

Protecting the Seeds of the Future

But Moses did more than just feed the fires of discontent. He also saw to it that the increasing difficulties did not damage his people. He protected his people from the full impact of the plagues by making a symbolic mark on the doorposts of the Jews, so that God's wrath would pass them by. Besides its theological meaning, this action (which is the origin of the Jewish Passover celebration) illustrates an important managerial act. That is to handle matters in such a way that the destruction of the old system does not damage the elements from which the new system will be built.

For today's transition leader, this means identifying, gathering together, and educating the pivotal people who will help realize the new vision, the organization's "Promised Land." It means beginning to create among them the basis for a new identity and a new culture. It means giving them a new sense of mission. Otherwise, these people may well be lost in the chaos that accompanies transition.

Every Organization Needs a "Red Sea"

When Pharaoh finally let Moses' people go, some of them surely thought that the Promised Land was just around the corner. But Moses was not so naive, for he saw that he still had two problems. First, he had to draw a line of no return between the ending and the neutral zone. Second, he had to keep people in the neutral zone long enough for them to be fundamentally changed by the wilderness experience. Let's look at these two realizations separately, starting with the first.

Whatever the old system is, it always "follows" people and tries to pull them back, just as the Pharaoh's army did. In the case of a technological change, the old machines try to pull people back; in the case of a strategic change, it is the old strategy that holds onto people; in the case of a reorganized work force, it is the old reporting relationships and the old peer groupings; and in the case of a culture change, it is the old values, symbols, and ceremonies that exert the pull on people.

This pull must be broken, and Moses did that by a symbolic act. He called on God to part the waters of the Red Sea so that his people could cross over, and then just as Pharaoh's troops entered the sea bed he called on God to close the waters again. The pursuers were drowned.

There are two elements to this action that today's transition leader ought to note. The first is that there needs to be a clean break with the past. There must be no pieces of the past lying around to suggest that perhaps it is not gone, after all. Those pieces might be policies that were justified by the old goals, tactics that were justified by the old strategies, missions that were justified by the old vision. The pieces could be people who held positions because they were particularly effective in or sympathetic to the old way of doing things. The past needs to be "drowned," as the Pharaoh's army was.

A word of warning, however. Leaders must be careful, as they break up power centers of the old order and dismantle systems that made the old way work, not to denigrate "the past" in the general sense. The eradication of the past should not be done vindictively or with any suggestion that those who were loyal to the past were mistaken or ineffective. If you do that, you are likely to lose some of your best people, for many of them were loyal to that bygone organization that you are not just doing away with but also denouncing. Instead, make it clear that the past did its job and got you where you are today. It was fine for its time, but its time is past. New situations call for new things.

Moses knew that people's identities were too tied up in the past to reject it entirely. He cut off ties to the immediate past, but he also gathered up Joseph's bones and carried them along into the wilderness, thereby tying his current efforts to the collective origins of his people.

Some leaders can even capitalize on this longing for the lost past by giving people a piece of it to take with them. It may be a brick from the old factory or cutting from an uprooted rose garden. It may be a plaque or a t-shirt with the old logo on it. Or it may be a book of photographs recording a historical past that is being both built upon and left behind.

The second aspect of the Red Sea experience that the modern transition leader must understand is that it is a symbolic “boundary event” and that such events are an excellent way to capture people’s attention and carry the message that the old way is gone and beyond recovery.

- Rene McPherson created such an event when he became CEO at Dana Corporation by piling all the policy manuals that were then in force into a two-foot stack, and then toppling them. He held up in their place a one-page statement of the new company principles. His message: I want you to understand our principles, but I think you are intelligent enough to translate them into effective actions.
- The Spanish explorer, Cortez, created another such boundary event, although it is rather traumatic for most organizational situations. After his men landed on the forbidding coast of Mexico, he burned the ships. His message: there is no turning back now!

The effect of the boundary event is not just to keep the past from invading the present; it is also to keep the people from turning around and returning to Egypt. People react to the neutral zone by idealizing the way things used to be. The Old Testament authors said that in the wilderness the Jews began to “murmur.” Today the people murmur about the wilderness at AT&T, GM, Apple, and other companies where an old way of doing things has been left behind. In the corridors of such organizations, you hear variations on a theme from Exodus:

“What was so bad about Egypt anyway?”

“Do you think Moses really knows where he’s going?”

“I’d never have left if I knew it was going to take this long!”

Moses knew what we too often today forget: that people have to take a long journey through this second phase of transition before they can be transformed into the people who are ready for the Promised Land. Moses knew, you might say, that it is always easier to take the people out of Egypt (or any old system) than it is to take the old Egypt-system out of people. Only a long time in the psychological wilderness state of the neutral zone can do that.⁵

This is an idea that is foreign to most modern people, although their own life experiences would give them plenty of examples of how the neutral zone works. They have experienced it after all the big endings in their lives. Nevertheless, they tend to forget transition and imagine that change (which can take place much more quickly) is all that is necessary. They admit that "it takes a little while to get used to" whatever Promised Land they have been seeking, but they apologize for that fact. And they refuse to build the transition process into their plans when they make an organizational change.

