

On My Mind...Leading Change

By Jeri Mae Rowley

As leaders, we hold the key to successful change in the palm of our hand...especially if we happen to be holding a mirror.

Change

While researching the subject of “change” I came across two related stories. The most recent story is about a scientific breakthrough takes place in 2002. But the genesis of this breakthrough took place in 1846. Over 150 years apart, these stories remind us of leadership’s unique role in making changes to improve results.



Jeri Mae Rowley

Change 2002

A September 2002 news article noted that many hospitals are switching from soap and water to quick-drying alcohol gels to keep hands clean. The latest research, presented at an American Society for Microbiology meeting, cited evidence that these alcohol gels stop dangerous germs faster and better.

This finding is significant. The spread of microbes, which can be spread on the hands of nurses, doctors and technicians who move from patient to patient, makes sick people sicker. These germs are said to be responsible for an estimated 20,000 deaths a year in the United States. Looks like it’s time for a change.

Change 1846

But this story actually begins at Vienna’s General Hospital in Austria during the mid-1800’s. This story, told in the book *Leadership and Self-Deception*, begins when a young doctor, Ignaz Semmelweis, earns a position at this important research hospital.

The young doctor was assigned to one of the two maternity wards. Semmelweis was alarmed when he realized what a high mortality rate maternity patients were experiencing. More troubling was that his ward’s mortality rate was even more dreadful than the other ward’s. This problem was so apparent that the doctor reported pregnant women “kneeling and wringing their hands,” begging to be moved to the less risky ward.

Find the Root Cause

Even more troubling was the decline in mortality rates in his ward when Semmelweis was gone for several weeks. Obsessed with discovering the root cause of this problem, Semmelweis systematically standardized practices in the two wards to isolate the problem. Birthing procedures, diet, ventilation and even laundry processing, were standardized with no improvement in mortality rates.

Eventually, Semmelweis' professor, received a minor cut while performing an autopsy on a woman who died of childbed fever. The male professor soon began to experience symptoms of childbed fever and died. This event transformed Semmelweis' thinking. He realized that there *was a difference* between the two wards. His ward was attended by doctors who also performed autopsies. The less risky ward was attended by midwives who did not perform autopsies.

Take a Look in the Mirror

Semmelweis developed a theory that “particles” from autopsies and diseased patients were being transferred from patient to patient *on the hands of the doctors*. He immediately instituted a policy in his ward requiring physicians to wash their hands.

Even though the mortality rate decreased dramatically and immediately, Semmelweis' change met with strong resistance from other physicians. It was difficult, maybe even impossible, for the doctors to perceive that *they* were the root cause of the high mortality rate. Keep in mind, these doctors had advanced professionally in a culture where blood on their gowns was a status symbol--the more bloodstains, the more surgical experience and expertise.

The lesson for us today: As leaders, we hold the key to successful change in the palm of our hands...especially if we happen to be holding a mirror.

The author of *Leadership and Self-Deception* identifies three characteristics of effective organizations and their leadership. Effective leadership will consistently:

1) Focus on Results

Focus on the results you want to achieve and free everyone to do what's right, even if it means changing what's been done before. Even if that means you, as the leader, changing what you've always done.

2) Learn—Teach—Learn

Actively seek information, insight, and differing points of view to help you achieve desired results. Learn. Share what you've learned. Learn some more.

3) Come Clean

Leaders of effective organizations model “coming clean.” When they make mistakes, they acknowledge them and don't shift responsibility. They learn and move on (and, by the way, have much more fun because laughing at yourself is much more energizing than desperately defending and pretending!)

Ergo

Ignaz Semmelweis could never have made his important, life-saving discovery unless he was willing to accept that his own behavior might be the root cause of the problem. Overcoming self-deception is the first (and often most difficult) step toward improved results.

Ergo: ego has got to go!

More About Change

If you are interested in reading more about change, the following books and web references may be of interest to you:

Leadership and Self-Deception: Getting out of the Box, Arbinger Institute

Who Moved My Cheese? by Spencer Johnson

The Change Masters, by Rosabeth Moss Kanter

<http://www.change-management.org/> a web site with change articles, training, and research.

<http://home.att.net/~nickols/change.htm> for the article “Change Management 101” by Fred Nichols

Jeri Mae Rowley, M.S. Human Resource Management, is a popular speaker, trainer and facilitator. By weaving together her unique humor and storytelling skills, Jeri Mae helps individuals and organizations improve leadership, communications, and customer service. Participants in her programs often comment: “She's not boring!”

Jeri Mae Rowley
600 Alice Drive
Great Falls, MT 59405
406-781-7206 jerimae@jmrowley.com