

Organizational Change

Unifying Your Company's Old Guard and New Arrivals

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Summary. Seasons of disruptive change can fracture an organization's sense of solidarity. One of the most divisive factors from the past two years has been the mass exodus of employees from the workplace, alongside a significant amount of hiring to bring on new ones.... [more](#)

One of the unfortunate byproducts of the serial changes of the last two years has been fragmentation across organizations. Such division is the result of things like varying beliefs about how much flexibility workers should have in terms of where and when they work, as well as abrupt shifts in business models. And that's

on top of the physical isolation people are feeling due to remote work. Some research from Microsoft suggests that collaboration across the organization went down by 25% during the pandemic.

One of the most divisive factors has been the mass exodus of employees from the workplace, alongside a significant amount of hiring to bring on new ones. Relational dynamics have been torn without the opportunity to re-stitch the seams between new connections. So, companies are left with numerous camps of “we’s” and “they’s.” As one leader at an organization I’ve consulted with put it, “The proverbial ‘old guard’ and ‘new guard’ are at war with each other.”

During seasons of disruptive change, it’s natural for people to retreat into ideological enclaves that unite them. Whether they share a common enemy (“Our boss is such a jerk” or “Those people in accounting don’t get it”) or tenure (“These new people have no clue...” or “I can’t believe how old school they still do things here”), people hunker together to feel safer and saner. The problem is: They’re neither. In actuality, they’ve parsed the story they tell themselves to include only the parts they like and clung to allies who share their views. That creates one of the most dangerous organizational places to be — making decisions from a place of estrangement based on incomplete information built on partial truths.

I consulted with one company for which the pandemic was especially damaging. We had to take a very careful approach to reintegrating a disintegrated organization. Egos are fragile, people are exhausted, and deeply held biases are especially resistant to change. Restoring trust and a widened sense of unity required a sensitive, deliberate approach. As one leader in our assessment told us: “We’ve just stopped listening to each other. We’ve damaged trust by making one another the enemy. I haven’t even met half the leaders hired into my department who show up announcing new changes by the day, and I’m just expected to salute.”

If your organization has been divided over the last two years, there are ways you can start putting the pieces back together and reuniting people. Here are some places to begin.

What All Leaders Can Do

Own your biases and eliminate labels.

Fragmented organizations more readily “other” people, pigeonholing them into categories that justify ostracizing them. In the organization discussed above, the salespeople were convinced that marketing was prioritizing certain customer segments because the pandemic had slowed down agency production. This made the salespeople’s job harder. Meanwhile, marketers were certain the salespeople only wanted collaterals for prospects with the highest possible margins to elevate their commissions, given the negative impact Covid had on revenues. Of course, neither story was true. But until we got them into a room to share their biases, the labels of “lazy” and “greedy” couldn’t be removed.

Think about those in your organization whom you refer to with a contemptuous “they.” What conclusions have you drawn about “them” that may be unfounded and based on faulty data? Replace your certainty with curiosity and seek out more information. Engage them with empathy rather than scorn, and you’ll learn more about what’s behind their choices and motives you’re convinced are bad.

Restore relationships where trust has been broken.

In some cases, the strain on relationships over the last two years may have damaged trust. Missed commitments, conflicting priorities, and excessive anxiety have been standard fare, fraying nerves and patience. Finding someone to blame has become a natural default. If the stresses of the last two years have caused you to withdraw trust from critical relationships, consider reaching out and repairing those connections. Even if there were legitimate mistakes that made things difficult, forgiveness is more

productive long-term than holding a grudge. It's also likely that you bear some responsibility for things breaking down.

In another organization I've worked with, we brought leaders from across the organization into workshops aimed at restoring lost trust. In a series of round-robin conversations, leaders met in pairs to address and resolve tensions, acknowledge strained trust, and recommit to strengthening relationships between their teams. While it's easy to assume that things will "work themselves out" over time, that's rarely the case. Relational dynamics like trust need to be addressed apart from the work so that leaders can't hide behind the work during the conversation.

