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The New Change Journey

My work life revolved around change management, including numerous complicated software and business systems implementations. Implicit with any field is taking every opportunity to update our thinking and perspective. Recent studies have provided greater insight into why some change is/was so hard, and what is required to facilitate any conversion. Liminality, briefly discussed in January's newsletter, is a significant tool for project management and change agents. The concept has contemporary application for today's business world, with contract workers, temporary teams, international teams, and the use of outside services. Everything is fluid, even ambiguous, complicating the process of bringing everyone through the learning and acceptance curve.

Types of Change

There are four levels of change.

1. **Evolutionary** - Most LEAN initiatives focus on incremental (evolutionary) change, which is frequently logarithmic. Automating a process is an example, gaining volume and productivity.

2. **Transformative** - significant change of A into B. Installing new Enterprise Systems or automated production lines are examples of transformation. LEAN initiative's dip into transformational (promise of exponential) change but using re-engineering methods is integral to the project.

3. **Disruptive** - disruption means that future circumstances will profoundly change, and introduce significant elements of potential opportunity and risk. The digital revolution and automation are examples.

4. **Uncontrolled collapse** - This type of change splits complex systems into suboptimal fragments. They may be able to function on their own, even while connected, but at the expense of the total. They may eventually splinter away and become independent, or stop working. The American political system is a prime example, but enterprises also suffer the fate of gridlock, and the inability to deal with issues critical to success and survival. Losing sight of mission and purpose are common causes. Other reasons are inadequate or fractured governance processes, greed, disparate systems, and business philosophy.

   Collapse may be the result of uncontrollable or random circumstances where the mission is unclear, or an unrecognized force growing in strength with companies failing to respond. An example is the rapid rise of on-line businesses resulting in the collapse of box stores.

   Reassembling fractured subsystems is extremely difficult. The problem is that unintended consequences intervene and the objectives spiral out of control. Persons viewing uncontrolled collapse often shake their heads at the inability of participants to see the problem. Change complexity forces us to deal with increasingly complicated issues, but first, we have to recognize situations for what they are.

Normalcy bias

The normalcy bias defines how difficult it is for people to comprehend significant, clear and present dangers. In situations counter to personal beliefs, experiences, or desired outcomes, we deny that disastrous results are possible. In reality, bad things happen to people and companies all the time. No one is immune.

Understanding this phenomenon is a significant component of our response to change. Dealing with change is not about technology. It is about how people perceive and deal with change.

Project Teams

Connected through Smartphone's, people instantly interact. Worker's bond into loosely coupled and temporary teams and members want to be involved in meaningful ways. Leaders must take additional effort to help team members and associates deal with complex and fast-paced change. Doing so requires reviewing the project team process and continually updating our process management structures.

There are multiple project models. The common objective is the rapid deployment of the technological solutions. Studies conducted on liminal thinking, portals, and transformation indicates we need to shift our focus from technology to people.

While this paper discusses the method at a project level, it applies to us all. The purpose is to help deal with new concepts and ideas that are difficult to understand, complex in nature, or counter to prior learning and habits. When people understand what and why actions are required, the buy-in provides the positive energy to implement the technological solution. Executive team members, as individuals, must grapple with the complexities, break old thinking patterns, and develop new business paradigms.
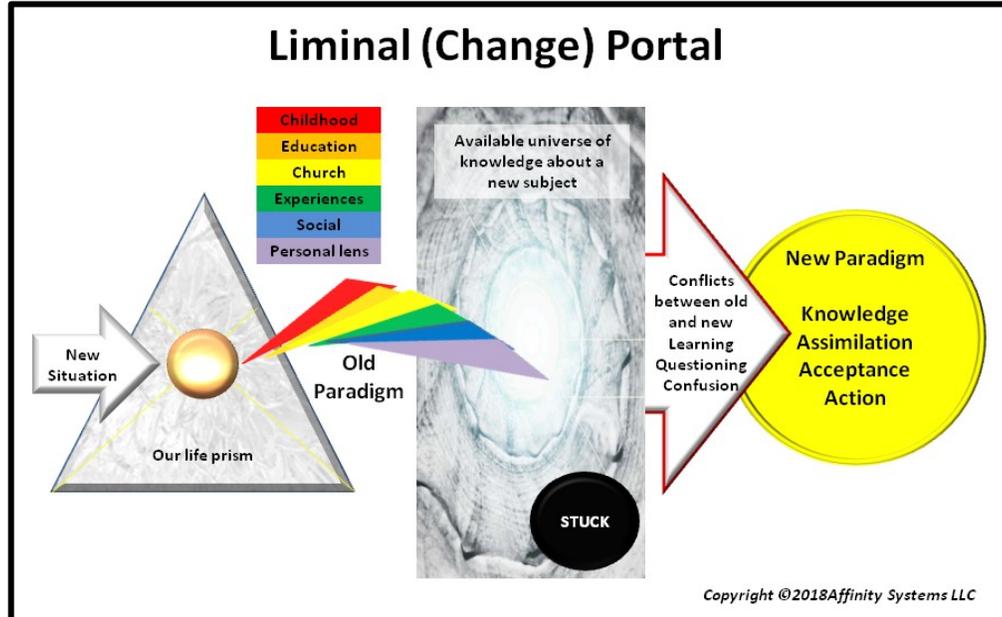
Liminality

