

The Courage For Change: How To Turn Fear Into Success

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Summary

Change is an inevitable part of life and essential for growth. Without change we experience stagnation, depression, and even death. Change brings progress and is often what we resist and fear the most.

We are in the midst of some of the biggest changes in history. Big businesses are downsizing; the global market is in hyper growth; and the small business sector is expanding at an amazing rate. As the world around us changes, we must learn to change with it or we experience confusion, frustration, and stress.

The good news is that we can actually turn our fear of change into a positive and energizing force for success. To achieve anything there is always some risk involved, and, by conquering the fear of risk, we can have what we really want. Every fear we face is an opportunity to grow.

Leaders must be able to embrace change and lead others to do the same. A corporation cannot be a leader without the dedication and loyalty of its employees. When management implements company changes without the consent of the workers, there will be a backlash. People need to be heard and fears must be addressed. When leaders and managers learn to "coach" others through the resistance and the fear of change, everyone wins. I have developed a four-step plan to help you coach others through fear: Focus, Explore, Assess, and Respond. These four steps can actually help turn fear into a positive synergistic force for greater performance and success.

Introduction

As a business and personal coach, I partner with entrepreneurs, executives, and professionals who want to get more out of their personal and professional lives. I work with individual clients mostly through weekly telephone sessions that last from a half-hour to an hour.

As a speaker and a trainer, I usually offer advice and share information. In my role as a coach, I use a process of inquiry and personal discovery to build my client's level of awareness and responsibility. I provide my clients with structure, support, and feedback instead of giving advice, information, or my opinions. I listen and observe so I can customize my approach to each individual's needs and elicit solutions and strategies from my client.

This coaching process helps clients both to define and to achieve professional and personal goals faster and with more ease than would be possible otherwise.

In my coaching practice, I have observed that the main obstacle that holds people back from greater success is their resistance and fear of change. To help my clients overcome this obstacle, I developed four steps to help coach them out of their *comfort zone* and into producing the results that they most desire. These four steps are explained in the following sections.

Coaching Through the Fear of Change

To be effective leaders we must be able to embrace change both professionally and personally. So often we get stuck doing things the same way, hoping for different results, hoping employees become more productive so company profits will increase. We get caught on the hamster wheel running faster and faster hoping our efforts will work if we just try harder. We often resist the idea of changing course because new paths are foreign to us. They are UNKNOWN. We fear change because we do not know what is on the other side.

In order to truly achieve our visions, we must stop and reevaluate. We must ask ourselves: Where is it that I want to be?, What am I doing to get there?, What is holding me back from being there now?

In addition to being a professional speaker, I am a certified business and personal coach. Delivering private and group coaching primarily by phone has allowed me to work with executive and entrepreneurial clients nationwide.

A coaching client of mine wanted to move to the next level of his profession. He is an international business management consultant and hired me because he wanted to become a partner in his company. When asked what he needed to do to achieve a partnership, he replied, "I should begin speaking at conferences to become more visible in my industry." My client's vision was clear, yet he resisted making the change. Why? He was terrified of public speaking! Many times we know exactly what we want, but that nasty four letter word holds us back, F-E-A-R. Organizations and individuals are faced with this dilemma on a regular basis.

The good news is that fear can actually become a positive asset! Effective leaders can learn to turn resistance and fear into a powerful, energizing force. Here are four simple steps that can be used in the moment or for long-term planning to help us breakthrough fear, build courage, and create the results we desire.

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| F – Focus | “What do you want?” |
| E – Explore | “What is stopping you?” |
| A – Assess | “What could you do?” |
| R – Respond | “What will you do?” |

This information is hardly new, but most people have either forgotten it or do not have a structure to implement it or fail to use it.

I like to demonstrate these four steps with something that was uncomfortable and scary for me—my first bungee jump! I looked at my first bungee jump as an opportunity to do something different and to face my fear. There are many ways to get out of your comfort zone. You certainly do not have to jump off a bridge to accomplish that! More important, why would you want to? I believe we must be willing to take risks and get out of our comfort zone to achieve more success. Often we have to risk thinking and doing things differently to get better results.

