

CHANGE - sometimes it's the little things that matter!



Whose change the coffee! And where have the custard cream biscuits gone!



A volunteer manager recently shared with me a story about change that was to him perplexing and curious. By pure coincidence, at the same time the organisation was introducing a new process with volunteers, a subscription to a daily newspaper was not renewed. Volunteers, who read this newspaper in the break room, became disproportionately unhappy and angry about the missing newspapers that caused much consternation in the office.

To the volunteer manager's surprise, the newspaper became the most important amenity in the office; it seemed to be a key tool that contributed to volunteer work quality and served as a significant signal to volunteers that their work wasn't being appreciated.

I've heard similar stories about the brand of tea and coffee available in lunch rooms, cakes and biscuits on offer, new scratchy t-shirts for volunteers to wear and new furniture.

Most volunteers will be aghast at any suggestion that they need or expect certain amenities - volunteering certainly is about the camaraderie, friendships, the cause and those who are being helped. Why then, can reading materials in the break room matter so much?

They may seem trivial things to be upset about - but believe me they're not. The common factor in these stories is that these changes occurred in conjunction to changes to volunteer activity. These seemingly trivial things became lightning rods for bigger issues involved in change management.

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Fundamentally, it's easier to complain about a missing newspaper than a new process. Volunteers understand that a process change is important because you have told them. But that doesn't mean they are not irritated about it. Sometimes, we all need an outlet for irritations and projecting our frustrations on seemingly trivial things can be a convenient, easy and achievable way to let off some steam and, perhaps inadvertently or subconsciously, signal disquiet.

Sometimes it can be about the 'irritation load' - 'the straw that breaks the camel's back', if you like. Most of us can deal with one irritation (a small change), maybe two changes. It might be the third irritation that causes us to react. Each of us has our own irritation load, triggered by different things ... one can be at work, one can be at play, one can be at home. At some point the load becomes too much and, like steam in pressure cooker, it seeks an avenue of release -such as the missing newspaper or the biscuit brand in the tea room.

The same goes for teams: one irritation can be ok, perhaps two - but maybe three can cause a reaction. Teams can also attribute all range of reasons to why you have withdrawn the amenity: "We don't seem to matter anymore"; "Don't they understand us?"; "We do all this work and they can't even give us a decent biscuit in the tea room!". It's not about the biscuits - it's about what has gone on before and what is the cumulative effect of what is happening now.

When we design change projects we can be guilty of assuming people will respond in a rational and pragmatic way. We assume that once people understand why things need to change, they will change as needed. But those who have experienced change will know that there is no guarantee that responses will be rational.

In fact, the irrational emotions that may come to the surface can even surprise the individual - eczema, teariness, hair loss, tetchiness, argumentativeness, withdrawal, conflict... to name a few. Let's not forget that volunteering is about an emotional engagement to your organisation, the difference your organisation makes and the people involved. Volunteer passion can bring out an emotional response that can be surprising.

A word of caution - be aware that seemingly irrational responses can indicate other conditions too. If there are no obvious contributing factors - look deeper. These reactions can also be a signal of unresolved conflict, bullying or interpersonal tensions in your team.

So, whether it's the brand of coffee, tea, the types of biscuits or cakes provided, the small niceties or treats that volunteers enjoy - sometimes change to these little things can threaten to undo the big things. When introducing change, keep as much as you can the same, particularly the little things that can give a sense of comfort and

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security in chaos. Ask what changes are really necessary - and necessary now. Do some elements risk the derailment of a bigger objective?

If a seemingly small thing creates a big response - pay attention to it immediately. Fix it if you can! Sometimes a small thing can make a big difference.

With regards to the actual change project itself, the level of support provided for volunteers is critical to minimise the irritation load in the first place.

... And that's a whole other article!

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