

ENGAGING THE COLLECTIVE WILL

On accelerating change and letting go.
by Joe Smerkers

The last 12 months have been an exciting and rewarding time for me, and I hope for you. But nothing that I have experienced can compare to what has occurred over the last few days.

So you might truly understand my sense of excitement let me go back in time. We had our monthly L.A. Group meeting on Friday. L.A. is a voluntary membership organization of which I am the founder; a.k.a. leader. Like many of you I have been working hard to create a sense of shared vision, values and purpose among members of our organization, and to build collective ownership and commitment to our goals.

Prior to our meeting as I usually do I wrote an invitation letter which discussed several topics that I considered of importance and enclosed a revised copy of our organization's vision, asking for comments. When I have done this in the past, reactions generally have been of passive acceptance. Interestingly I had recently inserted language into our vision statement which addressed 'engaging an organization's collective will.'

On Thursday it started to snow. It snowed for close to twenty-four hours. I considered canceling the meeting but decided against it. And I am ever so glad I did.

As usual I arrived early, at about 7:20 am. I checked out the meeting room and took a walk through the lobby. It was then that I noticed the marquee. Normally it says, L.A. Group. On Friday it said, Smerkers & Company. It was a stark reminder that indeed L.A. was mine. When I later repeated this story to a friend he asked,

"Was it blinking?" To me it was as bright and powerful as any message in Times Square.

By 7:40 I knew this was to be a meeting of one, so I decided to spend thirty minutes reflecting on the seemingly contradictory ideas of 'engaging the collective will' and 'letting go.' I left the meeting at about 8:20 feeling very good, not at all disappointed in the attendance. And it was going to get better.

Somewhere between 7:20 am and the time I arrived back at my office, I got it. It all came together like a light bulb going off. I had been asking people to take ownership of something, to invest themselves in something, to support something that was mine. I had done it again. It was my program, my project, my idea, my organization. People looked to me to lead the organization and them. As long as I accepted this noble crown of 'leadership' they would continue to act as followers.

I realized at that point there was only one thing I could do. Let go and start acting as a leader.

Once the bulb went off it was as if the weight of the world was off my shoulders. My life was suddenly in balance. My goals, vision, purpose hadn't changed. My commitment hadn't changed. What suddenly changed was the number of leaders we had in our organization. Instead of depending upon the skills and abilities of one or two people we now had the chance to truly 'engage the collective will' of thousands. To make this possible all I had to do was let go. Amazing.

I have for some time believed that 'if I built it, they will come.' And to some extent I was

right. Now I see that 'if I let it go, they will build it, and it will grow.'

I knew that not only had I discovered something that was about to unleash our organization but more importantly I had crossed over a chasm of my own making and discovered something that forever more would change my life. A whole range of disparate thoughts made sense. All the obstacles became manageable.

A highly successful young man I have known since he was in college, some twelve years now, is exhausted from dealing with the culture of the organization in which he works. He awakes in the morning so full of anxiety from the ensuing day's expectations he is unable to eat till noon. He cries out that his life is completely out of balance.

I asked him recently to imagine a conference room with ten people sitting around a large oval table. What role, I asked, do you think a true leader would assume? Would they sit at the table and lead the meeting; remove themselves from the room thus empowering the team; put their chair against the wall; or sit at the table and support the group?

Might the team build shared vision, values and purpose faster, if my young friend let go? Might they aspire to and achieve higher goals, if he let go? Might they be more productive, if he let go? Might they take more initiative, if he let go? Might he have more fun and restore balance to his life, if he let go?

What do we lose? We abandon nothing. We give up nothing. We can ask 'why not.' We can listen and observe. We can participate actively. We can act. We can voice hope. We can speak. We can write. We can learn and innovate. We can invest our total energy. We lose nothing; we only gain.

Consider the possibility of letting go. Consider the possibilities of thousands of minds interacting, thinking without you or any

one individual knowing about them or coordinating them; solving problems, satisfying customers, improving everything, everywhere.

Consider thousands of leaders in your organization. Taking ownership. Taking responsibility. Choosing to make things happen. Talking. Creating. Working. Achieving. Trusting. Experimenting. Listening. Sharing.

Consider the power of the collective will. Divorced from satisfying you or some other individual agenda. Consider the impact. Two to the power of one is two. Two to the power of thirty is one billion.

Consider putting your faith in others and trusting that they will choose to do the right thing. And when mistakes are made we will learn and innovate together. And by so doing we will find new and better answers, together.

Consider the insanity of trying to control and manage everything and everyone. The rules. The policies. The procedures. The errors. The time. The stress. The frustration. The cost.

As I shared my newfound strength with friends I heard the same concern. If you let go who will lead? How will we grow? How will we maintain our momentum? Our organization will die. To this I say, maybe. But that is up to others now. For I have made my decision to turn my life over to them.

What is now clear to me is that like other organizations mine will most certainly not grow, evolve and reach its potential if I continue to lead it alone. And I will not be a party to this underachieving survival. That is the choice I make.

Letting go is hard; full of perceived danger and risk. But the alternative is more certain and more unpleasant. Look around.