knowledge doesn't occur immediately; it's only after reflecting on the situation that the fresh understanding sinks in.

You might have argued passionately for your perspective before you gained the new information. It may not be that you were wrong before; your beliefs were probably simply incomplete. The new understanding has caused your awareness to be more extensive and accurate. The additional information presents a new meaning of the familiar situation.

When your perspectives are more complete, you make better choices. Because you think with greater clarity and awareness, your actions lead to more successful outcomes.

I invite you to look more intently for opportunities to refine your perspectives. The potential for paradigm shifts occurs frequently, but they are amazingly easy to overlook. Why? Because we are naturally and deeply invested in seeking to validate what we currently think is “the truth.” As you become more experienced at recognizing new insights, you’ll realize how very much deceived we humans can be!

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