So many people say they want more success, yet they are more committed to being comfortable instead of being committed to their vision. Often, when we do something different that negative gremlin voice in our head says, “You can’t do that! You will fail!” The biggest mistakes I see people making is when they get stuck doing the same things and continue to get the same results. That’s okay if the results are in their favor, but if not, then they must make a change. It takes courage to take on change. It takes courage to go after what we really want.

If change is so important to help us achieve more success, then why do so many people and organizations resist it? The problem is that fear is sneaky! It disguises itself in many forms: resistance, avoidance, procrastination, and overwhelm. If we don’t recognize fear or if we deny our fear of change then fear will actually control us.

The first step in overcoming fear and developing courage for change is developing focus. *Focusing* is getting clear on where you want to go. This is what great achievers and great companies have in common. They have vision. They have the ability to see beyond their present reality. Focusing is the skill of creating a compelling future vision that provides a reason to change. Change can be frightening and paralyzing. Most people need a good reason to change because they are more comfortable doing things the same way. Leaders must help them envision a specific future that looks better than the present reality. Leaders must be able to create a compelling future vision.

Let’s imagine you have joined me at my first bungee jump. Imagine that you are standing on the edge of a 200-foot bridge. As you look down, you can see a river rushing beneath you. In five seconds you are going to jump from this bridge with nothing but a rubber cord hooked to your body. How would you feel? What would it be like for you on the edge of that bridge? Excited? Nervous? Scared?

I certainly was on my first jump! As I stood on the edge of the bridge, I was terrified! That’s because I was focusing on my fears. I looked across the canyon and saw a pine tree that stood higher than all the others. I made that tree my goal. Having a goal helped boost my confidence. I focused on that tree. I was focused on where I wanted to go instead of on my fears.

Focus on the Vision

When I served on the board of directors of the Professional and Personal Coaches Association (PPCA), we held a retreat in Sedona, Arizona. The purpose of the retreat was to clarify the future vision, mission, and goals of our association. The PPCA was founded in 1992 with a mission to “promote the ever wider use of coaching.”

At the time of our retreat, the PPCA was the largest nonprofit, dues-collecting organization for the coaching industry. In order to help us clarify our vision, we collectively envisioned where we saw the coaching industry in twenty years. We visualized the details of what it would be like, what it would look like, and what role it would play in twenty years. We realized that the best way to reach our mission might be to close the organization! By dissolving and joining efforts with another large coaching organization, The International Coach Federation (ICF), there would be a more unified voice for the coaching industry. This was a very scary and uncomfortable decision for people who had put a lot of effort into creating the PPCA.

In 1726, English author, Jonathan Swift described vision as “the art of seeing things invisible.” A clear vision inspires people to take action, move forward and embrace change. This is why *focus* is the first step in developing the courage for change.

A vision is a detailed description of what you see if things were to turn out just right and if what you wish for becomes reality. Here’s the magic—by focusing on the best possible outcome, resistance and fear of change will turn into excitement, growth, and success!

Coaching People to Focus on Vision “What do you want?”

Coaching an individual or group to focus on what they want helps develop clarity. It also helps them discover possible resistance and potholes on the future road to success. We are rarely asked questions like What do you want? and What do you see for the future if things go well? These simple questions can elicit an array of responses and will help begin the coaching process of focusing, exploring, assessing, and responding.

Before our work together, many of my clients had never taken the time to look at what they really want for their companies, their departments, or themselves. Being *curious* is one of the most important skills of a great coach. Ask. Listen. Seek to understand. You will be amazed at the power of this first step. One of the greatest gifts we can give each other is the gift of caring and understanding. So often people charge ahead with their own agenda before pausing to get input and ideas from the individuals or group they are supposed to be supporting.

When you use the coaching skills of being curious, asking questions and understanding what people want, you will most likely discover there is resistance and fear associated with the changes needed to achieve their goals. This leads us to our next step in

exploring fears. If you skip this step, you will find that the fear will only get deeper and stronger!

