

Navigating the rough winds of restructuring by moving into...

The eye of the storm

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The climate in many government agencies and large corporations is grim. In response to the public's and the market's demand, leaders are learning as they go in their effort to transform large bureaucratic institutions into smaller, more efficient organizations.

The changes to be wrought call for the wisdom of sages and the courage of saints for both employers and employees:

- Employees must change qualitatively, both during the transition and after. At every level they must learn how to change, what to expect and how to cope...
- Employers, if they are to be successful in changing their institutions, must embrace change on a very personal level.

But, employees are scared and not always prepared to deal with the emotions (sometimes violent ones) that rush to the surface during such changes. When people are afraid, the organization will not grow or change in a healthy way.*

Change is not death; it hurts more — Most organizations are unprepared to support employees' personal trauma during downsizing or restructuring; especially the large bureaucratic ones — the ones most likely to be involved in this activity. Large bureaucratic organizations typically do not discuss feelings and certainly cannot be counted on to provide much emotional support to employees during a reorganization. It seems as if everyone just turns away from the problem and hopes it will go away. On the surface things may appear to be pretty normal — day to day work goes on — but behind the scenes people are hurting.

This is not to say that the leaders of the organization are unfeeling people themselves or that they

don't care about the feelings of the employees in their organization. They just don't know how to help them, and they don't know how to help one another. Typically, they adopt a get tough attitude: "Grit your teeth and do what must be done; don't show emotional vulnerability." This tough guy attitude has major costs to the company in the form of productivity losses, physical illness and attrition. Emotional reactions during a period of prolonged restructuring may include feelings of anger, depression, lethargy, guilt and powerlessness.

Such reactions are not unusual, not the exception, they are part of a predictable response to unplanned change. Certainly, a company cannot be held accountable for all of the emotional reactions of its employees. But, awareness of the emotional signals that accompany fundamental personal change can help individuals at every level of the organization take responsibility when it is appropriate and manage the change effort in ways that promote creativity and minimize fear.

Prolonged restructuring can be paralyzing — The ambiguity that accompanies long periods of restructuring creates a sense of *not knowing* that eats at one's psychological need to be in control. Many employees become outwardly or inwardly depressed and begin to question their self worth, some even become physically sick. If absenteeism and insurance claims are not enough to indicate the pain employees are experiencing, just the look on people's faces will tell the story.

* What if employees were not afraid of changing? What if employees had faith in themselves and the future? Would each one contribute some spark of creativity to transform the whole? I will explain how that might be possible in the eye of the storm section of this article.

These employees are miserable most of the time; and, if they aren't personally hurting, one of their friends or family members is — or the co-worker down the hall. The *not knowing* prompts a physical sensation in the gut — fear!

Employees are afraid of what might happen, could happen; most expect the worst. Work gets done in spite of the fear. Worklife goes on while employees throughout the organization feel aimless, lethargic, bored, sad, worried, trapped, guilty for trying to save themselves, frustrated over having no one to talk to, confused, out of control, angry, cynical, alienated, caught in the middle, and feeling like puppets at the hands of some maniacal puppeteer who takes great pleasure in yanking the string to make them dance.

The not knowing blues... This tendency to obsess over the worst that can happen is common when one has little or no information with which to plan the future. It is the usual reaction to *not knowing*. It is not limited to the rank and file, front-line employee. When rank and file employees do feel this way, it is safe to assume that ambiguity and fear are present throughout all levels of the organization.

Executive management, middle management, supervisors, and non-supervisory personnel, may seem to have different reactions, but if you look closely you will see that it is but a variation on a common theme; ambiguity and fear are mirrored at every level.

"Communication has ceased entirely from executive management. Even the directors don't know what to expect and are attacking each other. The predominant emotion is fear. The halls are empty, yet around the corners, behind the partitions and at the lunch table people talk in hushed tones about what may happen — if their worst fears come true. The organization shakes almost."

Not following our expected plan — Dynamics at the top of the hierarchy are mirrored and proliferate throughout the organization. In this case, the hierarchy itself generates waves of dynamics that are at the very core of our being:

- We all want to control our lives...
- We give consistent meaning to events based on the assumption that things will continue tomorrow much as they did today...
- We adopt an identity based on our profession and relationships...

The fear and confusion arising from not knowing the future hits every level...

Level 1: The view from the top

It is common for employees to think that restructuring is being carefully planned and executed by executives who take pleasure in not telling anyone about their plans. But, meetings at this level give evidence to the contrary.