Liminality is a portal or doorway between the past and future where the situation demands rethinking what we feel and know. It is consciously dealing with the personal consequences of new knowledge. The concept applies to all learning processes, but today, it has increasing application to group endeavors.

In the early days of computer technology, information processing was not a credited offering. Lacking technology workers, IBM, the leader in business computers, expanded their internal training classes to include customers. It was the only way to get enough programmers and analysts to grow a customer's business, and therefore, their own. (It worked brilliantly). Attending these elite classes provided a solid foundation for my future. IBM called them intensive training, and they were brutal. Classes lasted a week. Subjects were a progression, requiring the successful completion of each step, qualifying for the next. Breakfast was at eight, class from nine until five/six, followed by at least three hours of homework. Completion of each assignment was mandatory, or you went home. The attrition rate was very high, and every emotion was tested, but at the end, we learned, changed, succeeded, and celebrated.

While the term was not in vogue, IBM was pushing, leading, and facilitating our liminal transformation from the current to a future state, using a concept long employed by the military - force-feed a new knowledge reality.

Bridging the Abyss

Future

Current-Liminal Journey

Past

Liminal Depression

⬇ Stuck
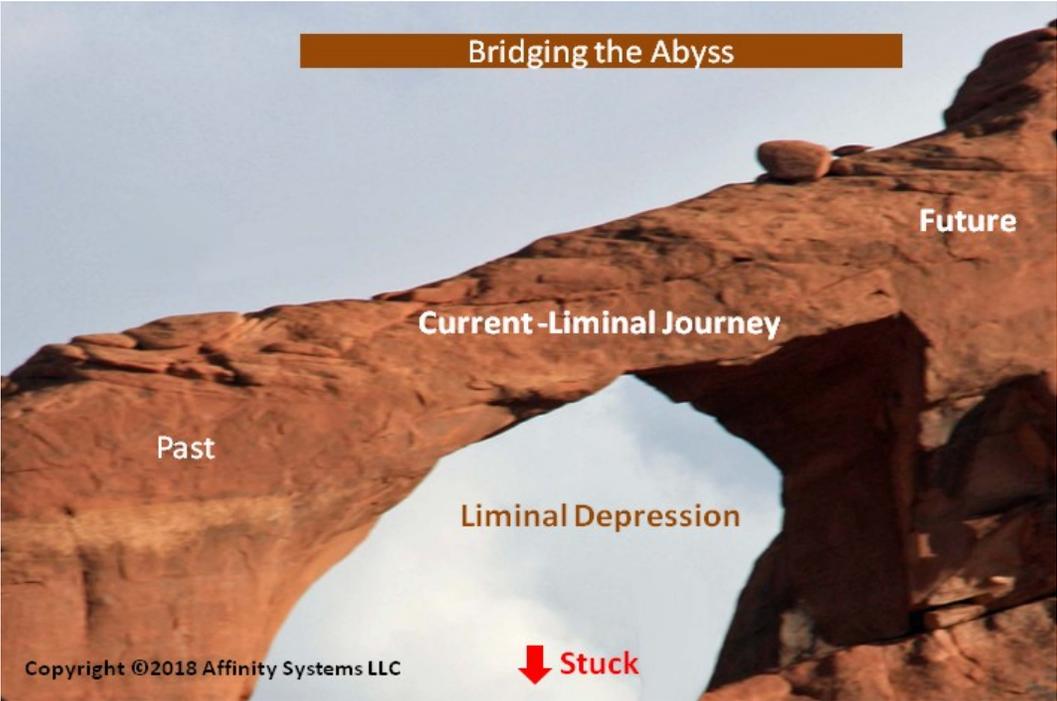
The following graphic illustrates the concept.

