

BILL CENTER – APRIL 8, 2020 ROTARY PRESENTATION

Hi! It's great to see everybody! A few weeks back President Kim asked if I'd be willing to present one of our online programs and I told her I'd be happy to offer some thoughts about the pace of change we're experiencing and a few suggestions for dealing with it. If you have comments, questions – or, especially if you have suggestions of your own for dealing with change, type them in using the “chat” button at the bottom of the window. No need to wait till this video is over. So here goes ...

I'm a HUGE fan of musical theatre. Among my favorites is “Fiddler on the Roof.” The story of Tevye, a dairyman who lived with his wife and three daughters in Anatevka, a small Jewish village far out on the Russian steppes circa 1906.

As Tevye is introducing us to Anatevka and its inhabitants he tells us with confidence born of experience that “nothing ever changes in Anatevka.” And – in that place and time – it was absolutely true. People were born, lived a precarious existence, never traveled far from home, then left the world pretty much as they found it.

Tevye goes on to sing – it is a musical after all – about the importance of “tradition” in helping the denizens of the village understand who they are and what is expected of them.

The story tells how change comes to his family – first as his oldest daughter refuses to marry the man chosen for her, then her wedding is disrupted by the Russian Pogrom, and finally when the Pogrom forces them to flee the village, his youngest daughter follows her husband going off to join the Bolsheviks.

Wow! Zero to light-speed in just ten short years.

We empathize. We get tears in our eyes. Change is hard. We feel it and we know it.

We've seen a lot of change in the past two decades. In 2001 we survived the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In 2007 the great recession imperiled our economy. The sluggish climb out of that chasm morphed into one of the longest periods of economic growth in our nation's history. That came to a crashing halt two months ago as a global pandemic once again compelled us all toward dramatic change.

The tsunamis of change accompanying those milestone events grabbed our attention – briefly obscuring the torrential river of change in which we swim every day. It's grueling – often exhausting – yet we risk being swept away if we stop swimming as fast as we can.

Change is hard – and it's getting harder. The pace of change – the current in that river – is accelerating, and it's accelerating dramatically.

It's a cliché to say humans – especially older folks like me – are uncomfortable with change – even resistant to it. We all know people in that category. We may even feel a twinge of self-reproach when we catch ourselves grouching about some new innovation.

Relax! You're not alone. Change may be an inexorable aspect of our 21st century lives, but the kind of change I'm talking about is really a new phenomenon for humans.

Our species first appeared on this planet about two-hundred-thousand years ago. For 99.9% of that time the river of change was a stagnant mud puddle. As we learned from Tevye, there really was no discernable change in course of a normal lifetime.

People didn't wake up one morning and say, "Oh look, we're having a renaissance! I'm so glad those dark ages are finally over."

Yes, there were milestone events – a war or foreign invasion, a plague or famine – but eventually things got back to "normal" – meaning folks experienced little

or no change in their daily lives. When change did occur, people complained. That's nothing new.

One of my favorite examples comes from the book of Exodus. Soon after Moses led the Israelites out of captivity folks started grumbling. "If only we had died as slaves in Egypt," they said. "There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve to death." That's right ... they were actually fondly recalling their time as slaves. Change really is hard!

Let me illustrate the slow pace of change with another example.

Twenty years ago – at the turn of the millennium – a bunch of certified smart people like Stephen Hawking and Bill Gates were asked to name the most influential person of the previous thousand years. They selected Johannes Gutenberg who was born around 1400 and died in 1468 – a long life in mid-evil Europe where life expectancy was about 31 years.

When I was teaching, I enjoyed asking my students what Gutenberg was famous for. They'd invariably respond, "inventing the printing press," which was understandable because that's what we've been taught. But the screw-type printing press using carved wood blocks was developed in China in the 8th century and was well-known in Europe 700 years later when Gutenberg arrived on the scene. His big innovation was reusable, movable type which made possible the publication of books and newspapers. Most of us have heard of – and maybe even seen – one of the famous "Gutenberg bibles."

A milestone change, right? Not exactly. It was more than three centuries after Gutenberg's innovation before printed books became generally available in Europe. Such was the pace of change.

