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Briefing Notes:

Tactics for Dealing with Denial and Confusion

Change often stirs up anxiety and irrational hopes and fears. People often respond to such changes by the defense of denial. They refuse to see an emerging new reality or significant threats to the continued way of doing business. The core difficulty with denial is that people are unaware that they are in denial. Hardin (1978, p. 5) writes, “It takes five years for a person’s mind to change ... In areas of deep emotional meaning facts alone are not enough; there has to be a restructuring of the psyche, and this takes place with glacial slowness after all the facts are in.”

Often after overcoming denial, the next stage is confusion—making sense of conflicting information, entertaining different possibilities. If leaders have broken through the denial and admitted not only their inability to offer strategies but also that they may not fully understand the situation, they need to create the conditions for people to tolerate not knowing. Often in groups each person imagines that he or she is the only one who does not know.

Managing Transitions

Below are some tactics for helping people work through denial and confusion.

1. *Avoid exaggerated scare tactics.* The greatest difficulty in moving from contentment to acknowledging one may be in denial is the power of one’s mind to fool him or herself—“whistling in the dark” to ward off feeling anxious. Performance problems are explained in terms of one-time, special circumstances. Often more information about a difficult situation can actually increase denial. In some experiments in England concerning accident prevention it was found that vivid photographs of car wrecks actually increased poor drivers’ sense of invulnerability—that it could not happen to them. It increased their denial. Hardin has suggested that one has to “stalk taboos” by sneaking up on them to prevent one’s target from fleeing or fighting. He suggests avoiding taking more than one taboo at a time to prevent overload.

2. **Use rational, data-driven approaches but do not expect the facts alone to overcome denial.** Fuld suggests when faced with poor business performance that is being rationalized away, one needs to focus ruthlessly on identifying and examining the root cause of the competitiveness gap by learning the numbers, examining processes, benchmarking, etc. If people can take the threat as serious and actionable, they can begin to mobilize their intelligence.
3. **Amplify surprise.** Get people to commit in advance to what they think an outcome will be and then systematically compare the actual results. People often reopen their unexamined routines and habits only when they do not get the results that they want, and they are surprised by the outcome. Something has changed that alters the effectiveness of their strategies and creates the fresh search.
4. **Capitalize on painful new realities.** Often denial is overcome by an event or an action that forces one into a new reality. Much of the change literature frequently stresses that one can never make somebody else change. However, external events can create the conditions that help one overcome denial. For example, with downsizing, moving ahead to implement cuts rather than endless planning and anticipation can create a new reality for the affected employees. When one listens to people who have been laid off and have adapted effectively, they often talk with hindsight about the power of the action that triggered the whole sequence, even though at the time they could not understand that it was going to be developmental.
5. **Give people opportunities to observe.** Being a spectator and being aware of what interests or irritates one another is often a cue to what is a real issue for oneself but on the edge of one's awareness. For example, at a top team retreat of a national nonprofit organization, the vice presidents' fascination with what the departing CEO was going to do next was a clue to their denial of their anxieties about the future under a new leader. Instead of adaptively working those issues on their own, the group tried to live vicariously through its fascination with the leader's future (Gilmore and Austin, 1993). The intervention was to make each person imagine a story about their being recruited out of the organization.

Framo (1970) created a couples-therapy model that helped people reclaim unwanted aspects of themselves that they could see in others. Each couple had 20 – 25 minutes of intense work with the therapist. Afterward the other couples commented on this work. Then the roles switched so that in the space of one two-hour session the couples experienced observing, commenting (which is often as much about themselves as it is about the others) and being the focus of attention. This kind of a structure enables people to get multiple vantage points on their current situation, which is often the most powerful way to overcome contentment and realize that there is some aspect of their life that they are not looking at.

