

Drive the Change Bus or Get Run Over

By: Dr. David Griffin

News flash: Change is difficult. Here's another news flash: Change is one of the only areas of an organization that's constant. Why? Because leaders are always looking for new ideas to improve their products and services. Get over it. Change is here to stay. Fortunately, you have a few choices. You can get on the bus and ride, drive the bus, or get run over. Personally, riding and getting run over do not sound very appealing to me. Unfortunately, I did play chicken with the change bus before, and it ran me over pretty quickly. Lesson learned.

Enough rambling. Back to organizational change. History indicates that we can trace organizational change back to the Old Testament when Moses had thousands of Israelites as new followers after they escaped the Egyptian pharaoh's tyranny. Moses was now in charge of a large number of people and he had to do a better job of organizing this overwhelming time in his life. It was suggested, by his father-in-law, Jethro, that he reorganize and select some of his best men to be the leaders of these new found followers. Under Moses' best men would be Lieutenants tasked with this duty. If need be, Moses' best men would then have direct access to Moses. If a problem was presented that the Lieutenants couldn't handle, then it would be taken directly to Moses, through the chain of command (Burke, 2007). Of course, the aforementioned example was not the first instance in history that highlighted a structural and operational change following a suggestion, but it was definitely an impactful one.

Do you realize how much easier this change made Moses' job as the leader of these new followers? This was all started from a suggestion from Jethro, who saw a problem and decided a major overhaul was necessary in order to fix it. Was it difficult at first? Of course it was. Did they quit and say that wasn't the way they use to do it? No. They pushed through it and made the

changes to ensure more effective leadership was allowed and that their people were taken better care of. It seems pretty simple right. Well, why is it so hard for organizations to change, when we don't have thousands of unknown people entering the equation as Moses did quite some time ago? Simple. People like their routine and what they feel comfortable doing. But if you don't change, you don't grow. According to Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr, American theologian and the recipient of the 1964 Presidential Medal of Freedom, "Change is the essence of life. Be willing to surrender what you are for what you could become."

What you could become is something incredible if you would stay positive and give the process a chance to work. I have seen this time and time again in organizations and the resistance is usually high at first. Let's go back to my knob year (freshman) at The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, in 1998. For over a hundred years, this institution had been an all-male university. Females were now entering the matriculation process in increasing numbers. Changes in training were starting to be passed down the pipe, I assumed, because I continued to hear my cadre sergeants grumbling about what needed to be done to uphold the new standards. I was young and didn't understand what I was hearing at the time. As I look back on it now, it was simple resistance to organizational change. These changes were being put into place to create a better training environment for all parties involved. I was worried due to the new changes that I wouldn't be a part of the history of the "Old Corps". But in essence, I was a part of a bigger time in the history of the "New Corps". We were innovators; some of the first to go through "Hell Week" with females by our side. These dynamics made us a stronger group because of the diversity we had. Of course, some of my classmates complained, but I believed in the process and knew that this new dynamic would make our university stronger. I was willing to surrender what I was for what I could become. Four years later, one of my female classmates rose to the

rank of Company Commander and led us courageously during the year that our country lost 343 firefighters and deployed our troops for the war against terrorism. As I stated, I surrendered what I was for what I could become and in turn learned from a great leader.

Fast forward to over a decade later and I found myself in a position of surrender again to allow the change process to work in the city I was born and raised in and now have the pleasure of protecting, The City of Charleston, SC. We had just lost nine firefighters in a warehouse fire on June 18, 2007. I was the engineer of the first due engine that day and witnessed first-hand the effects of a lack of organizational change over previous decades. Unfortunately, at the time, myself or other department members didn't realize the organizational changes that were needed. It took some deep self-exploration for all of us to come to terms with the changes, but once we did, the weight of the world was lifted off of our shoulders. We surrendered and gave it a chance. This monumental step changed our lives as well as the direction of our department. It was a dramatic change of events for everyone in the organization.

Of course, not everyone embraced the change. However, the ones that were willing to take that step, changed their lives and career as well. Ask yourself: "Are you willing to surrender what you are for what you could become?" It's a tough question that takes some self-exploration on your part. Ponder it, explore it, embrace it, sleep on it. Do whatever you have to do, but at least give it a chance. Don't resist new ideas that could change your life in a positive manner and make you an innovator in your organization. It's easy to buck the system and hide under the radar on the change bus, but it's much more difficult to surrender and make a positive change. Complaining and negativity snowball. When individuals continue to handle themselves in this manner, they are not only hurting the place that they work for and the people that care about

them, but they are making it difficult for the remaining members to move on and take that step to surrender.

History indicates that in many organizations and professions, not everyone will be able to surrender. But there are individuals that understand the importance of surrender and the meaning it has in the grand scheme of things. These are the members that will be behind the wheel of the change bus that will continue to move through not only the emergency services, but organizations worldwide. Will you be behind the wheel or continually dodging it? Trust me, the change bus **will** keep coming and **will** eventually run you over. It's your choice...make the right one.

References

Burke, W. (2002). *Organization Change: Theory and Practice*. Sage Publications, Inc.

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