

Letting Go through Story and Ritual

By Barry Heerman

Abstract

This example illustrates how story was used to assist a chapter of the American Red Cross move through a transition.

Background

The time was the mid-1990s and the organization was a large chapter of the American Red Cross in the Midwest. A shift in leadership was underway from a loved, admired, and charismatic individual to an unfamiliar replacement. A number of challenges needed to be dealt with that included bringing a new CEO on board and reorganizing how the work was done. The organization engaged Barry Heermann, author of *Building Team Spirit*, to ensure a smooth transition.

Research studies indicate that members of many high performing teams attribute their ability to achieve extraordinary results to a spirit that operates in their midst. They experience this spirit, personally, as increased energy, unbounded enthusiasm, exuberance, and joy. Teams that are infused with spirit can collectively produce exponential gains in effectiveness and efficiency.

The Team Spirit approach focuses on inspiring and energizing people who work together in organizations so they're able to achieve their full potential. To help bring spirit into being Barry engages team members in explorations of their shared identity, values, and purpose; and guides them through activities that foster trust and promote group bonding.

Purpose

The purpose of this intervention was to bring successful closure to the end of one leader's tenure and ensure high performance during the transition to a new leader. Barry's role was to support the passage of the team members from one way of operating to another. This transition required them to release their attachments to the known and to embrace the unfamiliar.

One of the phases in the Team Spirit approach is "Letting Go." In this phase it's important for people to recognize dissonance that exists in the team, acknowledge their fears, express apprehension, and disclose despair. To experience synergy, the team members must be able to disclose rather than repress their negative ideas, thoughts, and feelings. A collective sense of release arises from being forthright and sharing with integrity. As the unspoken is acknowledged, people become more alive.

Bringing what's undiscussable into the light through story clears a space for reframing relationships and situations, and discovering how to see things differently. It releases blocked energy that can be transformed into team spirit.

Process

Barry believes teams have their own distinct dynamics and require tailored applications of learning activities. Recognizing the need these people had to separate from the former CEO and extricate themselves from the old way of doing things, he created a Letting Go activity to formally acknowledge the death of the old and make room for the birth of the new. He facilitated a process in which a cross-functional team, representing employees at different levels of the organization, developed and enacted a "passing on" story. Staging a mock funeral, they enlisted a band, had a casket brought in,

dressed in robes, and sang gospels. On notepaper they wrote about the frustration, disappointment, uncertainty, anger, and fear they were experiencing due to the loss of their leader. They also expressed aspects of the old ways of doing things that they'd found disturbing and stressful. Then they ceremoniously threw all of the notepapers into the casket and closed the lid.

At the end of this indoor ritual, they adjourned to an outdoor picnic with hot dogs and cold drinks. The new CEO, also dressed in a robe, joined them to get acquainted and to begin exchanging ideas about their shared future.

Impact

In this letting-go-through-story ritual, self-disclosure was welcomed. People felt free to express themselves on paper and to throw the paper into a casket. Taken together, the casket's contents would make up a large part of this organization's story (the principle actors, what was regarded as important, why employees behaved in certain ways, how co-workers interacted, and how challenges were handled.)

If the team members had not acknowledged both the harmony and the conflict they'd experienced with the former CEO, the previous story would have gotten in the way of making a fresh start. Letting Go freed them to hope and to begin thinking about a future not based on the past. The shared experience of allowing the old ways to die a natural death generated trust and a sense of completion among the members of this organization. Bringing closure to the old story meant there would be energy, space, and opportunity for the team members and the new CEO to move on to a new story.

Lessons

- Engaging team members in ritually acknowledging the completion of the old and the beginning of the new, related to a change in senior team leadership, creates opportunities for freshly generating team identity and action.
- Revealing previously suppressed attitudes and feelings leads team members to a sense of freedom and renewed vitality.
- Story, combined with ritual, provides a foundation for visioning and ultimately claiming of key team responsibilities.

Contributor

Barry Heermann, Ph.D., M.B.A., is an organization development consultant and a former core faculty member of the Graduate School of the Union Institute. He's the creator of Team Spirit, a comprehensive team development program used by the American Red Cross, AT&T, General Motors, Lexis/Nexis, NCR, United Way, and VW of America. He's the author of five books on adult and experiential learning including, *Building Team Spirit: Activities for Inspiring and Energizing Teams* (McGraw-Hill, 1997). His newest book translates the implication of spirit and extraordinary service to the individual journey in his book, *Noble Purpose: Igniting Extraordinary Passion for Life and Work* (QSU, 2004).