

Liminality



Last week, we were working with a client discussing their personal visions, how to lead teams, and their role as leaders in overcoming resistance to change. The word liminality came up, which is from the science of anthropology. Liminality is a state of transition between one stage and the next. How often do we find ourselves in liminal spaces? In architecture we see this a lot—hallways, stairs, thresholds—as we move from one space to the next. In organizations, this is a great metaphor for all of us as we move through times of growth, change in leadership, downsizing, change in direction, reorganization—in short change. But the problem for most of us is that these transitions also bring feelings of tension, unease, and uncertainty. If we as leaders naturally feel this, imagine how much more those we lead feel it if they don't have good sources of information or aren't "in the know." I remember one CEO standing and announcing to all present in our transformation meeting: "We will not pass through the emotional cycle of change." What? How can you mandate how people will or won't feel during change? It's natural to pass through stages of unawareness, awareness, and understanding on our way to acceptance as we psychologically transition across new boundaries and borders.

When I discussed this concept later with my friend and colleague Fritz Gugelmann from Duke Corporate Education he said, "Great concept, nerdy word. In the context of our work on change, it seems quite relevant. For example, the old system had rules and roles; the new one will have rules and roles. But when we're in between (in a liminal state) neither the old nor the new rules really apply. In the classic studies of liminality, the new state is already defined and understood (e.g., single men become married men)—we know what the rules will be in the new state. In change, of course, we might not know yet what the new rules will be, and we might not know some important things like who the new boss will be. So, we're in a liminal state, but we probably don't know where we're headed."

When we don't know where we are going or what the next stage will be, we experience one of humanity's oldest fears—fear of the unknown. Consequently, many will feel a sense of dread or anxiety but might not always know why.

Marilyn Ferguson, a founding member of the Association of Humanistic Psychology, said, "It's not so much that we're afraid of change or in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear. It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There is nothing to hold on to."

So, what can we do as leaders? Share. Share more. Over share. And then listen more than you want to or think you need to. Most people don't need to be agreed with, but all of us need to feel understood. When you communicate, share the facts, details, plans, and next steps. Share what will happen to them and their team, what's in it for them, how this will be better, and how the organization might struggle. Give people a chance to try the change on, get involved, offer feedback, and see how it will make their jobs easier and harder. Then listen...just listen without defensiveness until they feel heard.

C. S. Lewis, the famous novelist and poet, said, "Getting over a painful experience is much like crossing monkey bars. You have to let go at some point in order to move forward." It's our job as leaders to give people something to hold onto—vision, purpose, strategy, transition descriptions, details, plans, hope, faith, belief. The liminal state can be either exhilarating or debilitating. Step into the space and lead so that others can follow and feel the positive side of change.