

Anne Offner, Ph.D.**APRIL, 2007**

This newsletter features topics related to managing change and improving our work environments. If there are topics you would like to see covered or feedback you have about this newsletter, please submit your ideas and feedback to the following link: <http://www.anneoffner.com/contact.htm>



Celebrities get my attention. I'm not inclined to read People Magazine but I do like to see a good movie with one of my "heroes" in it. For example, Jodie Foster has been a long-time favorite of mine because she portrays characters who are unusual, and that forces me to sometimes shift my way of looking at the world. I would say that Clint Eastwood, Morgan Freeman, Kathryn Hepburn, Patrick Stewart, Susan Sarandon, Robert DeNiro and Antonio Bandaras also fall into my celebrity-inspirational categories.

Because I'm also a geeky psychologist my celebrity list includes academic heroes. Some academics are heroes to me because they are able to take complex human dynamics, study them and then translate their theories into practical applications that benefit folks who live outside of academia. Also, these researchers make bold statements that capture our attention and invite us to incorporate new ways of thinking into our brains.

This article will focus on three of my academic-inspired hero's – Martin Seligman,

William Bridges and Ferdinand Fournies. These three gentlemen have a lot to say about motivating ourselves, and others, to consider making changes that can increase our effectiveness at work – as well as our satisfaction in general.

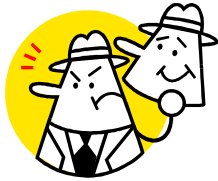
**Change and Transition**

According to William Bridges, change and transition are very different concepts. Change is something external to us, like an event or a situation. Sometimes we cause the change and other times the change happens without our input. Transition is the psychological process of becoming accustomed to the change. Bridges focuses mostly on transition because the challenge comes when we try to adjust the "psychological process" related to change.

The psychological process involves the things that are often automatic or unconscious to us – like our beliefs, assumptions, or values about a given situation. For example, a manager who believes that in order to be successful it's important to work late hours will conclude that an employee who leaves at 5 p.m. is lazy or lacks interest in her career. Or, an employee who assumes that once a restructuring is completed things will go back to "normal" will very likely be disappointed when she finds that things have changed a great deal and there is a new "normal" she must get used to.

The value I take from William Bridges' literature is the concept of focusing on the transition process. If we focus on the change – the plans, project timelines, new technology, new work groups – then we are short-changing the human element.

For example, during the 1980-1990s, most mergers did not realize the financial success anticipated. Corporate leadership lacked attention to how the merger-related changes would affect employees, productivity and implementation of the merger. A recent study by London's Cass Business School and Towers Perrin¹ reports a trend of greater success with merger deals. The results show an increase in general knowledge and competence among C-level leaders (e.g., CEO, CFO, COO, etc.), HR leaders and project teams as a reason for the improved success. Organizations in the study now demonstrate a greater awareness of the direct impact that retention and engagement of employees have on operational success during and following a merger. Because operational success is a key driver for the financial success of a merger, "people issues" are being taken more seriously in recent mergers and acquisitions.



Optimism and Pessimism

Martin Seligman takes all of this a step further. He would likely agree with Bridges that the transition is the place to focus. His research has focused on the differences among people in how they relate to change or other situations they are faced with. Seligman is the author of *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*².

Seligman has found that some individuals routinely interpret the causes of bad events differently from others. Some folks tend to attribute events that they perceive as negative to their own doing (e.g., "It's my fault" or "I knew this would happen if I took this job"). These folks often also see situations as unending (e.g., stable, ongoing situations that are not likely to improve). Additionally they

tend to think globally about the situation (e.g., "This is going to ruin my life" or "This change is going to undercut everything I've worked for.").

According to his research, people who have these habits in their thinking will be more susceptible to feeling helpless, discouraged, and de-motivated than people who tend to have a more optimistic outlook on situations.

Seligman believes that optimists tend to see situations they perceive as negative in the opposite way that the pessimists do. For an optimist, a downsizing or restructuring will be viewed as temporary (e.g., "This is an opportunity to find a job I really enjoy" or "By this time next year, this will blow over."). They also tend to see negative situations in a more specific, focused way than pessimists (e.g., "Yes, I made a mistake and was fired from my last job but I've been able to prove myself in my new job."). Finally optimists tend not to place the blame for bad events on themselves and tend not to reduce their own sense of self-worth ("I was downsized because the business is changing and my skills need some polishing up" or "These things happen in today's corporate environment.")

Seligman's book has great tips for anyone – optimists and pessimists alike. Pessimists can certainly retrain their way of thinking to help them better cope with negative events. Their managers can coach them to think through alternative ways of seeing the situation. Seligman also points out that there is value in pessimism. For example, pessimists tend to be more realistic in their view of situations. Optimists can get caught in the trap of being idealistic or missing crucial messages about their own behavior.

The important message for pessimists is to learn a new set of beliefs. Instead of jumping to the conclusion that a downsizing was attributable to their own lack of skills or ability Seligman would point out that it's healthier and more productive to look at external cues (e.g., the company's financial viability, a bad break but not something that's likely to be repeated, etc.). This can help a person to

maintain a sense of self-worth and realistically view his or her strengths during challenging times of transition.



The Power of Positive Reinforcement

Ferdinand Fournies comes into the picture because he offers a straight-forward approach to coaching – which can be especially helpful during times of change.

In Fournies' view, a manager's primary role in an organization is to help his employees be as successful as he needs them to be. "Managers succeed only when they succeed," he says on page 12 of his book, *Coaching for Improved Work Performance*.ⁱⁱⁱ In his conception, managers are the greatest influence over the success or failure of their employees.

Fournies stresses the importance of communication. He has an entire chapter that chastises those who assume they know what an employee is thinking or believe they understand an employee's attitude. He says that attitude-guessing is self-destructive because it does not help a person understand another person's real motivations for their behavior.

Instead, Fournies relies on a behavioral modification approach that focuses on reinforcing performance improvement. In Chapter Five of his book, Fournies discusses the tendency in business environments to reward the wrong behaviors. Similarly, it is common to see punishment used as a means of motivating performance. The problem with this is that punishment generally gets you compliance or short term performance improvement. Managers who take the time to identify the behaviors they want to reinforce and focus on performance improvement in those areas will see longer-term performance improvement.



In Summary

My academic heroes have a great deal of insight to offer managers and employees as they face challenging transitions. You may never see them, or their theories, in the movie theatres but I believe you will find inspiration and an opportunity to view the world a bit differently, just as you might with any really well-directed movie with one of my celebrity-inspirational heroes!

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This newsletter is edited by Larry Offner of West Palm Beach, Florida.

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ⁱ Towers Perrin HR Services Report (2006). *Current M&A Cycle Creates Shareholder Value*.

ⁱⁱ Seligman, Martin (1990). *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*. NY: Pocket Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fournies, Ferdinand (2000). *Coaching for Improved Work Performance*. NY: McGraw Hill.