The psychological insights of Exodus are very accurate. Every time we make a change of any depth or extent, we find ourselves in a confusing no-man's land between the old way and the new for some time. That time in the wilderness can begin before we actually leave the old way, for as soon as we decide to leave we find that the old way starts to lose its hold on us. And it certainly can last long after we arrive at our destination, for there can be months and even years in the new situation before we really "feel at home" there.

⁵ When I gave a talk on transition management in Israel, I learned that a Jewish writer named Ahad Ha-am had made a similar point about Moses in an essay he wrote in 1904. (So much for the idea of "new ideas"! I am indebted to Sydney Engelberg for sending me the essay. It can be found in Ahad Ha-am, *Selected Essays* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., n.d.)

Keeping People Going

Since the wilderness can be so wide and Promised Lands can take such a long time to reach, people need some quick successes to reassure them. So the Red Sea incident was more than just a boundary event. Not only did the destruction of the Egyptian cavalry break the ties to the past; it also demonstrated dramatically that Moses' "organization" was indeed on its way to the future and that heaven was watching over it.

Few modern executives or managers have Moses' gift for invoking divine intervention, but most successful transition leaders are said to have worked a miracle or two in the early days of a transition. The trick is to find areas where quick and sure successes are possible and push toward those outcomes quickly, even if it takes more resources than the importance the success might otherwise justify. One money-losing operation turned around, one big customer signed up, one department reorganized quickly, one regional office where the new information system or management style is working—these are worth far more than vague and gradual progress across the board. When these things happen, the doubters can be reassured for a while, the critics can be silenced a little longer, and the opponents can be temporarily confounded.

Going Slowly Enough

Paradoxically, the quick success needs to be part of a plan that ensures a slow journey through the wilderness. Moses could not get his people into the Promised Land—so the tradition goes—until the ones who had known Egypt had died. If we take that literally, it is a pretty discouraging message. But if we take it symbolically, it makes good sense: the old attitudes and behaviors that were appropriate to Egypt must die and new ones must be generated, or else the Promised Land will prove to be just a new Egypt. And today, all too many changes prove to be new names for the old behaviors and attitudes.

Moses discovered early in his journey that the old tribal structures didn't work very well in the wilderness. They depended on the existence of tribal territory or turf, and the wilderness did not provide that. Modern transition leaders usually discover the same thing—that the ending they make has destroyed the conditions that made some of their old structures, policies, cultural norms, technical solutions, and strategies function properly.

Moses turned for an answer to the first OD (organizational development) consultant in recorded history, his father-in-law Jethro. Jethro noted that the wilderness had created what today we would call a "span of control" problem, and he suggested that people be re-grouped into arbitrary administrative units of 10, 50, 100, and 1000. He also recommended that authority be decentralized, urging Moses to set up judges to settle disputes within their groupings so that Moses himself wouldn't use up all his time doing that. Jethro's promise to Moses sounds like one that many modern OD consultants have made to their clients: "If thou shalt do this thing... then thou shalt be able to endure." And Jethro was right.

What the modern transition leader needs to take from this story is the idea that the wilderness demands new and temporary arrangements to give people a sense of cohesion and purpose. It may be (as in Moses' case) a temporary structure or a temporary decentralized decision-making system. Or it may be a temporary policy for determining qualifications for advancement or retirement, during the time when the whole promotion or pension system is being changed. Or it may be temporary technological solutions for a time between fixed technological systems—a way to process invoices, for example, while the information system is being shifted from a mini-computer to a network of workstations.

In the neutral zone the old cultural and social mores of the Jewish people were being transformed, but to be transformed they first had to be dissolved. That is always the pattern: first dissolution, then transformation. Picasso put it well when he said, "Every act of creation is first an act of destruction." But throughout the story, Moses runs the fearful possibility that the disintegration necessary for a new form to take shape can, if not managed properly, lead to destruction.

The danger is still a real one, for at least three different negative outcomes are possible:

- The danger that the disintegration will be terminal, a fatal entropy that leads nowhere; in such a case, the organization would slowly come apart.
- The danger that, in its weakened state, the organization will be conquered from outside; in that case the organization in transition is either defeated or acquired by a competitor.
- The danger that the disintegration of the old order will release destructive inner forces that the old order kept in check; in that case, the organization would be engulfed by old, unresolved conflicts or overcome by old inherent weaknesses.

All of these dangers are very real. Organizations (and, for that matter, individuals and whole societies) fall prey to them all the time. Russia is in just such a neutral zone as I write these words, and the news analysts have suggested all of the three previous possible outcomes to its transition.

The fear that an organization will become a victim of its transition lies behind the panic that often sets in when things are changing. Voices are raised suggesting four different paths of escape:

1. **A return to Egypt.** The pull of nostalgia is very strong when everything is up for grabs. Even after the Red Sea Experience cut off literal retreat, Moses had to contend constantly with the people who undermined morale by pining for the Good Old Days on the Nile. And so it is with today's transitions, as every transition leader quickly discovers.