The laser printer was invented in 1969 by Gary Starkweather. Remember him? He worked at Xerox. Laser printers were widely available by the mid-70s and desktop publishing programs were populating our computers by the mid-80s. Quite a contrast.

So, when did the pace of change really begin to noticeably accelerate?

The first notable signs of change occurred during the first industrial revolution which began in Europe and spread to the United States from about 1750 to 1850. The second wave began in the U.S. and spread to Europe from 1850 to 1914.

The first big milestone change event for Americans was the Civil war. Things would never be “the same” after that.

Then three giant tsunamis of change, dwarfing the three we experienced in the past 20 years, swept over our nation. World War I – 1914 to 1918, the Great Depression – 1929 to 1933,

and World War II – 1941 to 1945 launched America – and ultimately the entire world – on the path of exponential change we’re experiencing today.

It took us a while to fully recognize what was happening.

The rate of change we’re experiencing has now gone exponential. Humans have a difficult time grasping that concept. It’s natural to think – even as we’re astounded by how much change has occurred over the past decade – that we’ll see similar change in the decade to come, when in fact – by most measures – we can anticipate roughly 10 times more.

While discussing the COVID-19 pandemic a friend recently offered this interesting way illustrate what exponential change looks like.

Suppose into this little box you place a tiny “tribble” of some sort. All we know about them is they replicate themselves every minute and that in precisely one hour, our box will be full of tribbles. The question is, when the box is half-full, how long do we have before we’ll need another box?

The answer – of course – is one minute, because if the box will be full after 60 minutes it will be half-full after 59 minutes.

So, it took an hour to fill the first box. How long will it take to fill the second box? That's right – just one minute. Now we need two more boxes. A minute later we need four. A minute after that we need eight. After ten minutes we'll have 1,024 boxes full of tribbles and we haven't stopped them yet.

When we put that first tribble in the box, we had an hour to react. I sure hope we were building boxes – maybe even bigger boxes – and working on ways to slow down the tribble multiplication process. It's easy to see how an exponential rate of change can overwhelm us. It's difficult to keep up and almost impossible to stay ahead of the curve.

Fortunately – figuratively speaking, from an historical perspective – we're still in the first hour of the exponential change curve. We still have time to react, but the clock is ticking and there is less and less room for error. The challenges posed by global climate change, nuclear proliferation and global pandemics should alert us all to the very real possibility we could screw this up and bring our species relatively short time on planet earth to an abrupt and unhappy conclusion.

This accelerating pace of change is so new for us we've had no time to genetically adapt ... and we won't have the thousands of years required for a meaningful mutation to manifest itself ... so we can't count on nature to save us.

Which brings us to Charles Darwin. I bring him up because it's common to encapsulate Darwin's theory of evolution as "survival of the fittest." That phrase was actually coined by Herbert Spencer, an English sociologist and philosopher who was a contemporary and admirer of Darwin.

What Darwin posited was "natural selection" where certain mutations were preferred because they were best suited or most useful. This distinction is important because to some folks "survival of the fittest" suggests it's the tough people who will survive. Darwin would disagree. He'd say the survivors will be those who prove most adaptable to change.

As our Soldiers and Marines like to say – “improvise, adapt, overcome!”

I’ve spent far too long telling you stuff you likely already knew. Hopefully I presented it in a way that helped you think differently about the challenges presented by an exponential rate of change.

I promised to offer a few suggestions for dealing with that challenge, so here we go.

Where I in my classroom or in front of a live audience, at this point I’d probably present a multiple-choice question like this:

How long do you think it will take to get back to “normal” once the current COVID-19 crisis is in the rear-view mirror?

- A. Six months
- B. One Year
- C. Two years or more – or –
- D. Never – we’ll have an entirely new definition for “normal” when this crisis is over.

When I asked that question after 9/11 the majority answered six months or one year. With that experience so fresh in our minds I anticipate most of you would now choose D. We know “normal” now is nothing like “normal” pre-9/11, and things will never be the same again once this crisis passes.

That’s lesson one – look ahead – don’t look back. From my vantage point a lot of the inconvenient and costly stuff we’ve been doing post-9/11 is designed for the past, not the future.

We know the world has changed a lot since 2001 – our approach to combating terrorism hasn’t kept pace. As a result, the next attack will likely catch us off guard just like 9/11 and COVID-19.

