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The Burning Platform

Identification of the “burning issue” will encourage change in stakeholder behavior.

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The Story

The term “burning platform” is a mainstay in business lexicon for many years. For those not familiar with its origin, the story goes something like this:

A man working on an oil platform in the North Sea awakened suddenly one night by an explosion. Amidst the chaos, he made his way to the edge of the platform. As a plume of fire billowed behind him, he decided to jump from the burning platform even though jumping is a risky option for the following reasons:

- It was a 150-foot drop from the platform to the water.
- There is debris and burning oil on the surface of the water.
- If the jump into the 40°F water did not kill him, he would die of exposure within 15 minutes.

Luckily, the man survived the jump and hauled aboard a rescue boat shortly thereafter. When asked why he jumped, he replied, “Better probable death than certain death.” The point is the literally “burning” platform caused the radical change in his behavior.

The Point

You may not be running for your life, but you undoubtedly face changes every day that threaten your organization’s success. **Your ability to identify “burning” change issues and separate them from the routine challenges of the day will have a great effect on a stakeholder’s willingness to accept change** and adapt to a new way of thinking about the important issue.

Useful Hints

If all this talk about jumping from an oilrig seems a tad dramatic for you, consider that most people will change only when **survival anxiety is greater than learning anxiety**. **Learning anxieties are the basis for resistance to change** and represent apprehension of trying something new for fear that, it will be too difficult or we will look stupid while attempting it. **Survival anxieties, in contrast, are those painful realizations that in order to succeed, we have to change**. The oil worker who took the perilous North Sea plunge clearly had greater survival anxiety than learning anxiety. Your challenge is to introduce survival anxiety while also lessening learning anxiety, thereby creating a safe environment in which true learning can occur.

Therefore, when with the “burning platform” of a tough issue and organizational change, work with your team to **identify the key issues** that will introduce survival anxieties to stakeholders and this means that **stakeholders will be able to describe why we must change in order to survive**.

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