What Tenured Leaders Can Do

Be welcoming instead of threatened.

The arrival of new faces can be unsettling, especially if those people are in positions of authority or replacing longtime colleagues. And it's worsened by remote work that makes getting to know them challenging. Isolation makes it easier to be suspicious of new leaders as they try to get traction in an unfamiliar culture. Rather than seeing their arrival as a threat, reach out and welcome them and offer to help them through the confusion of onboarding. If your organization's onboarding process is weak to begin with, redouble your efforts to create a robust process that spans at least six to nine months.

In my client organization, one leader privately confided her fear: "We've always promoted from within, so when they filled my old boss's job with an external candidate, I was certain they were going to replace me. I was bitter, so I wasn't interested in helping her be successful." As it turns out, the organization had hired her new boss with the express purpose of helping to mentor her and prepare her for a broader assignment. Had she been more hospitable, she wouldn't have wasted energy trying to stymie her new boss.

Minimize resistance to new ideas.

One of the greatest frustrations of newly arriving leaders is opposition to their ideas. The proverbial “not invented here” mentality causes people to instinctively reject ideas new leaders believe they were hired to bring. Those rejections are often met with the common refrains of “We’ve tried that before, and it didn’t work” or “You don’t really understand how we do things here.”

But rather than interpreting new thinking as a critique of how you’ve done things, view it as an opportunity to learn and stretch. This becomes especially important if you’re in a role for which new technologies and approaches have rendered your legacy approaches obsolete. While your equipment, processes, or technologies may be outmoded, that doesn’t mean *you* are outmoded. Show your enthusiasm and support for new ways of doing things, especially those that can help your company be more competitive. When new leaders are struggling to contextualize their ideas in an unknown environment, offer suggestions to help them succeed rather than standing by while they flounder.

What New Leaders Can Do

Ensure your diagnosis doesn’t turn into an indictment.

You may believe you were hired with an unspoken (or expressed) mandate to change things. And your ideas may well be exactly what the organization needs. But until you build sufficient credibility, you need to pace how you introduce new thinking. You’ll inevitably uncover harsher realities than you were aware of prior to being hired. And when you do, your frustrations over how bad things are can signal an indictment of those around you. Before pointing out how things can be improved, you must honor the successes that came before you.

In my client organization, new leaders were introducing massive changes each week while harshly criticizing a culture of otherwise very proud employees. One leader was heard mocking, “The ‘90s called, and they want their technology back.” The leader who’d introduced the technology he was chiding overheard him and was

demoralized. The company had planned a major technology upgrade, but the pandemic simply made that investment impossible.

Rather than taking a condescending tone about what you're discovering, honor the good work of tenured leaders and invite them to help make your ideas successful by sharing their insights. (And please stop talking about how you did things at your last company.)

Ask seasoned employees for help learning the culture and context.

While you may feel obligated to prove your worth by hitting the ground running, you're better off hitting the ground learning. Asking lots of questions will show respect for the culture you've arrived in. Avoid taking inventory of all the cultural anomalies that you feel need changing, and instead become a student of the culture that shaped the organization for years prior to your arrival.

Ask veteran employees for coaching when you confront norms, acronyms, or idiosyncrasies you don't understand. Further, ask them what they're most proud of and what their hopes are for the future. Regulate any feelings of judgment you have toward behaviors you find strange or unproductive. You can say: "I've never approached budgeting this way before — it's new to me. Can you help me understand how it's benefitted the organization?" What may seem like (and indeed, may be) bizarre ways of doing things are perfectly normal to those who've been around for a while.

Demonstrate your willingness to adapt before asking the organization to consider adapting to your ideas. In doing so, you set an example of learning and humility — the very things you'll be asking of the organization when introducing change.

Seasons of disruptive change can fracture an organization's sense of solidarity. To counteract the centrifugal force of such divisiveness, bring sources of centripetal force that unite the

organization around a common future that, regardless of how long you've been around, is one people will be proud to create.

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