How "Stone Soup" can Overcome Organizational Resistance to Change

Looking back over more than 25 years of process improvement projects, I am struck by how consistently this "truth" held up: **When people are EMOTIONALLY invested in the project, it takes off like a rocket.** If they're only intellectually invested (or not invested at all), you have more work and a less sustainable end product.

I would be asked to look into a situation that seemed to have some opportunity to improve and my first introduction to the teams involved would invariably end with kind reassurance that everything was fine. They'd tried all sorts of things before and none had worked. No doubt my talents had more use elsewhere. It played out every time. I got used to it quickly.

The point of this short article is to describe a simple approach that helped overcome these early objections. As you can guess from the title, it is a riff on the old story of "Stone Soup" wherein a traveller, hungry, asks for food and is told there is none. He offers to make Stone Soup for everyone if they'll provide only a pot and some water and a fire. They are curious and grudgingly agree. He starts making the soup with just the "magic" stone but mutters quietly how it would be even better with a potato or two. The audience, now getting invested in this project, concede they have a few potatoes which they bring forward. This dance is repeated for some carrots, some onions, some butter, salt etc at the end of which there is a rich tasty soup ready for everyone, conjured from a mere stone.

In each project where business processes are to be improved, there are some key commonalities worth highlighting:

1. Be respectful and accept the first round of objections with grace.
2. Meet the team on ground they are comfortable on and ask for things that they are ready to give. More will come when they're invested in the idea but not yet.
3. Use dialogue to generate a bridge between where they are and where they could be with modest effort i.e. don't ask for a potato but get them to agree that IF there were a potato, the soup would be better.
4. Repeat.

The path to improvement lay in engaging the teams respectfully and at a pace that was brisk enough to achieve meaningful change but not so fast that they felt out of control of their own destiny.

One of the popular tools to help with this is Process Mapping. As the picture evolves and more is added to refine it, more lightbulbs come on and people will start to get excited because they are seeing their own work environment clearly for the first time.

The change process can invert itself here - the change agent faces having to run to keep up with a team of people who now feel they're on to something and they're going to fix it NOW!

An amusing anecdote associated with this approach that has stayed with me for years occurred after completing the process map for a production planning group. The lead planner, the one who had assured me that everything was fine and my talents were needed elsewhere, looked at me square and said, "You know, now that I come to describe this process like this, I have to admit, this is pretty messed up!"

I smiled then and still do. If you want to have this experience, you can find us at

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