

Evolve or Languish

Resisting change is monkey business.

Primatologists researching monkeys in the wild have devised an ingenious way to humanely capture their subjects. A few bananas are dropped into heavy bottles with long narrow necks. These bottles are then fastened to trees or anchored to the ground with strong chord, dispersed throughout a jungle area, and left for a short time. The bananas contain no sedatives and there is no snare or trap box used, yet when the researchers return to their bottles they unfailingly find a monkey sitting next to it. Why? A monkey, seeing food it likes, will place his long arm into the bottle and grasp the banana. Alas, the narrow neck prevents him from removing his clenched fist. The bottle is fastened to the spot and too heavy to break, but the monkey can simply let go of the banana and be free. There is nothing keeping the monkey captive except his attachment to that banana.

You might be thinking, “Foolish monkey!” But the truth is, most of us are guilty of similarly foolish behaviour. I see it in my work time and again—employees, managers, entire organizations tenaciously holding on to the old ways of doing things simply because they are familiar and comfortable. Even when those comfortable, familiar ways prevent us from moving forward we, like the monkey, still won’t let go.

It’s no news that our actions and attitudes around change affect our individual and organizational paths. In a business environment that is becoming increasingly dynamic by the minute, a successful leader must embrace, effect and inspire significant change. Inability to change limits ability to lead in times of crisis and, equally important, times of opportunity.



Conversely, embracing and leading change can be an invigorating force for an organization. We know this, don't we? So why do so many of us resist? Why do we keep our fist clenched inside that bottle?

Many of us are haunted by that old occupational hazard, fear of failure. Change is an unscripted journey—i.e., there are no guarantees. Change means dealing with unfamiliar and daunting challenges—no stability. Change means moving out of our comfort zone, fighting the powerful internal pull back to our normal state. It can feel counterintuitive.

It can feel terrifying. It can feel like if you let go you'll never get another banana again. But the reality is that leaders who embrace change see great improvements in their own performance and, in turn, the performance of others.

They typically:

- Think strategically and act visionary
- Demonstrate resilience, courage and strength that others crave in a leader
- Are confident enough to guide the organization through the white-water that is the modern business environment
- Value the concept of lifelong learning and promote it in others

What's true in the Amazon is true in the concrete jungle: When you let go of one banana, you are able to go after all those fresh, ripe bananas hanging in the trees. You know, the ones you can actually eat.

Truly embracing change often requires a shift in consciousness—that is, in the way we view others, our organization and ourselves. Only then can you effectively re-think, re-calibrate and re-imagine the future. So how do you do it?

How do you let go of the banana?

1. Make the decision to change. It's like flipping a mental switch. Adopt an attitude of positive expectation and watch what happens.
2. Start a leadership journal and record your daily progress. Reflect on how a positive attitude toward change creates endless opportunities to positively affect yourself and others.
3. Learn from the experience of someone who's been there. Find a mentor or professional executive coach with experience in change management.
4. Model the way. Take the steps as a leader to become the change you want to see in others. Talk to your staff about what your goals are and how you're meeting them.
5. Reward yourself and your team after every successful change initiative, big or small, at a personal or organizational level. Change isn't always easy, but positive reinforcement can make the next attempt something you'll actually look forward to.
6. Tell people the story of the monkey trap.

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