



The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

New Year's Resolution #1: Accepting & Starting Where You Are

It is the start of a new year -- time to make our resolutions and declare what will be different in 2006. Having helped others through positive change, I have come to realize that those who made the greatest transformations mastered a paradox of the change process itself: sustainable change always begins with an acceptance and acknowledgement of where you are first. How is it acceptance drives change?

Principle #1: Acceptance frees up our emotional resources for change

Acceptance is a powerful lever because it frees up emotional resources. When we are not accepting our lives, we live in a state of resistance. In resistance, we experience anger, fear, or frustration – emotions which sap emotional and physical energy. When we move to a state of acceptance, we come to terms with how things are. We shift from saying, "I hate this about my life" to, "things are exactly as they should be, I am exactly where I should be." Acceptance, however, does not mean resignation or giving up. The natural progression from anger to acceptance actually creates an opening for change to occur.

Take, for example, an up and coming leader – we'll call her Jane – whom I recently worked with at a top tier management consulting firm. For years, Jane received feedback that others felt shut down around her due to a commanding style perceived as abrupt, curt, and impatient. For years, she met this feedback with resistance feeling angry and blameful. When the same feedback came again but this time with a stalled promotion warning, Jane reached out for coaching but from a place of acceptance. "I finally realize I am a great leader in terms of getting the job done but there is some truth to that I am a terrible listener and can be curt with others – I'd really like to get to the next level but don't know how."

Principle #2: Acceptance enables us to see our situation with clarity

No longer swimming in the pools of anger or fear, acceptance helps us to see what is really going on with great clarity. In the case of Jane, she could now objectively observe herself in meetings and track the triggers, causing her to feel impatient or go abrupt. In this self-observation, she uncovered many vulnerabilities: the time pressure she felt from her boss, the fear of not being seen as an "expert", and her knee jerk habits of responding when under stress.

Principle #3: Acceptance creates focus, faith, and fuel for change

By uncovering the truth, Jane could now efficiently engage in the practice of change. She decided to focus on evolving her leadership style. She felt good about her strengths in directing, executing and driving action - skills that had carried her career so far – but now it was time to balance out her leadership voice with skills such as listening, empathy, and reading an audience. No longer frustrated, Jane channeled her energy into practicing these new skills. Her faith and optimism about her future career advancement grew. Six months after coaching, Jane received a performance review and feedback from colleagues indicating she had successfully made the changes she intended.

Jim Collins' research on Level 5 Leaders (refers to the highest level of executive capabilities), called this the "Stockdale Paradox" named for Admiral James Stockdale, a Vietcong POW camp survivor. Level 5 Leaders "confront the most brutal facts of their current reality (accept, acknowledge, and see it clearly), yet simultaneously maintain absolute faith that they would prevail in the end (focus, faith, optimism)." While most of us may never experience something as horrific as a POW camp, the same principles apply.

As 2006 begins to unfold, make this New Year different: rather than starting with what you most dislike about your life, start with accepting and acknowledging where you are first. You may be surprised to find a year later you actually held to your resolutions and made incredible change as a result.

- Amy Jen Su

Quarterly Reflection: Cultivating An Attitude of Acceptance

An attitude of “acceptance” was found to be a key foundation for being able to calm the mind and relax the body. The following comes from John Kabat-Zinn’s Body Scan Meditation used at the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center:

*[This is] a time in which to open to the sources of strength and healing within yourself...
Becoming aware in each passing moment and just accepting what is happening in yourself
Looking at it clearly
And seeing it as it is because it’s already here
It’s part of your experience in the moment for better or for worse
Let go of the tendency which we all have
To want things to be different
From how they are right now
And allow things to be exactly as you find them
Allow yourself to be exactly as you are...
Letting go of judgmental and critical thoughts...*

Reflection Questions:

1. What are some areas of your life, your career, or your work performance that you spend a lot of energy denying, resisting, or forcing control?
2. What emotions are you experiencing in this denial or resistance?
3. What new things might you see about these areas if you accepted them?
4. What new positive change could occur if you accepted your situation and came to terms with it?

