

Executive Strategy: How leaders embrace 'change moments'

by Kevin Sweeney - 6.1.07

In a big company, in a crowded industry, in a difficult year, in a time when there seems to be no time — how does one change an organization? How do we get, and hold, the attention of our colleagues? How do we help a traditional company see the opportunities that may come if it embraces the principles of sustainable development?

We struggle to find the right books or speeches, and work to develop new ways to present old information. We fail to recall that the audience listens and learns only when it is ready to do so.

In the classroom, we understand the notion of “teachable moments.” A high school student’s fear is exposed when he asks about a violent event; the teacher drops the planned lesson and decides to follow the student’s line of questioning, knowing the time is ripe for real learning.

Similarly, the Civil Rights movement had done its groundwork for years, but needed the right mix of people and circumstances before unleashing massive boycotts; Rosa Parks provided the teachable moment, which was seized by movement leaders waiting for the opportunity to elevate their issues.



National Park Service rangers talk of “interpretive moments.” The ranger walks us along the path, pointing out geologic formations, noting the unique fauna, or explaining significant events that occurred here. We’re quiet in the presence of a historic site or natural wonder, and we nod our heads in agreement as the ranger connects us emotionally to the resource.

In a way, the ranger is interpreting our own silence for us, helping us understand our feelings. Without this conversation, some of the real value of a National Park visit might be lost. The moments when those of us who visit a site might be changed by it, or by the events that transpired there, would pass unfulfilled.

We all know this, but the scale and form of a large organization can lead us away from the obvious. These concepts can work just as well in the business world. I prefer the term “change moments,” as it moves away from the teacher-student relationship and implies a collective responsibility for instigating change.

There are a few key things to look for when identifying change moments:

- The event should not have painfully obvious lessons, but should be subject to, or in need of, interpretation.
- The event should allow for emotional communication. It should be of such a type or scale that individuals are open to a less typical tone of conversation. The interpretation should stay in-house. This isn’t grandstanding; it is a means of building esprit de corps and leading people toward a specific place or goal.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, and the city was enveloped in panic, a CEO could have called an all-company meeting to reflect on climate change and the company's relationship to it. We can't know when the next hurricane will hit, of course, but we surely know devastating storms will continue to strike. In some companies, it will be a potential change moment.

When yet another boardroom scandal unfolds, a CEO can talk about the reality of transparency, of how the company must embrace it, and how it means the company must be open about its greatest challenges. We don't know when the next scandal will occur, but we do know it will happen. In some companies, it will be a potential change moment.

A change moment can also stem from a small event, and may not require executive involvement. In 1995, three Patagonia employees were arrested in a nonviolent protest to protect the Headwaters Forest in Northern California. Their action took great courage, and many of their colleagues were inspired. But inspiration spread like wildfire when a handful of employees — none of them executives — called a company meeting to talk about the events. It was appropriate, given Patagonia's long-standing support of ancient forest protection efforts.

At the company meeting, someone read a quote from Thoreau, someone else talked about Martin Luther King, and those present began to see their colleagues as belonging to a lineage of courageous American activists.

The event helped transform the company. Many more employees were trained in civil disobedience. The company instituted a new policy to post bail for employees arrested in nonviolent environmental protests. (Admittedly, this is not something most companies can or would do, but it hints at the depth of change.) Perhaps most important, more employees brought their environmental passions to the workplace. That momentum played an important role in quickening the company's introduction of organic cotton and pushing Patagonia toward the use of recycled building materials and alternative energy purchases.

Company leaders should be willing to embrace change moments when they occur. And those who work with executives can develop an opportunistic strategy in advance, starting with a common understanding of why change moments are important.

I think it's helpful to make a numerical commitment, perhaps looking for two change moments a year. Each quarter, come back to the commitment. If no change moments were created in the previous quarter, think back over the course of events to see if one could have been built, or why leaders were hesitant to embrace an opportunity. Try to learn from any missed opportunities.

In most places, and at most times, people may not be open to change. But when they are, the best leaders — and the best change agents — are ready.

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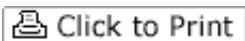
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