

Transforming a Culture Means Pushing Through Fear

...by Paul Terry

A power outage darkened our part of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, but my family felt safe enough to walk to a restaurant near our temporary flat. Returning home, I led us down a familiar but narrow dim path. Two shirtless and sweaty men with tattered pants and bare feet suddenly appeared, trotting toward us with machetes raised. They ran around me, past my son, and descended on my wife, patting her body to find money or jewelry. I still wonder at the noise that erupted from me — between a fierce lion and a raging lunatic. If not for my rapid-fire expletives, I doubt you would identify the appalling sound as coming from a human. I charged at the men and they disappeared into the night even faster than they had appeared.

In a distressed environment, you must charge ahead for what matters most to you — even if your views... may be in the minority or even downright unwelcomed.

Instincts I hope never to experience again showed me how fear mobilized me to fight. I'm pretty sure it was also fear that compelled them to decide on flight.

In my last *Practitioner* column I argued that situational leadership is required in health promotion because we all find ourselves in different circumstances relative to the interactions between individual behaviors and an organization's culture. What are

health promotion leaders to do in an environment where employees don't feel safe, much less supported? Having returned often to work in Africa over the years, I have 2 observations for those who want to play a role in culture change:

- If you want to influence a culture, you need to become ensconced in it.
- Working in unsupportive or unsafe environments means overcoming fear.

In a distressed environment, you must charge ahead for what matters most to you — even if your views about changing management practices, increasing break times, or limiting access to bad-for-you foods may be

in the minority or even downright unwelcomed.

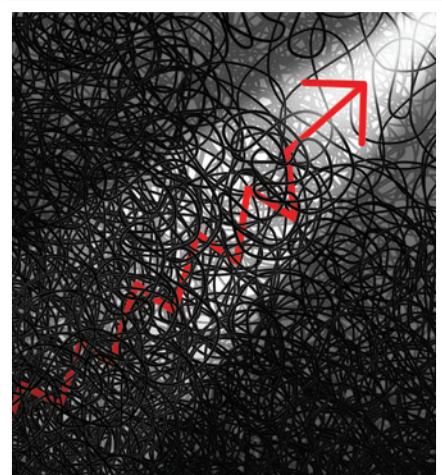
This column is adapted from an essay I wrote for the New York Mills Cultural Center. The question for their Great American Think Off this year was: "Love or Fear: What Motivates Us More?" It's a safe bet that those drawn to health promotion favor love over fear. My heart wants me to believe that love conquers all and that if we appeal to employees' higher-order needs,

leadership in health promotion



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somehow our enlightenment will be embraced by decision makers. But my experience that dark night affirms my view that Abraham Maslow was right to put our safety needs at the base of his famous pyramid of motivations. We may fear we'll lose support for wellness if we confront organizational norms. What's more, we may fear



we'll lose our jobs if we defy accepted practices. Legitimate fears? Yes and yes.

You're not alone if you'd rather avoid conflict. Fear is such a powerful motivator that it delimits action and serves as a catalyst for action at the same time. We see this daily in the

American workforce. Gallup polls show we have hit new lows in employee engagement. Why do countless people stay in jobs they don't love? It's because we fear unemployment and destitution more than we love the idea of risking a new venture or swimming against a dangerous current. This "bird in the hand" attitude is common. It's sad but true in our profession that we often see how motivated people are to change their lifestyle after a heart attack. The fear of losing everything is now viscerally real. Similarly, if we wait to act on our professional fears we may find that wellness programs perish under the weight of the culture anyway. We'll be left with regrets that at least we should have gone down swinging.

Offering and seeking a supportive approach to evoking change are the goals to be sure, but we get to that narrow peak of self-actualization by shoring up our broad base of safety and security needs. And how do we

know if the pyramid's base is shaky? It's when our fears simmer below ground. Surveys show most of us fear speaking up or speaking out as much as we would fear being sliced apart by a sharp machete. Confronting leaders or norms instills fears of being ignored, embarrassed or, most of all, retribution.

Overcoming our fears is part of stretching personal boundaries; it helps us learn and grow as professionals. Leaders who act as change agents are seldom popular.

Still, pushing through our fear isn't about risking everything all at once. High-performing athletes know about this — they love their sport and love to win, but it's their fear that drives them to excel.

My windsurfing speed record is an exhilarating, but scary, 26.2 mph. It was fear of a painful wipeout that drove me to lock in precisely enough to push

my physical limits. And, paradoxically, it is also fear that explains why I haven't gone faster. When elite athletes win, their reaction is often relief more so than joy... that is, we fear losing more than we love winning.

Pick a policy or practice in your organization that will stretch you but not break you. If it scares you without paralyzing you, you have probably found a fear worth confronting and a fight worth waging.

The morning after the attack I saw one of the men using his machete to rummage through garbage. It was in broad daylight with people around so I confronted him. I told him how much I feared for my family and others. Then I offered him a pair of my son's shoes if he would surrender his machete. Though I loved this poor man, it was my fear of him that motivated me much more. ☺

HIIT Work With Your Best Shot*

High intensity interval training (HIIT) is a workout scheme that's been around for a long time. But it's gained popularity in the last few years because ordinary mortals — not just elite athletes — have discovered it and experienced dramatic fitness benefits in 1/3 the time of the tired, overused, largely unsupported advice we've given clients for the last 20 years: Exercise 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week, blah, blah, blah....

The same principles — high intensity, short duration, moderate recovery, repeat — can be applied to cognitive training and work tasks to produce better results in shorter time. Try this:

- Set aside 30 minutes for HIIT-style work at a time of day when you're most refreshed — for many, that's

first thing in the morning, before the events of the day begin to wear on you, or after a vigorous morning workout.

- Select 2 items from your to-do list that would normally take 30 minutes each to complete, working at your normal pace.
- Set a timer for 3-minute intervals of work; 1-minute of recovery X 4 bouts.
- Start the timer and put your head down, working as quickly as you can on the first task. When 3 minutes are up, stand and daydream, clean your office, wipe down your whiteboard, whatever you want for 1 minute.
- Repeat the sequence until the task is complete or you reach 4 bouts — whichever comes first.

- Then move on to the second task and follow the same sequence.
- At the end of 30 minutes or so, take a quick, brisk walk to refresh.

Try HIIT-style work twice a week to start, and don't maintain it for more than about 30 minutes at a time. It will feel a little messy at first, but by your third attempt, you'll know what kinds of work fit the HIIT model — and just like physical training, you'll begin to find your cognitive stride.

*FREE Health Enhancement Systems T-shirt to the first reader to reference the '80s hit single and the artist who sang it. Email your guess quickly to carolinec@hesonline.com. ☺