

YOUR LEADERSHIP

EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY
AMANDA CEBULA

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CHAPTER 17
ENERGIZE OTHERS

Speak to Loss

“People are afraid of change.”

We’ve all heard that one before. It’s the simplistic answer explaining lack of progress on what matters most.

The marketing department is stuck in its ways, unwilling to try something new. **“They are afraid of change!”**

The teachers aren’t open to new methods and salary models. **“They are afraid of change!”**

Have you noticed how seldom **we** claim to be afraid of change ourselves? Maybe no one is actually afraid of change. Maybe we just think they are afraid.

A new term is in vogue in community and civic life: “CAVE people.” You’ll hear it in town hall meetings and at chamber of commerce mixers. CAVE stands for “citizens against virtually everything.” Just about any place

“NEW SEATING WILL BE PERHAPS THE MOST VISIBLE DIFFERENCE YOU WILL SEE IN CHANGING FROM ONE HOUR DAYS WITH EIGHT HOURS OF BREAK TO EIGHT HOUR DAYS WITH ONE HOUR OF BREAK.”



a group is trying to make something new happen in a community — build a park, pass a school bond issue, develop incentives to lure businesses — the proponents bemoan the CAVE people. “They are afraid of change! They are holding us back!”

We have yet to meet anyone who claims membership in the CAVE club. Perhaps complaints about CAVE people or marketing departments tap into our human nature to vilify others and let ourselves off the hook.

*Our friend Marty Linksy,
from the Kennedy School
of Government at Harvard,
says no one is afraid of change
per se. What we fear is the
loss that comes with change.*

Your grand idea doesn't look so grand to them. You see possibility. They see loss. You see hope. They see despair. You see progress. They see all kinds of problems that may or may not be connected (from your perspective) to the issue you care about.

Our experience suggests most of us don't understand the distinction between change and loss. Moreover, those of us working for a change do everything we can to focus energy away from negatives. We deny the potential losses and, if we can't get away with simple denial, we defend and make speeches about why those losses make sense.

Mobilizing others on tough challenges (aka exercising leadership) often requires us to “speak to loss.”

WHAT DOES THAT LOOK LIKE?

- ▶ After a great deal of turnover in her church, a member organizes a meeting for parishioners and says, “I know we’ve experienced a great deal of change lately. And because we’re not the pastor or church staff, we feel like the situation is out of our control. In fact, I’ve been frustrated myself and have even considered transferring to another church. The truth is, though, that I just care too much about this place and our community and, by your presence here tonight, I can tell you do too.”
- ▶ Rather than only touting the perceived benefits of the new commercial development in town, the mayor also says, “And I understand this won’t all be easy. Business owners will face new competition. I understand that in many ways this effort — especially in the short run — may make things harder for you. We are doing this to help the city grow overall. That growth should benefit everyone, but it might not feel like it right away.”
- ▶ While speaking at the annual all-employee meeting, the CEO describes the gains the company will make because of increased efficiency and the streamlined production process. He also says, “These changes, while good for our bottom line, don’t necessarily feel rosy all the time. New efficiencies mean fewer employees. Many of our colleagues and friends have been let go because of the streamlining. I would like to take some time now to hear how these changes are affecting you. What’s been hard about all this change?”

WHY SHOULD YOU SPEAK TO LOSS?

- **To build trust.** Acknowledging the loss builds your credibility.
- **To help people get unstuck.** If people don't process their loss, it could get in the way of moving forward. Speaking about loss is not very comfortable, but it can generate new energy.
- **To validate their feelings.** People need to know that they are heard and that you care.

WHAT MAKES IT HARD?

- **It feels risky.** We are afraid, because we don't know what to expect. We are taught to be positive. At first, speaking to loss feels anything but positive.
- **We aren't used to uncertainty and conflict** and bringing up losses brings both to the surface. (See Chapter 8 for more related to this topic.)
- **We're responsible.** Often, we are the ones bringing on the loss and we would rather not "own" or be responsible for the others' feelings. Not only might we feel responsible for their loss, but once we acknowledge their loss, we may feel like we need to do something about it.



Lessons from History

SPEAKING TO LOSS

Dorothea Lange captured unforgettable images from the Depression and World War II on the homefront in America. Famous pieces include photographs such as “Migrant Mother,” which captures the face, fortitude, pain and grit of Depression-era mothers, and photographs showing Japanese Americans pledging their allegiance to the United States minutes before being sent to internment camps. By taking images that show real loss unfolding in the country, Lange highlighted things that many may have preferred to go unnoticed but were important for people to understand.

HOW DO YOU “SPEAK TO LOSS”?

- **Speak directly to their loss.** Don’t say, “I know how you feel,” because you don’t. But do acknowledge the loss. Describe the loss you see them experiencing.
- **Ask others to speak to their own loss.** Get them talking about it. Give the work back. Be careful to not jump in and start defending. For example, if you ask them the question, “What’s been hard about all of this change?” resist the urge to respond to every comment. Instead, listen closely, ask questions if what they’re saying doesn’t make sense and thank them for sharing.
- **Share your own loss** as a way to create an environment where sharing loss is accepted and valued. Be authentic and vulnerable.
- **Do less rather than more.** Creating the opportunity for others to speak to loss does not require you to say much. Sometimes it’s just about allowing more space. If this is something that is not the norm, you may need to create an environment where honest conversation can take place.

Our local nonprofit organization is getting ready to merge with the larger parent organization to save costs. Unfortunately, this means people will be shifting roles and, in some cases, losing their jobs. How can we cope with this transition in the coming months?



- TED IN TRANSITION

Dear Ted,

This is a tough one and feels particularly personal given that people's jobs are at stake. So just start there. Acknowledge you all are in a difficult situation and you understand it's going to be hard to stay focused and keep working toward the organization's mission with so much uncertainty looming about.

Resist the urge to try to make it right. What do we mean? Don't try to tell them everything will be OK; you don't know that for certain. And don't try to talk about the organization's mission and purpose to motivate them to stick with it, as you will most likely drive them further away.

You might also be asking, "Why is it so hard to not jump in and start defending?" This can be incredibly difficult. Oftentimes, you might know more details about the decision that caused the change. Usually, these details help explain why the decision, no matter how hard, was the best choice. We defend as a way to share the information that can help level out the conversation — although as we've learned, it ends up not being the most effective way to do this. In our desire to not have conflict, we also defend to self-protect and justify that the pain someone else feels was worth the change we helped make happen.

So just be with them. Create the space for people to share what they are thinking. And be prepared that this may need to happen as a group, or it may need to happen one-on-one. Everyone experiences change differently, and the best thing you can do is be open, honest and present.

Onward!