

Latent Heat in the Change Process

Several months has now passed since my last blog post. During that time, a number of ideas have been ruminating in my being, mostly about leadership and the change process. Sometimes I turn to science for insights. Such was the case a few weeks ago. I explored the concept of *latent heat* - the amount of energy in the form of heat that gets released or absorbed by a substance during a change phase. The thermochemical term *latent heat* now substituted by another - enthalpy of transformation - still holds interest for me as a metaphor for the energy of change. A man named Joseph Black introduced the term back in 1750 as a way to describe the "hidden" energy that lies within. It occurs to me that people have "latent heat." We have dreams and desires that are in part released into our workplace. Change occurs when we complete the process, when our energy is absorbed by the work itself and the opportunities that also lie hidden in the change process. Change occurs when the latent heat is not diminished, used up by the change, but instead is allowed to flourish and to push new boundaries of innovation.

Have you ever noticed that a glass of ice will eventually melt unless it's placed in a freezer or an extremely cold refrigerator? I know you probably don't spend your days thinking about these phenomena. Without the constant lowering of the temperature to maintain the status quo - frozen water - the ice would melt. There is latent heat in the water. The concept of cold is only the lowering of heat - a bit like this February morning in Atlanta! As the sun applies external warmth the heat hidden in the day will emerge and we will experience the warmth that was there all along.

During a change process in an organization, individuals teams, departments, divisions can become aware of the "heat" or energy for change that lies hidden. The heat lies within the thoughts, beliefs and emotions that we carry into the change event. The energy of fear is strong enough to cause extraordinary heat; fear is stimulated by perceived injury or harm. Often the fear energy is deflected into complaints and doubts about the efficacy of the change. Comments such as "I don't see the point in this" or "This will never work" are indicators of latent heat *deflected* into a fear mode. The leadership challenge is to discover the latent heat, and to find ways to absorb that heat into the change process.

The energy of regret is too a strong emotional reaction to the splitting of a sense of stability that comes from choices made. When we hear comments like "There was a better way to do that" , "How was that decision made?" or "Did we make the right decision?" we are hearing evidence of the latent heat that is being *cooled* by an uncertainty surrounding the choice. Regret delays absorption of heat energy into the change process. When we take the time to include multiple perspectives on the process for change, we can minimize the cool reception to the change, and maximize the likelihood of absorption of energy into the change. We can also remember that in our yin/yang world that choice will naturally generate regret. That awareness and acknowledgement helps us to temper any self-criticism, resistance or anxiety for the natural feelings of regret.

Inherent in any change process is latent heat, almost always fueled by self-interests that are seeking ways to be realized. Langston Hughes asks the question: What happens to a dream

deferred? Dreams are thoughts that are seeking a way to become real. Leaders have a responsibility to acknowledge the latent heat in individual dreams and to respond with development strategies. The development of an employee or prospective leader is another way to affect the absorption of energy into the work. Heat lying dormant or hidden is wasted energy. The true leader is a servant who is able to mobilize the heat within a person, merging self-interests and organizational directions. What happens to a dream absorbed? It evolves and contributes to the overall energy of the organization.

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