

The Messy Business of Progress



The business of progress can be challenging. This is true whether the progress is taking place in improving the performance of a department, a complete corporate turnaround or even executing a project. Progress implies change and resistance to change is natural. The necessity to change means that there is a better way. If there is a better way, then the way it's been done is, at least, suboptimal, if not destructive. For this reason, egos and pride are often collateral damage in the process of making progress.

Progress in business can be compared to applying sandpaper to wood in carpentry. Sanding wood has the effect of transforming something very rough into something elegant and precise. From a distance, it is a beautiful process. However, from the perspective of a grain of sand on the sandpaper, sanding is a very violent and turbulent process. It hurts to be the grain of sand. Similarly, business transformation is beautiful to witness from a distance, but at the working level the process can be turbulent and include constructive tension or conflict.

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Conflict for the sake of conflict is never healthy. Of course, there is an argument for the “if it’s not broke, break it” approach to continuous improvement to prevent stagnation, but there is no place in the corporate world for simply being disagreeable any more than you appreciate such behavior in your private life. Very few people enjoy conflict. If a team trusts each other, conflict is usually not perceived to be an attack, but accepted as a constructive tension borne of creative differences.

However, avoidance of conflict in a leadership team is usually a sign that the would-be leaders have an issue holding each other, or being held, accountable. Avoiding accountability is the

equivalent to prescribing acceptance of something less than optimal, worse than planned or allowing commitments to be missed. On the assumption that commitments were sought based on a tactical plan to achieve a goal or execute a strategy, failing to keep commitments inherently means falling short of objectives.

For progress to take place, a direction or goal has to be selected. Unless the organization is a dictatorship, the direction is the result of a leadership team openly debating conflicting priorities and visions. This, in itself, can be a source of tension. However, everybody must be “heard out” and all objections must be confronted so when a decision is made there is nothing that hasn’t been considered. Failure to do this will result in parallel agendas or passive aggressive behavior for the appearance of harmony and an insincere preservation of peace. Whether by broad agreement, majority vote, or the head of the company choosing from options after consideration, a single objective has to emerge.

Following selection of the objective, each team member on the leadership team has to own their commitment to the result even before they act. Self accountability must drive team members to be self empowered to take actions and risks, with the confidence that they are acting on behalf of their team of peers. They’ll have to answer for outcomes and expect to be evaluated for progress by their peers. This requires each leadership team member to fear poor results more than constructive conflict.

To keep commitments, each team member will have to throw away task lists and replace them with deadlines on a calendar. They’ll have to respect the critical path, manage expectations and have the courage and confidence to say “no” as they navigate competing priorities, and ask for help if they sense risk to keeping a commitment. There can be no fear of altering the plan if progress isn’t meeting the forecast. Accountability is not about punishment. Rather, it’s about an unrelenting

pursuit of an objective with a real-time analysis of whether an alternative plan (more resources, different skill sets, etc.) is required. When it's time to deliver you'll have to accept the outcome of your actions; good or bad, to keep the trust of your peers. You have to face the brutal reality and not assign blame.

Of course, if either the head of the company or the majority of your leadership team lives in silos or prefers politics to results, you are in a losing battle from the beginning. In fact, a single executive that resides in a silo without the head of the company replacing them can prevent the team from meeting their objective and often serves as the catalyst for the negative type of conflict in team meetings.

Often, their first commitment is to their functional team rather than the leadership peer group. They have their own objectives and are not prepared to subordinate their metrics and KPI's to those of the entire enterprise. While these people should be given an opportunity to change their priorities in allegiance, they must be replaced if the team is ever to function as a single body with a common objective that is to be achieved by constructive tension as opposed to frustrating disagreement.

So the messy business of progress doesn't have to be miserable. Conflict can be a positive tool when it is used in a constructive context in a trusting environment to keep a commitment or meet an objective that was selected as the best next way point for an organization. While it's not entirely comfortable, you can be at peace when you know it is a part of a positive process that is designed for the whole team to win. You not only achieve an objective, but you validate that your cohesive leadership peer group is a team that all employees are more apt to follow.

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