Lesson two – ancient Chinese wisdom – focus on the opportunities not the problems. Easy to say – apparently difficult to do in the midst of a global pandemic. But I promise you, folks like Warren Buffet are doing exactly that. They don't lack empathy for the suffering or generosity toward those in need, but they recognize the sun will rise tomorrow on a whole new world of opportunities. They are more focused on shaping the future than solving problems.

Lesson three – change is stressful. Find as many ways as possible to reduce stress. You know all the classic ways to do that – let me offer two of my favorites:

1. Go to bed early and get up early. How early? ... at least two hours before you have to leave the house ... and go to bed early enough to allow for seven-to-eight hours sleep. Follow a good sleep hygiene routine before bed. Allow yourself that time in the morning to calm your mind and prepare for the daily onslaught of change without rushing. Skip the news before bed and spend 15 minutes catching up in the morning.

Thanks to the internet you really can absorb everything you actually need to know in 15 minutes or less.

2. Reduce the number of unimportant daily choices and decisions you have to make. The pace of change can produce decision overload. How often do you find yourself responding to a question like “what do you want for dinner?” – or – “would you like to watch a movie?” – or – “what do you want to do this weekend?” ...with a phrase that sounds something like “I don't care ... whatever you decide will be fine.”

Back in the 1970s there was significant ground-breaking research on the impact of change on wellness. Researchers determined the more change people experienced in a set period of time the greater the likelihood they would suffer a serious illness or injury.

A couple smart Navy doctors decided to take advantage of the data available from ships going on routine six-month deployments to explore the thesis. To their surprise they discovered, as expected, sailors who experienced the most life change prior to deployment did have higher rates of injury and illness than their shipmates who experienced less change, but the rate was significantly lower than civilian test groups who experienced similar high levels of life change.

They concluded a major factor aiding the sailors in dealing with the stress of change was having fewer choices to make. For example, they didn't have to decide when to get up, what to wear, or when and what to eat. The daily shipboard routine plus freedom from commuting and traffic, daily family concerns, and nightly TV news also helped.

We're flooded with choices every day without even realizing it. The range of available options is staggering. For example, if you decide to buy a new car, even once you've narrowed it down to a new BMW, when you consider all the models and options there are still well over two million possibilities.

Find ways to relax, de-stress and "clear the decks" so you can focus your energy and attention on the decisions and choices that really matter.

Lesson Four: Have regular, intelligent, in-depth conversations with young people exploring their viewpoints and attitudes about the latest changes and innovations. Why do they prefer texting to phone calls, voicemail or email? Why do they get their movies, music and TV from the internet? Why do they change jobs so often? Why is it so much harder to get into college these days?

I recognize all those questions are already outdated. But next time you're wrestling with some change, ask a young person about it. Listen well. They were born into a world of change. They're not yet as flummoxed by it as us older folks and have wisdom beyond their years.

Lesson Five: Make sure you have at least one rock to cling to – something that won't change – ever – something on which you can always rely. Perhaps it's the

love of a spouse, a close group of long-time friends, or your faith in God. That last sentiment is captured perfectly in the second verse of the great hymn “Abide With Me.”

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see—
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

What is the rock in your life? ... that thing you can grab on to when the swiftly flowing river of change threatens to sweep you away?

Finally – Lesson Six: Change puts a premium on leadership. My definition of leadership is the art of successfully encouraging people to willingly do things they would not otherwise do – like change, for example – unleashing their maximum performance and helping them reach their fullest potential and personal goals in the process.

The current pandemic illustrates the importance of having good data and good management, but it clearly underscores the decisive impact of strong leadership in achieving an optimum outcome. Fortunately, I’m talking to a club full of leaders, so you already get this – and – next week our member, Ken Grant, will be addressing this very topic.

I’d also recommend the outstanding little book Leading Change by John Kotter to any of you leading organizations large or small. Even though it’s been 25 years since his book was first published it still contains the best roadmap for leading organizational change. Dr. Kotter provides the clearest explanation I’ve ever read on the difference between leadership and management and the importance of both.

I’m ready for questions – and it’s not necessary to phrase your statement or comment in the form of a question – especially if you have suggestions for dealing with change. Thank you!