



Helping leaders and organizations live up to their promise

Letting Go

Recent experiences reminded me about the importance of letting go: Not long ago I found myself essentially mediating between two client "camps" that couldn't let go of assumptions and beliefs they had about one another. It seemed that the only belief they held in common is that the other group was rigid and inflexible! Unfortunately I've experienced this dynamic a lot over nearly thirty years of consulting. Often the inability to let go of unconstructive beliefs and assumptions about others is reinforced when parties identify with different professional training, codes and traditions - perhaps doctors and health care administrators or tenured professors and academic administrators, for example. Sometimes the inability to see one another clearly and reason together is a function of geography or cultural traditions - maybe "in-state" vs. "out-state" or "red state" vs. "blue state." And we know how it goes: once we've formed perceptions or come to conclusions about a person or group they are hard to change; also we likely won't judge the quality of contributions by their own merits, but according to who made them.

With another client, strategic planning was hampered by two fundamentally different views of the organization's best path forward. I'll just say that one view was based more on the organization's traditional offerings and what had worked well to that point. The other view favored embracing new directions, new methods, new technology and new thinking that its proponents believed were more aligned with competitive requirements. The "truth" about how to best move forward was likely to integrate (not compromise) the two, but the level of conversation required to craft that kind of integration was inhibited by a "hardening of the categories" in the room. What we have in situations like this is not a "failure to communicate;" the parties were communicating their entrenched points of view loud and clear. What we have is a failure to engage in "dialog" - that special kind of conversation that requires letting go of assumptions, urgency to decide and motives to advance particular agendas. Sometimes there is no opposing point of view, or it is silenced - a different kind of "letting go" challenge. We move along comfortably with our view of the world, lacking incentives to question it and unchallenged by alternate points of view - and bang! - our world is turned upside down and inside-out in a flash. Think "Titanic" here - refusal to let go of the belief that icebergs were that far south, or more recently the inability pre-2008 to let go of faith in an ever-rising housing market and Dow.

A fellow sailor recently shared his plan with me of investing in a sufficiently sea-worthy craft to sail around the world - wow! A challenge for him is that it meant letting go of something he knew and loved - his live-aboard sailboat and home for years - to pursue his new call of the sea. I admired the

courage and ability to let go that it must have taken when he simultaneously listed his existing sailboat with a broker and began his search for the next that would take him around the world. "Like a kid," he said, we have to let go of one toy before we can play with another. Later in life, of course, it's not toys, but relationships, jobs, homes, careers or businesses that we must sometimes let go of to move on and become all that we are capable of. And we need to ask what else to let go of so we can let go of those things and live up to our promise - perhaps invalid assumptions, self-limiting beliefs, dependence on security or simply comfortable routines. Imagine the possibilities and impact - in our lives, work, relationships, organizations and communities - if we all became more proficient at letting go.

What might be possible for you personally or professionally if you set aside certain perceptions, beliefs, assumptions or patterns?

What do you long for or aspire to in your heart of hearts? What can you let go of that would bring that closer to reality?

What perceptions, beliefs, assumptions or patterns might be interfering with your organization, work group or relationship being all that it could be - with living up to its promise?

What will you commit to letting go of personally or helping your organization / group / relationship let go of to accelerate your growth?

We cannot become what we need to be remaining what we are.

Max DePree

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AI

AI Watts
[inTEgro, Inc.](http://www.integro-inc.com)
ph: (612) 827-2363