

TOM

Beyond Acceptance

ASACKER

“The first step toward change is awareness. The second step is acceptance.”

- Nathaniel Branden

The following landed in my inbox last week in an email titled “NAB SmartBrief:”

“Radio’s ‘challenge’ isn’t to retain its audience or remake its programming, but to convince marketers that the medium is still viable, according to Jeff Smulyan, Emmis chairman-CEO. ‘The challenge is the perception,’ Smulyan said during a conference call with analysts.

Really? I heard something similar from the CEO of General Motors a few months back. In essence he blamed his company’s fall on the uninformed, and misinformed, marketplace: “It’s the consumers, stupid!” Or maybe, it’s the stupid consumers. In any event, and with all due respect, if you believe that you need to “convince” your ignorant audience of the value of your offering, you simply don’t offer anything uniquely valuable. In this day and age, if you did, and people were interested, they’d figure it out.

So what’s the solution? How do you stand out and move your organization forward in a hypercompetitive and rapidly changing marketplace? Simple (but not easy): You change with it! As Branden made clear, it takes awareness and acceptance. And, I’d add, a laser-like focus on the outside world of your audience. But first, you must deal with your grief: the inevitable pain that comes with relevance lost, which is a predictable outcome of allowing your organization to fall out of step with the external environment.

The Five Stages of Organizational Grief

I recently experienced organizational atrophy with some close friends (the details are irrelevant), and noticed that we were each experiencing very different stages of grief. Assuming that you also find yourself in a stagnant or decaying organization, see if you can discern your particular stage of grief on the Kübler-Ross model. I’ve added commentary to elucidate the mindset I’ve witnessed in many struggling organizations (Note: the steps do not necessarily occur in the order listed):

1. **Denial** - “Look, we’re fine. We’re viable. We’re as good as they are, if not better. It’s simply a communication and perception problem. Or perhaps it’s a timing thing.”

2. **Anger** - “What’s wrong with those people? I wish they’d open their eyes. And you? Please, work harder. And smarter! Any way, why us? This isn’t fair.”
3. **Bargaining** - “Just let me keep it going a little longer, until I can get out. That’s all I’m asking.”
4. **Depression** - “It’s over. We had a good run. We’re finished. Screw it! Why should I bust my a**? What’s the point? What’s in it for me?”
5. **Acceptance** - “Times changed, we didn’t. No problem, we can change too. Everything will be okay, albeit different. Let’s stop getting old and start getting new!”

If you’re a member of an organization that’s struggling, my guess is that you chose number 1, 2, or both. (There aren’t many 3’s and 4’s reading my work. After all, why would they?) The solution, then, is to quickly move through the stages of management grief, accept your situation, and get on with the business of adding value to your offering. Get to work creating a new model, along with enlightened and inspired people, with a singular and unitary *outside-in* perspective. One which rapidly produces products, services, content and experiences that people want to connect with, share, feel good about, and look forward to during their stressful daily lives.

Open Your Eyes (and Your Heart)

It’s time to wake up and perceive your denial for what it really is: a defensive response to outside forces. It’s simply a way to avoid reality, and the necessary conflicts, disagreements and difficult decisions that come with its acceptance. It’s nothing more than psychological armor to protect you from short term pain and the risk of the unknown. You wear it like a mask to “look good” and appear “in control.” And . . . it will smother your passion and slowly suck the life out of you and your organization.

There’s only one way forward, and that’s to quickly and strategically move beyond acceptance; to stop talking and start acting. To get everyone excited about the future, and personally involved in, and committed to, the details. Yes, it’s about vision and values, but it’s also about caring deeply about people and consistently and creatively adding *value* to their lives. It takes empathy, courage, determination, and a “get it done now” attitude. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, “Vitality shows not only in the ability to persist but the ability to start over.” And I agree. But as a leader, it’s up to *you* to make it happen. Just like fish *stink* from the head down, vitality flows precisely in the same direction.

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Tom Asacker writes, teaches, and speaks about radically new practices and ideas for marketplace success in chaotic times. He is an independent brand adviser and author of critically acclaimed books including *A Clear Eye for Branding* and *Sandbox Wisdom*, and his latest, *A Little Less Conversation*. Visit www.acleareye.com to learn more.