Level 2: The riddled middle

Middle managers are torn between doing what really is best for the future of the company (e.g. adopting new approaches to streamline work processes) and protecting the people who work for them. Meanwhile, their own safety is questionable as reports about decreasing or eliminating their level fill the media.

Level 3: Don't ask, don't tell

On a good day, a first-line supervisor has little control and must be a buffer between the demands of management and the employees. During downsizing or restructuring the supervisor is everyone's target. They have less information, less involvement in decision making, more stress and no one to talk to about it.

Level 4: The front line

Among front line employees, the tendency is to take the whole thing personally. Whatever may be happening at the levels above them seems as if it is being done intentionally and with morbid enjoyment. Those who have not experienced a reduction in force before are the most angry and upset. Those who have been through it before are more tolerant, not because they really understand the process, but because they know they can't do anything to change it.

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- We attach value to people and events based on experiences we have had with them.

In other words, we make sense out of our lives by expecting the future to unfold according to plan. We save to send the kids to college, look forward to a vacation, a new home or dinner out. It is a personally constructed meaning that is the result of emotional involvement and investiture of energy.

People who believe their world will continue remain emotionally attached to it. Those who don't believe or are unsure get scared and disengage emotionally, divesting their energy from the situation. This fear of the unknown is the source of much suffering.

Unprepared for the long journey...

Restructuring the organization (our world from nine to five) disrupts an order so diligently constructed. When this *known world* is brought into question, the normal reaction is to withdraw physiological energy until it is safe to resume our lives.

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"...(F)eeeling like puppets at the hands of some maniacal puppeteer who takes great pleasure in yanking the string to make them dance."

“...no one can explain how decisions are being made so no information is allowed out.”

“Whatever information was being shared is now hoarded as each executive circles their own wagons.”

“Restructuring is not a time for new behaviors. It is a time for regression to old familiar patterns, even if they are known to be ineffective.”

But, in an organization that is restructuring it may not be safe for quite some time. Without fair warning the organization has launched its employees into an extended journey of change for which they are unprepared. What then? How can people exist day to day, month to month, even year to year as uninformed and unwilling travelers? As best they, can people attempt to cope with the stress of *not knowing*:

- Obsessive chatter eventually gives way to grim acceptance...
- Angry threats and assumptions about who and why decisions were being made give way to silent resentment as employees try to do work amid the sticky atmosphere of self doubt...
- Meetings behind closed doors play out the decision-making rituals.

Meanwhile, all around people were dropping like flies from a supermarket assortment of ailments:

- EEO complaints sky rocket...
- Absenteeism rises...
- Attrition steadily increases.

Everyone thinks someone at a higher level knows the answers that would end the misery and just isn't telling.

Moving toward the eye of the storm

Level 1: The view from the top — It is common for employees to think that restructuring is being carefully planned and carried out by executives who take pleasure in not telling anyone about their plans. But, meetings at this level give evidence to the contrary.

It is not a deliberate act to withhold information... The lack of information is a symptom of their own *not knowing*. The executives are in as much emotional distress as everyone else. In addition to ambiguity associated with shrinking or fundamentally restructuring the organization, their fear appears in response to the *not knowing* associated with retirement benefits and buy-outs; uncertainty about one's place in the organization; the threat of loss of status; and guilt over not dealing with the whole situation as openly as one might like.

“The cycle happens every 8–10 years. I've seen it several times.”

“Can't management communicate more about the end result of the reorganization?”

“We don't know.”

“Someone must know.”

“Well its fragmented, different individuals have different ideas.”

Unrealistic expectations... It is unrealistic to expect employees at lower levels to remain confident and focused on work goals when executive management is not united in their understanding about the future toward which the organization is moving. At the executive level in many large organizations, there is not the type of communication that would allow the senior management group to reach adequate consensus about a future organizational configuration. Certainly, not the type of communication which would enable them to support one another emotionally. Communication in these organizations tends to be guarded, fragmented and sparse.

Competition is the norm, not openness and trust... During downsizing or reorganization, this norm is intensified. Whatever information was being shared is now hoarded as each executive circles their own wagons. Although many profess a desire for teamwork and insist that it is what is needed for the organization to change and survive, they are afraid to risk being a champion for this type of change. Restructuring is not a time for new behaviors. It is a time for regression to old familiar patterns, even if they are known to be ineffective.

If everyone knew, no one knew... Ironically, if the entire population of employees could realize that *not knowing* is part of the reorganization process, it might resolve much of the anxiety. If executives define and admit their fears, then this dynamic would be iterated and reinforced throughout the organization. The process of reorganization would accelerate. It would still not be painless, but there could be a lot more creativity and support available.

