Finding a Critical Friend

If you are trying to create a new way to be for yourself or your organization, you will often become painfully aware of just how far away you are from your goals. This can be emotionally wrenching, especially during the inevitable stages where you meet resistance, hostility, and delays in the system. This is particularly the case for executives finding their way in a new role or wishing to change fundamentally the role they currently occupy.

The ideal strategy is to move gently, continually toward your vision for the organization, learning to live with the feelings of stress and emotional tension. But it’s not easy, and all the conventional strategies for dealing with that tension make matters worse. Executives faced with disappointment force themselves to ‘push harder’; they lower their vision (“We don’t really need to make this reform complete”), or they deny that they have any emotional tension at all, for fear of burdening the organization (“Current reality is not so bad.”).

Any of these strategies will undermine your purpose. If only as a safety valve to preserve your change effort, you need to find a way to cultivate awareness of your own emotional tension, without giving in to it. You need to make sure you are taking care of yourself and you need to find ways to face your own patterns and ways of dealing with people honestly and squarely.

Some people claim that they can go off and meditate by themselves and clear the emotional tension they feel. But for most people in organizations, a better strategy is to find a partner whom they can trust. Leaders, regardless of ‘rank,’ need a partner and critical friend to talk to and confide in while going through the often intense phases of change.

This is particularly so for executives for they are likely to be the recipients of the most inauthentic communication in any organization. Whatever is presented to them is always highly filtered data and meanings and they tend to feel that many who work for them cannot also be critical of them.

Why is the presence of this partner and critical friend so important? Because if you are the leader, the rest of the people on your team or in your organization expect to see you project openness and honesty – including the confidence to say what you believe in, and to admit when you are uncertain. They expect you to be effective and flexible in your social dealings with them and others, and they expect you to have a much higher level of sensitivity and concern (both at a systems level and interpersonally) than you will often consider yourself capable of delivering.

It is much easier to pull this off if you are in steady contact with someone who can help you uncover what you are thinking and feeling, including your misgivings, who can help you reframe your understanding of what is actually going on (and your part in it) and who without fear or favour will tell you “the way it is”.

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Critical friends may have a vision of your potential, but they thoroughly accept you as you are now. They may be people you pay for the time they spend with you doing this “work” or they may already be someone you know. If you contract someone for this service, they become as it were an “Executive Coach” to and for you. But their fee, their experience, their skill and their qualifications will count for naught unless they are people who are there for you, both as person and in your new found role.

As you sort through the people and professionals in your life, you may discover that only one or two people meet these criteria – and your significant other or spouse may not be one of them. They have other important roles to fill in your life!

This is a different dynamic from finding a sympathetic person on whom you can “dump” your bad feeling when you get away from work. In systems terms, when you “dump,” you’re shifting the burden of your feelings onto the dumpee. If you generate strong emotional tension at work, and take it home and spill it onto a friend or spouse, there’s a cathartic release and the tension goes out of your system.

Then you are ready to go back and build up more negative tension, while your friend or spouse copes with the fact that you have used him or her, once again, as a repository vessel for your negative feelings.

On the other hand, when you find a worthy partner and critical friend associated with work, you are designing a more fundamental solution, in which the tension is named, witnessed, and used as energy to influence the system at work. Your goal is to forge an alliance, or create some form of mutual commitment, in which there is trust and freedom of expression. Make a point of allowing your prospective partner and critical friend to make an informed choice about taking on the role. Describe the changes you see ahead and make your expectations clear; ask if he or she is willing to serve as a sounding board, colleague, and personal consultant, i.e. an executive coach.

Given the current reality of the organization where you work, you will probably find it difficult to imagine having this kind of partnership. It is more likely you will need to build it outside the organization. And it will be helpful in the long term to you if the person you choose has strengths, experiences and insights in those areas that are your blind-spots.

In a good “partner and critical friend” conversation you can blow off steam without the burden of having to follow through. You may end up expressing your emotional tension in words, gestures, tears, or angry shouting – that’s part of the process. Your partner and critical friend may surprise you sometimes by saying something like: “I can see it’s worse than you’re letting on. You’re deeply hurt.” There is a moment of great release and awareness when you recognize that someone else has articulated what you’ve felt below the surface.
A “partner and critical friend” conversation will also remind you that while your feelings are absolutely legitimate, they may also change soon; your commitment, is to the truth as you see it each moment, not to consistency.

A “partner and critical friend” conversation will often involve diagrams, doodling, sketches and frameworks new to you as you learn to see your problems and concerns from different angles, different perspectives and build new insights as to how to act. It will be a safe and psychological space in which you can learn and grow.

Always let your partner and critical friend know how you would like her or him to listen at any particular meeting or on any particular day. Partners and critical friends may listen only as a sounding board, with no verbal response but lots of emotional response. They may listen and offer responses that show you how others will perceive your comments later. They may advise on strategies and tactics, or offer more wide-ranging insights.

Whatever form they take, these conversations are a sort of transformer, temporarily adding capacity to your emotional circuits. That is why your partner and critical friend will not help you much by telling you how the other people in your team feel about the situation, or how “it does you no good to be angry.” People need a partner and critical friend precisely because they need help seeing their feelings, looking at their responses, uncovering the consequences of their actions, both intended and unintended.

Similarly, it doesn’t help to have someone say: “If you’re feeling so angry, what are you going to do about it?” There is a profound difference between the actions that you might take when driven by the desire to reduce your emotional tension, and the strategic actions that will emerge after the tension has been transformed into positive creative energy.

Eventually, your partner and critical friend will probably be the first to recognize the point when the organization and you are more than halfway planted in its new reality. Both of you can construct questions or metrics to test the assumption that your organization and/or you have indeed “turned the corner.” Once you have evidence, you can do for your organization what your partner and critical friend has done for you – point to the light at the end of the tunnel.

So, now, as you have read these notes, you are coming to a point where you can start to make some choices: will your partner and critical friend be someone with whom you already are friends? Or, will they be someone else: although contracted by you, someone whose integrity and way of being in the world you trust, whom you contract with for a certain regular time: an executive coach.

We wish you well in this choice and in your role!

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