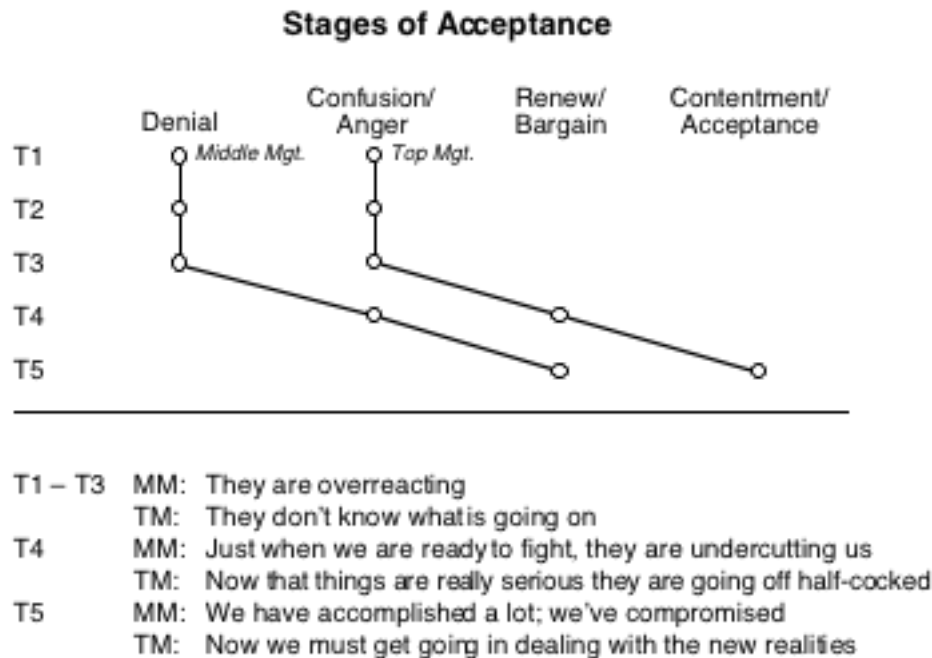
6. ***Differentiate what is controllable and not controllable.*** The process of coming to terms with a new reality has a first stage that acknowledges a helplessness, a bottoming out, a feeling that one is not in control, or a feeling that one's old strategies are no longer getting the results that they used to. Insanity has been defined as doing the same thing in the same context and expecting a different result.
7. ***Decompose a larger problem into smaller parts.*** The path through denial is disaggregating something or seeing a small piece as metaphorically representing the whole or disaggregating and seeing a different connection among the pieces.
8. ***Contain some of the anxiety.*** When people are overloaded with anxiety they often cannot take in information or act in their best interests. By creating some floor to their anxiety—for example, by a promise of no layoffs or help with transition—people can be more active in taking in a new reality.
9. ***Work through people that they know and/or trust.*** Frequently, significant changes are announced in large meetings by a top leader. Yet studies have found the most effective communication comes through the chain of command if each level is kept informed. People can hear much tougher news from someone with whom they have a strong relationship.
10. ***Use worst-case scenarios.*** Instead of gingerly going from the present to thinking about a dreaded stimulus like job loss, help people imagine, “If I did lose my job what’s the worst outcome?” This often helps people put a floor under their catastrophizing so that they actually get calmer and can think about the real issue in a more adaptive way.
11. ***Take a trip either actually or mentally.*** We often can see more freshly in new contexts. For example, the entrepreneur behind Starbucks Coffee got his idea while on a bean buying trip in Europe; seeing all the cafes led him to imagine Seattle similarly populated. Note the linguistic connection between “resigning” and “re-signing up” as an example of this process. The mental process of thinking of leaving is sometimes a way that gets one reconnected to why one is there in the first place. Benchmarking has become a major mode of getting people to see their worlds freshly, with some of the best cases involving visiting dissimilar companies—for example, IBM benchmarking supplies by looking at L.L. Bean’s warehouse and shipping systems.
12. ***Beware of premature flight into action.*** Watch for quick flight from denial directly to “the answer.” Acting out can be a way of discharging the anxiety caused by the loss of control. If one can stop the cycle of doing something, one can transfer some of that energy into thinking. It is the reverse of the folk wisdom of, “Don’t just stand there, do something,” to, “Don’t just do something, think.”

- 13. Legitimate that it is all right to be confused.** A leader should openly acknowledge to the group his or her own confusion coupled with confidence that working together they can find a way out. Research on high-performing cockpit teams suggests that the leaders listen more, attend more to the team dynamics, and by disavowing perfection, invite others to share their thinking and share responsibility for overall safety. For example, “I just want you guys to understand that they assign the seats in this airplane based on seniority, not on competence. So anything you can see or do that will help out, I’d sure appreciate hearing about it” (Weick, 1993, p. 650).
- 14. Keep active rather than passive.** Create a playful, experimental context for people to think outside the box and consider alternatives without immediately thinking about the politics or constraints that might prevent their implementation. DeBono’s (1970) work on lateral thinking suggests working through confusion needs a climate that suspends logical, chain-like reasoning. Being wrong can creatively lead to fresh ideas.
- 15. Invest in small experiments and probes versus one big single commitment.** Some of these initial actions might be contradictory, e.g., simultaneously rebuilding a department and contracting it out. Much of the work on strategic speed (Eisenhardt, 1990) suggests fast top teams are good at pursuing multiple strategies and getting rapid feedback on them.
- 16. Take stock periodically.** One of the effects of confusion is that people often imagine that they have made no progress when in fact they have learned a considerable amount but have not yet broken through their uncertainties. By looking back and summarizing, people can be reminded of how far they have come.
- 17. Clearly assign the responsibilities to the line organization and help build the systems that will let the change continue to function efficiently.**

Dealing with People Being in Different Places

This article has dealt with the journey through the four stages that often characterize a significant change. An added layer of complexity is that often different stakeholders (by functions, levels, individuals, etc.) are in different places with a change effort, creating significant communication dilemmas. For example, a common pattern for top management is to finally break through their own denial and get involved in working through the confusion to craft a strategy. For example, a telecommunications company may see cable coming in as a competitor and bringing a much lower cost structure. When these leaders roll out the new strategy or try to enroll participants into problem-solving teams, they forget their own emotional journey in coming to accept the realities of the competitive situation. They may have spent weeks or months with information, experiences, discussions, coming to know their own minds and taking in the new realities. As they communicate from a renewal stance to a group that may still be in denial, they do not provide the support to help them take in this information.

The figure below illustrates this dynamic, exploring possible splits between top and middle management.



It can often be helpful when thinking through a change effort to create a matrix of different stakeholders on one axis and the stages on the other to see if one is able to characterize the mood or place of each group and then craft strategies appropriately. This is not to suggest that each group needs to move through at the same pace, but that often one does need to learn from one's own experience and help others make the transitions. Leaders often need to loop back in order to move ahead.

One method of getting an idea of who is in which place is to use the cartoonist strategy of imagining what somebody else is thinking and feeling but not saying. One can often see by a group's reaction what people are not feeling comfortable enough to talk about. The leader can help the group overcome their suppression or denial of that issue by giving voice to those unexpressed ideas. For example, the leader might say, "As I look at you I have a hunch that some of you must be feeling considerable anxiety about who's going to end up with the key jobs after this consolidation. Perhaps we should talk a bit about that." That kind of an intervention helps people understand their own mind through active dialogue. If unexpressed, worry can cause flight from difficult thinking.

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