

Lessons from Egypt for those at the top

Like many, I find it fascinating what recently occurred in Egypt and is now spilling over to much of the Arab world. But while the dynamics of the political situation is interesting, what I really find compelling is how this all came about. If you have told Mubarak a few years ago that he would be bought down by Facebook and Twitter and satellite TV, I'm pretty sure you would have been taken as a nutcase. But isn't that what just happened? Satellite TV educated people about other countries and provided them another perspective on their situation. Facebook and Twitter allowed people to connect, communicate and organize. And the next thing you know we have a revolution fueled by social networking and technology.

I believe senior leaders in many of our organizations would be well-advised to take note of all this. After all, what's happening in many organizations these days? To start with, many employees do not trust the information given them by senior managers (latest figures suggest that just 32% of employees believe senior management communicates openly and honestly). Add to this the fact that, according to the Conference Board, 64 percent of workers under 25 say they are unhappy in their jobs and perhaps we have the makings of a revolution. What would happen in an organization if all these young, unhappy workers connected with each other, started to rally around a common vision of change and organized themselves along the same lines as the Egyptian people did? What if they demanded an end to unhealthy and unsustainable organizational life, an end to disconnected senior leadership, and end to a disengaging work climate? What would happen then?

Now some might say that this is a totally far-fetched idea and perhaps it is. Perhaps the disenfranchised young people would just leave the organization and go elsewhere. Perhaps they just wouldn't care enough to try and change the organization. But what if they did? What if they actually connected and tried to change the very thing that was causing their discontent. What then?

It's worth contemplating – particularly if you're a senior leader. As the Egyptians have shown us, great things can happen when people unite around a common cause. And with technology these days, such unification is easier than ever. Such change need not be directed towards the overthrow of dictatorial or hierarchical leaders. Perhaps instead events in the Arab world can show us a different way to implement organizational change – and the right and the wrong way to respond to the people's demand for change.

The key to change is not a series of "change management courses." Rather, it is a matter of allowing people to connect with each other in ways that perhaps have been suppressed (or at best tolerated) in the past. Senior leaders should be facilitating (not controlling) communication between their young employees, they should allow people to talk, to connect, to engage, they should sponsor events in which young employees get together and talk without censorship about the organization.

To do this requires courage and a willingness by those at the top to abandon the pretense of control. This kind of change can rapidly become organic and follow an unpredictable path. And in such circumstances the only control left to those in charge is the previously articulated vision. You'd better hope this vision is the rallying point – if not those in charge of their unhappy workers could, in short order, find themselves chased out of town. Just ask Mubarak.