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Pain, Change, and the Role of Canaries

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I was reflecting on the various families and organizations that I have worked with over the years and thinking through what had been the catalyst for getting them into doing organizational development/systems work, and if they had made significant change. In every case, there had been one or more individuals who had spoken up about some area of discontent and the need for change. These individuals had often taken great risk to their job, position, or how they might be perceived to step forward and candidly voice concern of what they perceived to be a risk or threat to the organization and/or family system if their concerns were not addressed. In fact, I could not think of a single incidence where a potential client had called me because they thought that things were going great and they just wanted me to come in and have a look around.

I have come to call these individuals "canaries" after the proverbial "canary in the coal mine". Before the advent of hand held gas sensors, miners would take a caged canary down into the shaft as they were particularly adept at sensing even a small concentration of gas and alert the minors to the risk. This term has come now to describe harbingers of the future, or those that are able to give the first warning of a larger problem developing.

It is interesting to note the qualities and characteristics of these individuals. They tend to be intuitive and expressive; they both sense things and will be likely to say what is on their mind. They are usually feeling a sense of pain that is at a crisis point, and there is often a threat of leaving, threat of a lawsuit, or some other threat to the organization or the family system that is perceived as negative or unpalatable. They usually do not have the position of power or authority to make the changes needed; In fact, the individuals in the positions of power rarely are the ones that initiate this type of change. Usually the rest of the system and its members are going through denial, rationalization, anger, or may agree with what the canary's concerns are, but are fearful or reluctant to voice them. There is also usually a critical incident or "tipping point" that has occurred that has created more urgency for intervention.

How the canary is perceived and responded to by those in a decision making position is usually the determinate of whether there will be constructive change. If the canary is perceived as a complainer, the concern is often explained away. If the canary is respected, or if the risk they are voicing is perceived as a real threat, there is a greater likelihood for help and constructive change. In every case that I could think of, the concerns of the canary about the risk was not only accurate, but if not addressed would lead to even greater consequences. For example, if the next generation family employee sees the founder making decisions without input from key stakeholders and is concerned about the ramifications of these decisions having risk to the family or business, this creates an inner tension that will need to be addressed. The concern or crisis point may be around one issue, but there are usually larger, more serious issues of failure to share power appropriately, failure to properly delegate decision making authority, poor listening, or a dismissiveness or lack of empathy in the family or team system.

CS Lewis said, "Pain removes the veil, it plants the flag of truth with the fortress of a rebel soul". Pain actually can help us see things more clearly. Its form can range from annoyance to a full blown crisis or catastrophe. It is often characterized by feelings of helplessness or hopelessness that there is anything that can be done to change. Ironically in actuality, crisis actually does tip the hand of the status quo, providing an urgency to make a decision that may change the direction and improve the way things have been done. A system is actually at greater risk if the members do not speak up or have a forum to voice their concerns. A norm of apathy or discouragement creates tremendous risk.

According to the Leadership Grid Model, originally developed by Blake and Mouton, there are three types of change that are observed in systems: evolutionary, revolutionary, and strategic. Evolutionary is the most passive; it is change that happens as things evolve and happen around you. These changes do impact the business and the people in them. Revolutionary, is when individuals and groups within a system became dissatisfied and create a disruption or disturbance in hopes of bringing about the necessary changes to relieve the tension in the system. Strategic change is change that is deliberate and based on both what change is needed and clear goals as to the outcome. Strategic change is proactive and is most effective when developed with a clear understanding of what the needs of the business and the culture are. This involves careful and empathetic listening to the stakeholders that both provides the data for a more effective decision, and builds the buy-in necessary to carry it out. In my experience, it is often the revolutionary change that if responded to appropriately (usually with intervention) then leads to addressing change in a more strategic manner. Systems and organizations are usually combinations of all three. But the more that these systems can create processes that promote strategic change as a norm, the better they will be able to manage risk to the organization.

What is the catalyst for change in your family or organization? Does change typically occur in an evolutionary, revolutionary, or strategic manner? Who in your group is a canary and how are they responded to? Are your leaders able to hear and utilize the key data in the culture that will help them mitigate risk and maximize return? How does your culture view and respond to those that voice concern? It is an interesting phenomenon in life and in business that it is not what happens to us that is important; it is how we respond to it. While this is true in all organizational systems, it is probably more poignant in the family business, where both business decisions and family relationships are being built, and are at risk. Rollo May probably said it best when he said, "It is highly significant, and indeed almost a rule, that moral courage has its source in identification through one's own sensitivity with the suffering of one's fellow human beings". In my experience there are members of family and of organizations that are particularly good at this, and individuals who may play this role at different times. It is important for those who work with them, and particularly those in positions of power to ask themselves if they are listening and responding.