

rB Dangerous Business of Change | Rod Brace

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There is something astoundingly powerful about resistance to change. The people of status quo will take all measures necessary to battle for their way of life, even in the face of truth. Ignaz Semmelweis is a historical reminder to this devastating will to resist.

In 1847 Dr. Semmelweis discovered that death, due to infection among hospital patients, could be reduced to a fraction of historical trends by caretakers washing their hands. Armed with the new truth of his research he set out to prove wrong the assumption that fatal infections were caused by internal conditions to be treated by bloodletting.

With mounting data, Dr. Semmelweis grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of respect and response from his hospital colleagues. One fellow physician mocked that a “gentlemen’s hands are always clean.”

Semmelweis continued his fight against the “murderous” practices of his colleagues. He was relieved of his position at his hospital, suffered depression and a nervous breakdown. A colleague forcibly placed him in an insane asylum. During the abduction, the asylum staff beat Dr. Semmelweis who refused to be admitted. His wounds went untreated and Dr. Semmelweis died two weeks later, ironically of an untreated infection.

The surprising footnote is while we certainly understand the nature of germs and the benefit of hand washing, a national effort exists today to get physicians and caregivers to wash their hands before and after caring for a patient. Over 150 years later, change continues to be difficult in the realm of hand washing.

The story of Dr. Semmelweis is a reminder to all leaders who pursue change that it is indeed a treacherous journey. We must recognize that the convenience presented by the status quo will be vigorously protected. Having “proof” that the change is warranted does not guarantee success. The human mind is capable of ignoring sound logic and conclusive results to protect current behaviors.

In the case of Dr. Semmelweis, his hand washing theory did not gain popularity until several colleagues began to simultaneously research and publish their supportive findings. The pressure of a crowd is the protection objectors will initially hide behind and it is the pressure of the opposing crowd that will eventually break through.

As you approach significant change in your organization, work carefully to equip a small group of supporters to simultaneously support the effort in a very public way. They should be versed in the arguments for and against the change to effectively respond to the challengers that will come forward.

As the size of the supporter group increases, the size of the detractors will subside. Eventually, many who strongly object to the change will migrate to the supporter ranks and

become your strongest champion. There will always be those who do not support the change, many because they find the role of objector to be a personality trait they enjoy. As these few are identified, the group should work to move them from the organization.

Dr. Semmelweis demonstrated that change is an emotional process that must be carefully managed to achieve an end result that includes survival of the leader. Step carefully, and wash your hands!