Denial and Immunity to Change: It Starts with the Leader

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- It is common for leaders to be confronted with resistance that makes forward progress impossible.
- The easiest action for the leader is to label the resistance as denial.
- Labeling behaviors that do not agree with expectations is one way leaders keep their immune system intact and fight off valuable feedback.
- The enlightened, well-developed leader is aware of her/his own immune system and can monitor the filtering system effectively.
- We have many opportunities to help organizations and leaders think through the roadmap that makes our immune systems switch off when new, helpful information is trying to enter.

The work of leaders is quite simply to improve the organization and develop people who can participate positively and sustain the evolution of the organization to a higher level. However, it is common for leaders to be confronted with resistance that makes forward progress impossible. In reality, resistance to change is a common reaction of many people in an organization. Leaders often blame people for resisting change without careful insightful reflection on how the leader’s practice could contribute to the resistance.

Labeling Resistance to Change as Denial

It is easy for the leader to label resistance to evidence-based interventions as denial. For example, refusing to use lift equipment or refusing flu vaccine can be labeled as resisting change. However, there are many reasons for resistance/denial and until the leader examines the issue, valuable learning will escape the leader. Spector (2009) comments on how denialists distrust many scientific findings which do not fit with their particular ideologies. Spector also discusses corporate denial and offers examples of corporations’ refusals to consider issues such as reducing greenhouse emissions and consumer protection issues as forms of corporate denialism. He defines denialism as a mechanism that is used to personally, corporately, and politically deny reality in order to continue their own, unscientific ideology.

It can be difficult for leaders to hear valid feedback about the proposed change. Leaders might fear looking bad and losing the ability to complete the initiative. Ford and Ford (2009) believe that leaders should understand resistance is a valuable form of feedback that is provided by the people who know more about daily operations than the leader. If the leader embraces the resistance as an excellent resource to improve the project rather than dismissing the comments as resistance, the leader can channel this energy into successfully improving the change project.

Using the term denial to describe the behavior of others polarizes the debate and pushes the two opposing views farther apart in the dialogue. It is far more helpful to examine the possible causes of the resistance. For example, the lack of convenient availability or excessive time commitments to use lift equipment can be an unrecognized precursor to refusing to use lift equipment. As leaders, we must be obligated to ask ourselves how often we promulgate beliefs that are unfounded in science.

Kegan and Lahey (2004) write that the way we talk can dramatically change the way we accomplish the work we need to do. These authors note that we have four internal languages that influence us: commitment, personal responsibility, competing commitments, and assumptions. In addition, there are the three social languages of ongoing regard, public agreement, and deconstructive criticism. With fluency in these seven languages, we can solve many conflicts. These authors also note that we communicate with each other in three primary ways: body language, tone of voice, and the content we verbalize; body language and tone are far more telling than content. As leaders, we often focus on the content by endlessly thinking through how to construct the message and often miss the power messaging of body language and tone of voice. It’s easy to blame and label others without asking the question of how we as leaders contribute to the failure of the message.

Help for Leaders

The leader’s own level of development is probably responsible for most of the efforts that fail. The ability to motivate just isn’t enough. According to Kegan and Lahey (2009), each of us has an immune system that quickly recognizes something different and immediately tries to kill any new change. These authors state each of us has a filtering system through which we view reality. The sophisticated leader can recognize this filtering system but can also look at this framework rather than always looking at reality through this filter. When we step outside of ourselves and see our filtering system as an operating system and not as the ultimate truth, we can open ourselves to valuable feedback and see ourselves as others see us. These authors tell us there are three stages to the development of knowledge as a leader: the socialized mind, the self-authoring mind, and the self-transforming mind, in which we no longer label resistance as denial and examine the reality of the situation much more effectively.

Kegan and Lahey (2009) offer the concept of a four-step immunity map that logically determines which issues can impede our ability to be better change agents. The first is to determine, based on a thorough assessment, how we want to change to be more effective and state specific commitments to achieve our goal. The next step is to define what works against the goal. The third step is to understand the hidden competing commitments. Finally, identify the big assumptions that sustain the immune system which are taken as truth but which might not be any part of truth. This very systematic way of working through an organization’s and a leader’s immune system provides a clear roadmap for change.

Summary

Labeling behaviors that do not agree with our expectations is one way that we keep our immune system intact and fight off valuable feedback. Acknowledging that we as leaders also fall victim to an immune system that blocks new information is the first step in improving our organization and leadership health. The enlightened, well-developed leader is aware of his/her own immune system and can monitor the filtering system effectively. Novice leaders cannot. We have many opportunities to help organizations and leaders think through the roadmap that makes our immune systems switch off when new, helpful information is trying to get in.

REFERENCES