Level 2: The riddled middle — Middle managers are torn between doing what really is best for the future of the company and protecting the people who work for them. Meanwhile, their own safety is uncertain as reports about decreasing or eliminating their level fill the media. Most would agree that middle managers are at risk. With mandates to reduce supervisory ratios and displaced senior executives, middle managers are prime targets. They should be looking for another job. On the other hand, many feel compelled to fight to justify the existence of the group of employees who work for them.

All this within the context of *not knowing* what the organization really is changing to.

"It's so hard to make decisions about who to let go when I don't know what the focus of our department really is for the future. I even think sometimes that our group is "nice to have" but not essential to the way this company does business. The company would surely continue to do its thing without us. But, I have to fight to keep my employees, I can't let them down."

"I must make a decision about staying or leaving. If I leave now, I can take advantage of the buy-out. If I leave now I abandon my group to be eaten up by the organization."

Who stays, who goes? Some managers have been through this kind of reorganization before and tend to react mildly to the stress of the situation. But, even these veterans quietly suffer from the stress of having to make decisions about who to keep and who to let go.

Telling someone they have been selected to leave is not easy, to say the least. Life changing decisions are hard enough in the best of circumstances, add to it the uncertainty about the future of the organization and what skills may be needed and you have managers making decisions based on shaky assumptions.

No wonder the reasoning seems weak, it is weak... Another justification for not communicating: no one can explain how decisions are being made so no information is allowed out. Instead, the normal manipulations necessary to protect some and eliminate others are done secretly with weak reasoning and averted eyes.

We play charades, don't we? Managers know that their employees see through this charade, that's why they hide in their offices and don't hold staff meetings. They are afraid. Managers are afraid someone will corner them and insist on knowing what they know.

They have been warned not to give out information, and yet they know that the people deserve to know as much as they can about the changes underway. The stress at middle management level is intense. They cannot satisfy everyone's demands, they are trapped, often powerless, and at the whim of an organizational system which no one claims.

"I'm so torn over not being able to communicate any information to my staff, not having anyone to talk to, feeling that I'm letting them down by not divulging information that I know about. And yet, I'm loyal to my boss and don't want to compromise him in any way. He is at risk whenever he gives me information."

It's as if the system takes on a life of its own... Decisions about how to handle the situation are made and disseminated as policy and no one really supports them or believes that this is the best way to handle things. What appears to be deliberate action is more often a path of least resistance based on fear and distrust — they just don't know any other way.

Level 3: Don't ask, don't tell — Feelings associated with downsizing, by a first-line supervisor:

- Trapped, can't tell people anything...
- Powerless, can't save my people...
- Guilty, over trying to save myself...
- Frustrated, no one to talk to...
- Morally confused, don't agree with the strategy to deny information to the people most affected, yet manipulate the organization to save some people.

On a good day, a first-line supervisor has little control and must be a buffer between the demands of management and the employees.

During downsizing or restructuring the supervisor is everyone's target:

- They have less information, less involvement in decision making, more stress and no one to talk to about it...
- The supervisor represents management in the eyes of the employees and is excluded from any discussion or support he or she might get from them...
- To upper management, they are like the infantry men in war who are expected to fight and die on the front line, to follow orders and not question commands. Many do not survive the battle.

Consider the following quote which describes the situation engendered by not allowing open discussion of current events.

"We met with (our manager) for two hours this morning, and we are not allowed to tell anyone what was discussed. Yet, everyone knows the news was not good — because we can't discuss it. Silence communicates volumes."

"(T)he normal manipulations necessary to protect some and eliminate others are done secretly with weak reasoning and averted eyes."

"The stress at middle management level is intense. They cannot satisfy everyone's demands, they are trapped, often powerless, and at the whim of an organizational system which no one claims."

“Poor me, this mean old organization is out to get me and I can’t do anything about it.”

“It’s not that they don’t experience fear and emotional pain, they just don’t seem to struggle against it. They know that discomfort is a necessary part of change; a route to something better.”

The not knowing deepens the fear... At each descending level of scale, the effects of *not knowing* are extended and the fear reaction spreads throughout the organization.

First-line supervisors are afraid for all the same reasons their superiors are. They too have kids in college, mortgages, friends in trouble and sick family members to provide for. Ages may vary widely, some are young and have young children, others are older long-term employees with retirement around the corner. Their reactions may range from frustration and anger that leads them to identify with the non-supervisory employees, to grim acceptance and adoption of the same *get tough* attitude senior management displays with a tough exterior and sarcastic tone. Both of these extremes contain the same element — fear.

