

Paradigms: From Theory to Action

It has been about two years since we first began our work with XYZ, and over 150 managers have been through the Supporting People program. Periodically we step back and try to determine if the work we have been doing has made any difference. And every time we do that, we are repeatedly reminded of how powerful some of the bank paradigms are.

As you recall, the notion of paradigms was introduced in the Joel Barker film entitled “Discovering The Future: The Business of Paradigms” and we went through the process of identifying paradigms that existed within XYZ; some positive, some not so positive. And many people left the program determined to do some paradigm busting.

Soooo..... what have we heard when subsequent groups have come into the course? It covers the range from:

“It’s really made a difference. He’s the same person he always was but he makes a lot more effort to listen and include us in what’s going on.”

“She came back and reviewed her LPI results; that was the beginning of much more open communication in our group. I sure hope it continues.”

“He’s handing off some more interesting work without looking over my shoulder to make sure I’m doing things exactly the same way he would do it. Oh sure, he still looks at it when its finished, but I feel like I have a lot more freedom now. It seems like he trusts me more.”

to comments like:

“He was really great for about a week, but then he went back to the way he had always been.” (This was one of the most frequent comments.)

“The only time he remembered the concepts was when he was doing my performance appraisal and he pointed out what I wasn’t doing right—but I hadn’t even been on the course!”

“He/she didn’t say anything about it—it’s a mystery what happened, if anything.”

“I heard that some of the other managers talked to their groups after the course, but mine sure didn’t.”

I believe that in the latter comments, what we have at work is the power of 'paradigm paralysis' as Barker describes it. Whenever there is an opportunity to do something new, it is generally more work and less comfortable than doing things 'the way they've always been done'. And under pressure, the tendency is to slip back into a working style that is more comfortable personally. Yet we also know that many people have tried successfully to do things differently—like the way they communicate with others, 'encourage the heart' more often and try new approaches to going about XYZ's business.

We've heard a number of examples where people who have recently been through the course attempted to challenge a few paradigms and were met with immediate resistance or rejection. Unfortunately, those who were doing the rejecting were often people who had attended the program even earlier—and had slipped back into the mode of "that's the way we do it around here." Now we're certainly not advocating that every suggestion or proposal be accepted with open arms and without challenge, however we believe it is entirely appropriate to at least listen, consider, evaluate and offer a respectful response to those individuals who are trying to shift a few a paradigms that are intended to help XYZ.

Remember, paradigms start to shift from the "outside" or the "edge". It is virtually impossible for someone who is heavily invested in an old paradigm to embrace the change to a new one. The paradigm effect prevents seeing new opportunities. A new paradigm generally looks like it will take a lot of work to implement and there is no guarantee that the new one will work any better than the old.

There is no value in blaming people who are stuck in old paradigms. It is no one's fault—that's just the way it is. But by understanding the power that paradigms play in all our lives, perhaps there is still hope for a few intrepid 'paradigm pioneers'! Here are a few thoughts on how to move things along.

1. Stick together! It is much easier to share the burden of paradigm busting if you support each other. This newsletter is a great example. It would be virtually impossible (and certainly impractical) for one person to take the entire responsibility for producing it on a regular basis—so a number of you have been rotating the editorship. And you're doing a super job. Thus far you are the only client we work with who has taken this on as a grassroots effort rather than having to go through the endless hoops of gaining a corporate mandate, budget, equipment allocation, etc. (and if you haven't yet contributed, there's always room for your thoughts, too!).
2. Don't view other individuals or the corporation as 'the enemy' when it comes to shifting a paradigm. Everyone wants the business to be successful—yet they generally have different views on how to work toward it. Instead, think of them as partners who may be suffering from a little organizational myopia and who need your assistance to see new opportunities more clearly.
3. Keep at it. Paradigms do not change easily. They came into being for good reason and they once served the individuals and the organization well. It takes a lot of time and effort to shift them. What is an apparent advantage to you may not be to the person or group that is being asked to change. 'Stick-to-it-iveness' is essential!

4. Seek first to understand, then to be understood. Be sure you fully understand the point of view of the person or group you are trying to persuade. By putting in a strong effort to see where they're coming from, it often earns you the right to present your case in a way that it can be understood. It also provides you with the information necessary to present your alternative in as persuasive a way as possible. It is most effective if you can show how your proposal can satisfy the interests of the person or group who will have to change. If you don't know what those interests are, you will have a much tougher job!
5. Communicate, communicate, communicate! Whenever you have met with some degree of success, let other people know. The sense of possibility that things can change tends to fuel the efforts of others who are running into brick walls. This newsletter is a great vehicle for letting others know what's happening. Let the editor know what paradigms you see shifting; what paradigms seem to be paralysed; what paradigms you could use some assistance in shaking; and what paradigms are important to hang on to.
6. Recognize your own paradigms. It is easy to be so busy challenging the paradigms of others that we fail to realize the ones we are caught up in ourselves. By becoming more aware of the paradigms you are hanging onto (that are more for personal comfort than for growth), you'll have a better appreciation for the difficulty that others have in breaking theirs.

With persistence, commitment and a "never say die" attitude, there's no doubt that as a group, you can make a big difference in the way things are done in XYZ. With good intentions, a lot of effort, and working together, the payoff will be there for everyone. The challenge and the choice is yours!