

The Secret to Change Management: Breaking with Tradition

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I'd like to share a story I heard from a friend—let's call her Jane—about an experience she had during her army service. Jane served at a shop where defective equipment was fixed and returned to service. The shop was using various tools as well as a good supply of paintbrushes. According to the procedures, at the end of each workday all tools had to be returned to their proper places and all paintbrushes had to be cleaned. In reality, at the end of the workday the soldiers were tired or in rush to get somewhere, and the shop was left a mess.

Of course, by the next day the paintbrushes would be stiff with dry paint and had to be thrown away. As new work was coming in regularly, there was never time to tidy the shop. Expensive tools were lost and precious time was spent either looking for them or going to the quartermaster to get new ones.

Jane testifies that she acted this way, too, and did not really see any problem in such behavior: "This is how things were done there," she said.

A few months before her service time was up, Jane found herself in a unique position. All the senior soldiers in her shop had completed their service term and were released. She was the only one left to train a new group of soldiers on how to do the work and what their responsibilities were.

Jane made a decision to do something drastic. A day before the new group arrived, she cleaned and tidied the shop until it was sparkling, with everything in its proper place. When the new soldiers came in, she explained the training plan and goals. She strongly emphasized a number of times, "The most important thing in this shop is neatness. We never go home before the shop is squeaky clean, all tools are in their proper places, and all paintbrushes are cleaned up."

Every training task given to the new soldiers contained a section about neatness. If any of the soldiers failed to clean up or misplaced a tool, he or she was reprimanded and had to listen to a long sermon about the indispensable importance of tidiness.

The result? By the end of the training period—about four months—the shop had a new generation of soldiers who were fanatic about neatness, and it did not even occur to them that things could be done any other way. A new tradition was created: keeping the rules and working according to the defined procedures.

Overcoming Resistance to Change

When we try to bring a quality process into a development or test team, there tends to be resistance. People say the process slows down progress or blocks innovation, that too much discipline does not fit a development team, or that the new procedure makes the workplace feel like a production facility. I believe this attitude is mostly the result of tradition—people being too used to the organizational culture and work habits to think that there could be a better way to do things.

Assume for a minute that you left your job and joined a new company. In that company, people adhere to processes and procedure and everyone, without exception, follows them to the letter. As a newcomer, you immediately follow the example set by everyone else. Because everybody keeps the rules, you won't feel like a pushover for following the rules; you won't think you are wasting time or that it feels like a factory line. You will just internalize the idea that these are the rules of the game, and it will feel natural to perform them.

Understanding this influence can help in making successful process changes in your team.

Implementing a New Tradition

Making process and procedural changes using a new set of rules and behaviors is an effort to create a new tradition. Considering that no one plans to fire everybody in your company and get an entirely new generation of workers (I hope), you have to get people to adopt these different work habits. Still, don't expect the logic of these implementations alone to get people on board and make them want to change. You have to make these new processes a habit—a tradition—and this can only be achieved if everyone does them all the time.

This is not impossible, as long as management and the team support it. Management has to commit that the new rules will not be tossed out the minute there is any inconvenience or other pressures. And the team needs to decide on the minimal level of process that is needed and pledge to each other to follow this process, no matter what. Agree that it's all right to remark when someone does not follow the rules and to demand compliance from each other.

For inspiration, watch Mars Code, a lecture by Gerard Holzmann, senior research scientist at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory that describes how its group of developers adopted new quality processes. Their model definitely can be reused with other software teams, and it gives a great example of how a new work tradition can be built.

After a while, behaviors that the team believes are important will start to take root. Eventually it will not even feel too hard to do them. And there's another bonus: New

people who join the team won't even have to be convinced that the rules are important or justified. It will just be "how things are done here."