Level 4: The front-line — Among front-line employees, the tendency is to take the whole thing personally. Whatever may be happening at the levels above them seems as if it is being done intentionally and with morbid enjoyment. Those who have not experienced a reduction in force before are the most angry and upset. Those who have been through it before are more tolerant, not because they really understand the process, but because they know they can’t do anything to change it.

Life in rumorville... As the rumors fly about what may happen and the stories accumulate from those who have been given their notices, wildly varying justifications are believed and repeated:

- Any opportunity to cross-train is viewed as a set-up for being laid off...
- Older employees are targets because of their age...
- Anyone who has been sick is at risk because they have taken more time off...
- If someone doesn’t get along with their supervisor they will surely be gone...
- Anyone who carools with someone in management is likely to be saved.

These are just a few of the rumors that appear to fill the information vacuum. The effects of *not knowing* reach chaos at the lowest levels of the organization where the mood is oppressive. It’s palpable and draining.

Poor me, this mean old organization is out to get me and I can’t do anything about it. Or, those dirty, no good, blood sucking managers are corrupt, heartless, and stupid. It’s all fear.

“There is an angry pall over all we do. Anyone who isn’t trying to get out is crazy or lazy. We may wind up with no one in my group. People are really pissed! If this is the way they treat people, I don’t want to be here either!”

“I remember coming to work one day and noticing how the atmosphere seemed to suck the energy right out of me as I entered the building. Everywhere people talked about the potential for layoffs. No one had any real information, it was all speculation. It seemed we had no choices. Most of us were too timid to fight directly so we just refused to do any real work. Most of us were too poor or unsure of our skills to leave the scene so we adopted the victim role — languishing in self pity and self doubt.”

Victims, we’re all victims... The tendency to blame others for one’s misfortune is characteristic of the victim role. It perpetuates a feeling of powerlessness by projecting responsibility for action onto another person. It is most effective as a paralyzing technique when responsibility is projected onto an unnamed group like *management* or the *organization*.

As long as that other person or group is doing everything to me, I can’t (and won’t) do anything to help myself. At the lowest levels of a bureaucracy, where accurate information about plans and timetables is almost non-existent, the tendency to assume the victim role is common. It even makes sense when you are in the midst of the situation. Why try to control a situation that is so totally hopeless?

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and, the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.”

Faith, wisdom and courage — The distress of employees in large organizations has defined the 1990s. Organizational systems have grown and proliferated in previous years, now they must recede and reorganize. To do otherwise would guarantee death to the entire system. Individuals within the changing systems simply must deal with the day-to-day realities of the situation and stay sane.

My experience writing this article...

This article has been in me for a long time. Yet, when I began to write about the observations that I had recorded in my journal and all that I believe in my heart, it was an awesome struggle. These things are not usually talked about on the same page, you know. I struggled with a cloud of negativity as I described the common feelings of employees and worried that maybe I was contributing more to the problem than the solution. But, even as I wrote, people shared feelings that reinforced the perceptions I was writing about. I became more confident that legitimizing and responding directly to the emotional distress is necessary before we can move on to explore the path out of this mess. As to the path out, I believe that a personal connection with a higher power (by whatever name each of us gives to it) is the fundamental missing link in all our organizational improvement efforts.

I am nervous about this article. Have I communicated well enough this delicate and volatile subject? Will others relate to what I have written in a way that is substantial and positive? Will I become known as a *spiritual air-headed New Ager*? I only know that my risk is mild compared to the risks I would ask employees to take as they make decisions about the future of their organizations and their lives. May we all be guided by the truth and peace of God.

"I cannot define for you what God is." Jung wrote to me just before he died. "I can only say that my work has proved empirically that the pattern of God exists in every man, and that this pattern has at its disposal the greatest of all his energies for transformation and transfiguration of his natural being. Not only the meaning of his life but his renewal and his institutions depend on his conscious relationship with this pattern in his collective unconscious" — From *Jung and the Story of Our Time* by Laurens van der Post, Random House, N.Y.



Finding your center... They must discover within themselves a point of reference from which to make tough decisions — about their careers and about the future of the organization. No organization will succeed unless the people who are the organization can continuously adapt and learn. It is the individual and how he or she reacts to the situation that will determine whether the organization succeeds or fails in its efforts to improve.

Where do people find the courage to face the unknown with confidence? There are some people who seem able to cope with any situation; you know, the ones who roll with the punches. These *lucky* ones always seem to mysteriously come out on top, they always land on their feet whether they stay in the organization or go on to other jobs. They often attract others in need of counseling or consoling or inspiration.