Liminal (Change) Portal

Everyone is unique but programmed by the past. Our childhood, education, religion, life experiences, social interactions, and personal bias all determine how we see and interact with the world. When thrown into a new situation, we react from this base. We do not know what we do not know. The process we face to acquire and deal with new knowledge is a liminal portal, a place where we may be confused, uncertain, afraid of the consequences, or fear our shortcomings. Often, it requires changing bias and even belief systems, an unsettling process. There is always a danger of getting stuck, unable to deal with the new reality.

The higher the level of change complexity the harder it is for people to transition across the portal, and form new paradigms. Leadership is responsible for bringing teams members through the portal, together if possible. When everyone is on the same page, it results in team unity and project focus. Reassign those members unable to cross the portal.

My military background says, "leave no-one behind." Because of the implicit impact on another human, we need to make extra efforts to help people cross the liminal portal. When they cannot get there, we need to help them find a way to succeed, perhaps in a different part of the project.
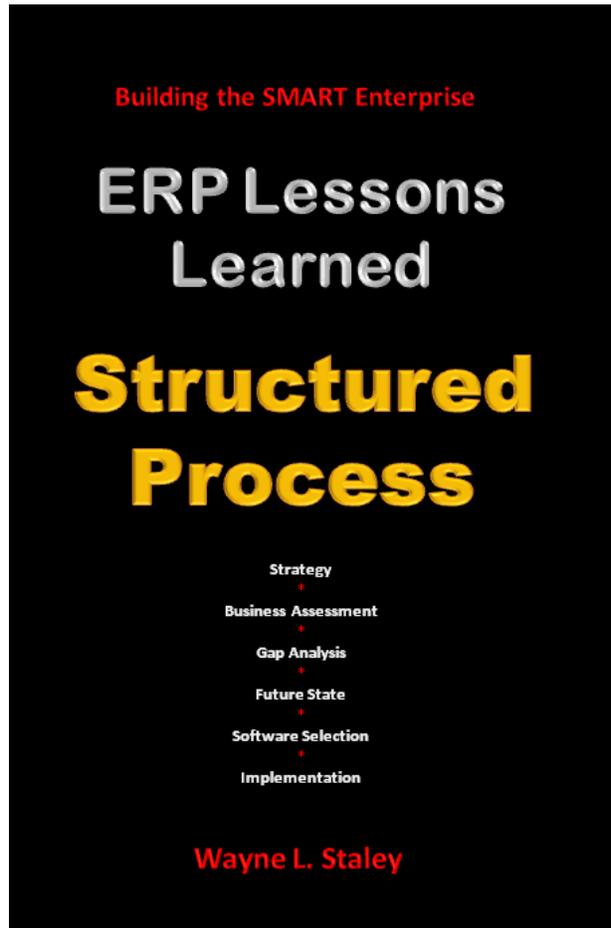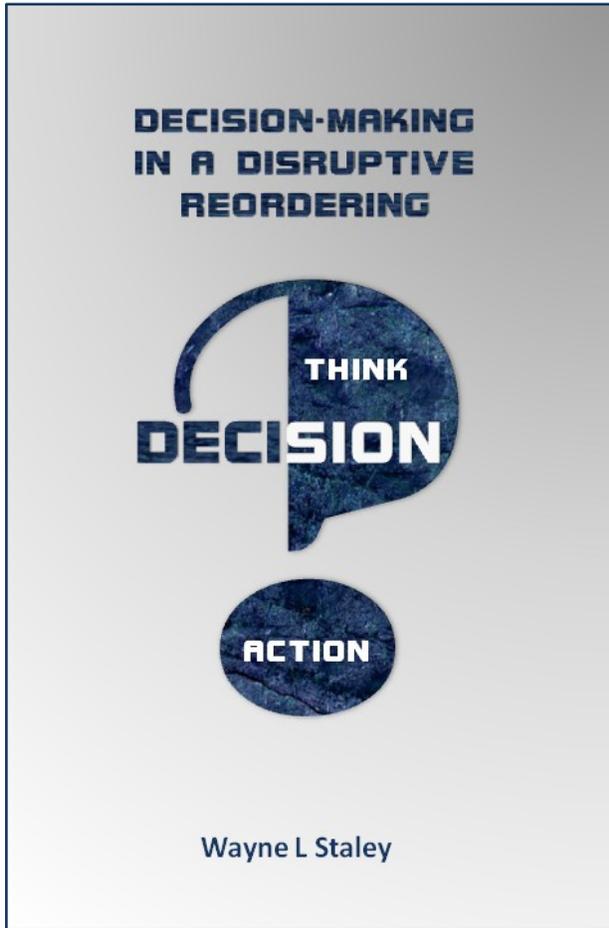
Best regards,

Wayne L Staley

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