Exploring the Warning Signs

Exploring resistance and fear means listening to and understanding what the resistance is trying to tell you. Exploring is when you ask questions such as What is stopping you? or What resistance or fear is coming up for you around this change?

At the PPCA retreat I mentioned, the idea of change brought up many fears. Our vision of creating a unified voice for the coaching industry would mean joining forces with our rival organization, the ICF. Would they have the same ethical standards that we had? Would we have any power within their organizations? Would all of our hard work just disappear? All of these fears were like red flashing warning signs to give us an opportunity to look at potential pitfalls.

To further describe the importance of exploring fear, let's return to my first bungee jump. Standing on the edge of the bridge I was focusing on the tree across the canyon. I had a goal and my confidence was stronger. I focused on where I wanted to go, yet I was still experiencing fear. My mind was saying yes and my body was saying no way! I used my fear like a stop sign to remind me to stop, be aware, and explore the situation before I moved forward into possible failure. I inspected my body harness. The harness was hooked up and safe. I checked if the cord was hooked to my body. Check. The cord was set. I looked to make sure the cord was hooked to the bridge. The system looked strong and secure. I felt more confidence arise and I was now more prepared for my jump.

Coaching People to Explore the Warning Signs "What's stopping you?"

If you do not allow people to explore their resistance and fear of change, you will inevitably find that fear will hold them back from achieving their goals. People deal with change in different ways. One person may be a risk taker who is ready to change just for the sake of change, while another person may have a high value of security and safety.

One way that leaders can better support others in the process of change is to be a role model for change. By exhibiting the courage to voice their fears about resistance, leaders create a magnetic force that helps pull others through difficult times. Their courage creates the positive energy and integrity that is needed to embrace change.

Coaching is not based on the coach's agenda. If the coach tries to manipulate and control rather than understand and empower, the person being coached will eventually resist and shut down. The key is to be understanding. People will not be willing to explore their fears if they think you won't understand their point of view. Use simple questions such as "What resistance are you noticing with this change?" or "What is your fear telling you about this next step?" These questions help the coach better understand where the person is in their own process of change.

Assess the Options

After you have focused on a compelling future vision and you have explored resistance and fear, the next step is to assess the options. After assessing the options, you can then create an action plan based on those options.

So how does one plan for a bungee jump? A countdown to the actual jump. The group of people on the bridge join in and yell, "5...4...3...2...1" and the jumper usually jumps. My plan was to break down my jump into small steps using the countdown as my structure to remember my plan. I planned to focus, take a deep breath, bend my knees, and on the count of one, push off with all of my might towards the tree across the canyon. I broke my plan into achievable steps and I had encouragement and support.

What options did we have for the PPCA? Our board of directors discussed several options. One was to launch an aggressive media campaign to build our association. Another was to dissolve the PPCA and bring our talents and resources over to the ICF. We also discussed how we could stay open and still collaborate with the ICF. The question we asked ourselves was, "Which one do we choose?"

We looked at the values of the PPCA. We discovered that our key values were partnership, community, contribution, and service. Based on that, we decided to approach the ICF to discuss the possibilities of working together. We had assessed our options and we created a plan.

Coaching People to Assess the Options "What could you do?"

Assessing and planning is one of the most important aspects of good coaching. Assisting others to clarify their values and objectives is a big part of the process but not the only part. Many people have an *Ah-ha* experience but do not do anything with their discoveries. This is why the skill of breaking down big changes and goals into small, achievable steps is so essential. The best way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time! That's an old joke, yet its point is often forgotten.

Let's reflect back to my client who was terrified of public speaking. After examining his fears associated with speaking, we came up with several options for him. His plan started with the first step of joining Toastmasters, a speaking club. His next steps included speaking at office meetings, regional meetings, and finally at his firm's national conference. He initially resisted the idea of speaking at the national conference because the goal was too daunting. But once he broke it down into a plan with small achievable steps, it became much easier to overcome his fear.