They are not to be confused with the blindly optimistic, always up and cheery ones who condemn the rest of us mere humans for the weakness of fear. They are not the ones who blame the victims for succumbing to their fate. Rather, they have a genuine peace about them that extends outward. It is almost tangible, the effects definitely are. These people have found a source of peace within themselves.

They are at peace and others who connect with them are, at least momentarily, at the same place. Whether they stay in the organization or leave

appears to not worry them much. These employees will take whatever happens in stride. It's not that they don't experience fear and emotional pain, they just don't seem to struggle against it. They know that discomfort is a necessary part of change; a route to something better. Like during childbirth, pain can be a natural indication of change in progress. They know that the pain will pass. They are not afraid because they have located the center of the storm.

The eye of the storm

"At the eye of the storm there is a quiet place where peace prevails and the damaging winds are calm. Such a place exists in the midst of this changing organization. It is accessible to every individual who seeks it because it is within your own mind."

To find the eye of the storm is to discover one's own spiritual core. We think that because we can't know with certainty how events will unfold that the situation is dangerously out of control. The fear of the unknown that employees feel can be tempered with the courage that faith allows. A certainty that, even though we don't know where events are leading, it is all leading somewhere that has unique meaning for our lives. The value of *not knowing* is that it often teaches us, with relentless reality, that we are not as much in control as we would like to believe.

"They know that the pain will pass. They are not afraid because they have located the center of the storm."



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Author's note: This article describes emotional reactions to organizational change. Quotes in the articles are composites of comments, reactions and anecdotes taken from my personal journal, kept over a five year period from 1990–1995. During that time, I talked with employees from many different organizations involved in downsizing or restructuring; all were government related. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the many employees who shared their feelings with me. They demonstrate that these feelings and emotions are normal reactions, not the result of any one organization's handling of the situation or anyone's weakness or guilt.

An organizational change can be the event that brings us closer to spiritual awakening. We have been relentless about denying a place for spirituality in the workplace. Unknowingly, we have denied a solution to suffering and the key to authentic organizational transformation.

Working from within the eye — Working from within the eye of the storm allows an individual to honor the spiritual implications of their work situation and to make career decisions that are inspired and courageous. The eye of the storm is a reference point from which the opportunities within organizational change become evident against a backdrop of emotion.

You can't stay the wind... Unfortunately, the eye is surrounded by powerful and often destructive forces that can keep a person going in circles for a lifetime. The winds are not overcome by force, they must be *navigated*. The challenge for each of us is to find our way into the eye. Many centuries of advice are available to us. Prayer, meditation, art, stories, dance, and many other avenues can lead to a state of consciousness that allows one to experience what I call the *eye of the storm*.

Spiritual wisdom is available for the taking... The biggest challenge is to ignore the daily noise of living and clear a space for the eye to exist. It is already there, just clear away the distractions and peace will come naturally to all who truly ask for it with sincere desire and clarity of purpose. There are people to help you and milestones to guide you; all on the same journey at different points along the way.

It is tempting to describe a spiritual path and wait expectantly (maybe a little impatiently) for others to start walking. But, experience proves time and time again that this approach is unrealistic, presumptuous and guaranteed to fail. Everyone encounters a personal struggle as they attempt to apply an attitude of faith to their own lives, even when they believe deeply and understand intellectually.

We seem to journey through growth cycles prompted by dissatisfaction, frustration, ambiguity, or loss. Only after much flailing about and gnashing of teeth does insight, application and change come. This kind of learning is guided by questions and direct experience not by testimonials.

Finding the eye of the storm requires working through trial and error to discover meaning and learning opportunities. It is a journey of unique personal growth that is not linear; it is characterized by steps forward and steps that seem to go backwards until they propel us into new information that was invisible earlier. Realize too that it will most likely be necessary to let go of some things in order to make space for others.

Organizational storms will come and go... Working from within the eye of the storm means incorporating spiritual awareness into your professional behavior. There are many ways that an organization can plan and conduct a restructuring that will minimize fear and ambiguity, but the *not knowing* never disappears completely. The eye of the storm is an alternative way of experiencing change. It is making a sincere and courageous attempt to perceive the situation from the perspective of spiritual awareness and faith.

Sometimes the crises in life serve to prompt us to action, the real priorities become clear and we understand that there is a way to respond creatively and without fear. The trauma of organizational restructuring is painful enough. Let it be a threshold, not the end of the road. ♦