Quarterly Book Selection: The Art of Possibility

What dog-eared, highlight-filled books are on our bookshelves that we find ourselves turning to time and time again and frequently recommending to others? Here’s our book selection for this quarter:

The Art of Possibility
by Rosamund Stone Zander & Benjamin Zander

“Presence without resistance: you are now free to turn to the question ‘What do I want to do from here?’... The capacity to be present to everything that is happening, without resistance, creates possibility.” Who has not wanted to make something possible in their own life or in the life of others? Whether it is driving a vision for an organization, motivating a staff member or making personal resolutions such as losing weight, we all want a future of fulfilled possibilities. In their pragmatic yet inspirational book, Rosamund and Benjamin Zander, offer a strategy for leading and living from a perspective of possibility rather than scarcity. Told through the powerful lens of his background as an orchestra conductor and hers as a psychotherapist, the Zanders overcome the risk of writing a book filled with “fluff”. Instead, they effectively engage readers with robust practices and memorable principles to support a path of developing self and others to bring possibilities to life. While not built on revolutionary new notions, the authors uniquely and eloquently deliver their message through the use of principles such as Rule #6: Lighten Up which encourages us to not take ourselves so seriously that we get in our own way and the practice of “Giving an A” as a means to seeing someone and their performance in a new light. The result is a book that makes an impact no matter how many times its read and no matter who reads it. The Art of Possibility is a wonderful gift to oneself to begin the New Year with acceptance and harmony for the purpose of driving positive sustainable change.

From the Coach's Corner: "The Four E's to Operating Up a Level"

From the Client:

"I have been at my organization for 6 months. My boss has helped me ramp up and is also grooming me for her position when she decides to move on. Well, that time came faster than we thought! She will be moving into her new role soon and our COO asked me if I could step into my boss' role on an interim basis. He said he hasn't worked with me closely enough to appoint me permanently, but he wants me to 'elevate my profile' across the organization and see me in 'action.' I want to prepare for this transition ...mentally. I've seen cases where people take positions on an 'interim' basis and then don't get it. They end up looking very defeated across the organization. I certainly want this opportunity and want it to work out in my favor."

From the Coach's Corner:

First of all, congratulations! This is a huge testament to your performance and now it's time to step it up. Interim positions are often tough because the expectations are typically more vague than usual. But they are also a phenomenal chance to do exactly what your COO asked you - - to elevate your profile and get others to see you in action. So what are steps you can take to make the most out of the situation and operate up a level? Whether transitioning into a new role or shifting into an interim post, here are some guidelines to get you started - "The Four E's to Operating Up a Level":

Envision Success: From how you've described the opportunity so far, you seem to have a great handle on what defeat would look like. If defeat is all you can see, that is what will happen! What would success look like for you in the interim position? What would you accomplish? What relationships will you build? How will you feel about yourself, the role and the organization? Capture your responses in writing. Visualizing success is a critical step with any new endeavor.

Understand Expectations: Do you know what is expected of you in this interim position? My guess is not. Are you clear on the scope of your responsibilities and deliverables? What does your boss expect? How about your stakeholders? It is not enough to execute - - you want to execute against the right things. Get on the same page with others and understand their needs. Talk to as many people as possible with an emphasis on your new boss, your former boss and clients. From these conversations, articulate your top five priorities. Validate your list with your boss and aim for mutual understanding. This will save you from the future pain of finding out that you and your boss were operating under completely different agendas over a critical period of time.

Manage Exposure: It is clear that your new boss wants to get to know you better. What a wonderful thing that he's made this request. What it also implies is that he feels he has not gotten enough exposure to you in the past. The onus is on you to make it happen. This is not the time to be head-down at your desk with your office door closed only to surface at the monthly divisional meetings! Find strategic opportunities to get in front of others including your new boss - - volunteer to chair a meeting, pop into his office with good news or to discuss a challenge rather than through email, have a scheduled time for update meetings, and go out to lunch or coffee. This is a chance for folks to get to know you as you. Your boss is not only trying to see if you can do the job - - he also wants to make sure he can see himself working with you and that you represent him and the organization well.

Execute, Execute, Execute!: At the end of the day, do not lose sight of the execution. You need to ramp up quickly on your functional responsibilities and knock your deliverables "out of the park". Identify what the quick wins are for you in your new role - - execute on them first, don't hide your successes and remember to share the credit with others. Get your team on board with the priorities and motivate them to execute along with you. They need to believe that a win for you is equal to a win for them.

As you prepare for your transition into the interim position, take a few hours out to reflect on the Four E's. What successes do you bring with you? What will you have to do differently to engage fully in the transition? And, finally, what will make it all worthwhile for you? Anchor yourself in these reflections and set your stage for what I am sure will be a memorable and positive experience for you.

- Muriel Maignan Wilkins

If you have a particular challenge or question you would like for us to address, feel free to email it to us at info@isisassociates.com.