Respond with Yes or No

We've moved through the first three steps of focusing, exploring, and assessing. Now it's time to choose. This final step is the response to the first three steps. If people do not have choice, they may not feel empowered to move toward a vision. Every individual must go through his or her own process. He or she needs to have the option to choose the vision, explore his or her fears, and then be heard. Implementing changes without choice creates resistance.

In regard to the PPCA, after we clarified our desire to collaborate with the ICF, an amazing thing happened. We were actually approached by the ICF! We were informed that their Board of Directors had also envisioned the ICF and the PPCA joining forces as one organization. The ICF's membership had voiced a strong opinion to have one coaching association for the industry.

The Board of the PPCA adopted a resolution to dissolve. This decision was enthusiastically approved by membership and, soon after, the strengths of the PPCA joined with the ICF to form the largest, most influential unified voice and support system for the coaching industry!

United, we were able to focus on a bigger vision. We explored the resistance that arose from this change, assessed the options for growth, and then responded with clarity and commitment. We created an organization that will build, support, and preserve the integrity of the coaching profession.

In the case of my bungee jump, the final step was to respond by choosing to jump. If I had not been ready to jump, I would have needed to start the process over again at the first step. But I was ready to break through my fear. I asked for the countdown, 5...4...3...2...1, and I jumped! I threw my whole body toward that tree and let out a big yes! I conquered my fear. I survived! I did something new and it felt great.

Coaching People to Respond *What will you do?"*

The final step to moving through resistance and the fear of change is to ask, "What will you do?" After coaching someone through the first three steps: (a) focus on the vision (What do you want?), (b) explore the fears (What's stopping you?), and (c) assess the options (What could you do?), now it is time for a choice.

You give people an opportunity to make a choice when you ask, "What will you do?" You will discover whether they are ready to make the change. If they are not ready, then don't force them. Bring them back to step one and revisit each step. Hold the space for them to experience each step. Eventually you both will discover what they need to embrace the changes they want.

There are times when we have to jump even when the butterflies are still flapping. That is part of building courage. By going through the first three steps we at least have investigated the why, what, and how before we take action. The only way to develop courage is by pushing through the fear. The more we use our courage muscle, the stronger it gets. People have a built in desire to stay in their comfort zones. When we challenge those comfort zones, we get outside of our box. This is when we usually get the results that we really want.

One way of supporting the client's actions is by setting up accountability and checking in with weekly appointments. The purpose of the appointment is to look at where the client is now and how the past week supported his or her vision. Accountability is part of the foundation of good coaching. Make sure that you get solid commitments of what action the client will take. Accountability does not put you in the role of taskmaster. You are simply there to support this person in his or her success. Having someone to check in with and to celebrate completion with is motivating and productive. Ask, "What will you do and how will I know that you did it?" Both of you should write down these commitments and follow up to make sure they are completed.

It Takes Courage to be Successful

To be more successful, we often must do things differently. What we have in life is the result of the choices we make every moment. To create a better future we must begin to see change as an opportunity and choose to live with courage and commitment.

Coaching people through resistance and the fear of change is an art that involves powerful questions, great listening skills, empathy, understanding, courage, and integrity. You will find that the more you use these natural assets the more they will develop. Developing courage will assist you and the people you coach to create a future that is more successful and fulfilling.

Conclusion

I am grateful for the learning I have gained from coaching many clients. The four simple steps of focus, explore, assess, and respond continually prove to be the fastest and most effective way to coach people through the resistance and the fear of change. In addition to this formula, a solid foundation of masterful coaching skills will greatly improve the effectiveness of these steps in your coaching. Keep in mind the following key points:

- Listen and observe the true needs of the person you are coaching.
- Focus on the agenda of the person you are coaching, not on your agenda for that person.
- Be curious. Ask. Listen. Seek to understand the person you are coaching.
- Be a role model for change. Exhibit the courage to voice your resistance and fears.

- Believe that the person you are coaching is naturally creative and resourceful.
- While you provide feedback and an objective perspective, the person you are coaching is responsible for taking the steps to produce the results he or she desires.
- Come from your heart, tell the truth, and notice the impact you have from being a great coach!