

Goof Gas Change



When you are seeking change in your company, make sure everybody is in the same plane.

“We’re going to make this company great!”

As the villainous Boris Badenov spreads his goof gas, America’s most brilliant scientists are transformed into idiots. Even the smartest investigators are not immune. In desperation, the country turns to the one person, well, animal, who can save them: Bullwinkle J. Moose. Bullwinkle, it turns out, is immune to goof gas because he is, quite simply, simple. Bullwinkle cannot be affected by Boris’s goof gun because Bullwinkle has no intelligence to start with.

Moving from the world of cartoon satire to reality, we come to sunny California, and Clovis, the CEO of Clovis Systems. One fine day, Clovis announced a major restructuring.

“We are good,” he said, “but as a company, we need to be great.”

His particular choice of words was inspired by the title of the book that had inspired him to action: Jim Collins’s “Good to Great.”

The only problem with “Good to Great” is that you have to recognise the implicit assumption: that you’re starting from “good.” If you’re starting from “pathetic,” well, it doesn’t work quite so well. In fact, Clovis Systems was immune to “Good to Great,” for reasons eerily similar to why Bullwinkle Moose is immune to goof gas.

To make matters worse, Clovis’s approach to the whole concept of moving to greatness was lacking. “Great” is an impressive sounding word, but what does it mean? The answer depends on the person and the organisation. By never defining what he meant, by never painting a picture of what “great” would mean, Clovis doomed his efforts from the start. But even if he had conveyed a clear destination, that wouldn’t have been enough.

Clovis made his announcement and then he didn’t follow through. If you want people to change, you need to do more than just tell them about the change.

To begin with, Clovis needed to help his employees recognise that some major changes were even necessary. From their perspective, things were pretty good. Having Clovis

announce a major restructuring out of the blue looked to them like goof gas. All Clovis managed to do with his announcement was generate confusion, and confused people don’t move forward: they dig in their heels and try to stop moving until they can figure out what is going on. Therefore, Clovis should have started by talking with his employees about the disadvantages of the status quo. What were they unhappy about? What would they like to see done better? What was getting in the way of their doing their jobs?

Only by getting his employees thinking about what was wrong would they become open to the idea of change.

Once people start to think about change as desirable, the next step is to get them to think about it as possible and is something that they are capable of bringing about.

Change is possible

Trying to persuade them in believing so rarely works. The more you push, the more they resist. Instead, it’s time for a new set of questions. What would help you make the change? How have you made successful changes in the past? What resources do you have to help you make the change? What resources do you need? What strengths do you have that will make this work? What strengths does the company have?

Notice that every one of these questions focuses on the positive: on why the change is possible. If you focus on the negative, then all you’ll get is a litany of objections. While it’s important to identify and overcome obstacles, first you need to convince people that they are capable of overcoming those obstacles! Focus on success, not on failure.

Once Clovis had his team thinking of change as desirable and as something they could do, then it’s time to get concrete. If you wait too long, you’ll lose momentum, so it’s important to take advantage of the enthusiasm while it lasts. How will we make these changes? What do we need to do? How will we get started? How will we know we’ve started? How will we know we’re making progress?

Sometimes, if it’s hard to figure out how to start, it can help to forget about the how and

focus purely on what you want to have happen. Get people talking and brainstorming and see how many different ideas you can generate. Do it right, and you’ll be amazed how many different approaches you’ll have.

Periodically, pause and summarize the progress you’re making. Echo it back to your employees. Let them see the small successes from the start. Each success builds momentum and keeps people believing that they can succeed. Recognise that people will make mistakes and that’s not a problem. Make it easy to recover and move on; you want employees to admit mistakes and correct them, not hide them out of fear of punishment.

Finally, keep everyone in the company moving forward together. When people move as a group, they support and encourage each other. When you leave people behind, the others stop to help their friends, or they insist on going back to get them. Either way, you lose forward momentum. If you already have strong teams, take advantage of their strength. If you don’t have strong teams, think of this as an opportunity to build team work. In either case, provide coaches, opportunities to practice the changes, room for experimentation, and vivid images of what the results will look like. Done right, not only will the mediocre teams become strong, but the strong teams will become excellent.

Clovis claimed he was serious about making his company great. However, he never did the work or committed the resources to make the change happen. In the end, he was breathing goof gas.

■ Stephen Balzac



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