



How 9/11 Influences My Approach to Managing Change

If you're like me, you remember exactly where you were and what you were doing when the attacks of 9/11 happened. How can we ever forget? That morning changed our nation-and our collective memory-forever.

And for me, a seminal moment occurred several months later, when I came face to face with those who were directly affected by the attacks-the mothers, the colleagues, the building owners and the children of those lost on that day.

This experience continues to influence my beliefs about the significant importance of implementing the right change management processes at the right time with the right people.

In 2002, the authorities responsible for the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site held a gathering of 5,000 New Yorkers with close ties to the 9/11 attacks to solicit their feedback on six design concepts for the rebuilding of the site. Attendees included family members of those lost in the attacks, real estate developers whose property was taken from them on that day, union representatives and political figures.

I had the incredible privilege of being asked to be a table facilitator at this event. I had no idea what to expect on that humid and overcast Saturday morning as I stood looking over the sea of empty tables that would soon seat over 5,000 people. But deep in my soul I knew that I was about to be part of something extremely important that would have major impact for New York City, the United States and the world. I also knew that no matter what feelings of resistance to change I had successfully helped people move through in my career up to this point, they would pale in comparison to what I would be challenged with that day.

As I watched participants enter the hall and rush to their seats, I noticed some-both men and women alike-wiping away tears streaming down their faces, others carrying union signs, and others all "suited up," representing their personal businesses or political parties. Several of each of these diverse types of participants sat themselves at my table. Several **immediately began to** talk to me at once, obviously unable to contain their emotions, which were so steeped in anger and hurt. One woman, barely able to breathe as she sobbed, attempted to tell me about the family member she'd lost. One man, his anger overtaking him, yelled at me-I don't remember his words. It was as though someone had taken the top off a bottle that was ready to explode and out it all came. I couldn't help but also truly feel the deep pain of each person as he or she spoke.

The Plan for the Day

The plan for the day was straightforward. First, each table discussed a series of intentionally ordered questions. The collective responses of the table discussion were entered into a laptop, and then collated by a centralized team. At timed intervals during the day, we were debriefed on the summarizations of the



table discussions via large screens. As a table facilitator, my role was to make sure that the discussions focused on answering the questions at hand, that all had an opportunity to voice their opinions and that each participant listened during the discussions so that no one person or "agenda" would dominate.

As each table member shared how he or she was personally impacted by the attacks and expressed a desired outcome for the meeting, a sense of community and uniformity was being built at the table. And that "one mind" was further built when all 5,000 participants were able to visually see their common desires and specific comments displayed in bold letters on a huge screen during the large group debriefing. I remember hearing statements such as "Hey, that's our comment" and "That's what we said" at my table several times throughout the day.

The Real Power of the Day

But the real power of the day came in the afternoon when history was changed. After strong, unanimous feedback from the 5,000 in the room against erecting the new buildings on the same footprint as the World Trade Center, city officials declared they would abandon the current plans and restart the design process.

This was the exact moment when all resistance from the participants melted away. The "shift" of mindset occurred and all were "on board" to move forward.

The 'Magic of Change'

So why did the shift occur in such a profound way? And in so short a time? The "**magic of change**" came for New York because **leadership listened - truly listened!** They listened to the emotions, the needs and the feedback. In the end, they did not abandon their original plans to build commercial **space on the site but** rather made adjustments as they were able and today a beautiful memorial with surrounding office buildings stands. And it was completed with full public support. Imagine the kinds of protests, demonstrations and sabotage that might have cost the city millions if officials hadn't listened!

Some of the changes that your organization is implementing will have the same types of emotional effects of loss for your people. Change for these folks won't occur because of the promise of more productivity or because of a decree of its use from leadership. They will have to want to change. And moving them to "wanting to change" is often no more than spending time listening to their needs and feedback.

The Power of Listening

Listening is the heart and power of excellent change management processes. Listening was never more needed than that Saturday morning in New York and it was beautiful to see its results. The process of listening to people's stories and hearing their concerns altered the course of those participants' thoughts, moving them from an "us vs. them" mindset to a "we can do it together" commitment!

Listening activities are now intricately weaved throughout the change management activities I execute. Listening is fully ingrained in the way I consult to leaders, their teams and individual contributors. And it will remain so because of what I witnessed that summer day in New York.

At Transformation Strategies, we are dedicated to helping you accelerate your return of investment and navigate through the implementation of transformational strategies and business processes. Learn [more](#).

