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The Sad Side of Change

by Dr. Mike Armour

Change is never without trade-offs. Something is gained. Something is lost. And loss always involves sadness. Which is one reason we resist change. We don't like the sadness it brings.

We might be losing familiar routines. Or familiar surroundings. Or we might be giving up working relationships with people we enjoy. People we love. Or we might be forsaking long-cherished dreams in order to pursue a new course for the future.

Whatever the loss, we need to admit that it entails sadness. The sadness won't go away simply because we ignore it. We either deal with it forthrightly. Or we run the risk of having it go underground to sabotage the change itself.

Weighing the Trade-Offs

When I decided to run for Congress, friends often asked how I would feel if I lost. But the possibility of defeat was never a worry for me. I had a great life before the campaign. In the event I lost, I would return to a great life, enriched by the experience of the campaign. So from the standpoint of having a great life, entering the race was a win-win proposition.

My major concern was how I would feel about winning. A life in Congress would force wholesale change. Wholesale trade-offs. You can immediately anticipate some of them. The loss of privacy. Large blocs of time away from family. Losing optimal freedom to set my own schedule.

Then there were other trade-offs that others might think trivial, but which for me were major. High on the list was my love for reading. It's not unusual for me to devour two or three books a week. Congress would hardly afford me that degree of leisure. Nor would it allow me to continue many wonderful volunteer commitments I enjoy. And time for my church would be reduced to a minimum.

There was a distinct sadness with each of these trade-offs. So I built a list of all the things I would be "losing" to serve in Congress. I looked at each one individually and asked, "Am I willing to give this up in exchange for what I may be able to accomplish in Congress?" Only when I made peace with the trade-offs did I announce my decision to run.

Grieving the Loss

But I did one thing more which was equally critical. I granted myself a week to grieve the losses. To feel sad about the things I was giving up. To admit that I was perhaps leaving them behind forever.

I didn't hide from the sadness. I didn't deny it. I just let myself experience it fully. Then, having processed the sadness, I was able to move beyond it and turn to the campaign with undiluted focus.

Since I did not prevail in the primary, the trade-offs proved only temporary. But had the story turned out differently, I'm certain that I could have welcomed the changes with enthusiasm. I came away more convinced than ever that effective change management should include a process for coping with the sad side of change. It's always there, lurking in the background. We need to bring it into the foreground and deal with it.

Listing the Trade-Offs

When you find yourself resisting change, even resenting it, assume that some underlying sadness may be fueling your resistance. Take out a sheet of paper and create two parallel columns. On the left side of the paper list all the things you stand to lose as a result of the change. Next, in the right column list all the things you will position yourself to gain.

Now, study the two lists, evaluating the trade-offs one by one. Determine if the benefits of change indeed offset the losses. If they do, you've built the case for change.

But before you launch in this new direction, pause long enough to lament the losses. To process the sadness. You don't need to spend weeks in this endeavor. A few hours, perhaps a few days are usually more than enough. But having processed the sadness, having put it behind you, you're free to embrace the change with genuinely open arms. To move forward unencumbered by gnawing regrets

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