

## Shoes and Change

*"It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's the place in between that we fear."*

Marilyn Ferguson

How ironic – I was doing a workshop on change and the new shoes I was wearing were killing my feet. Although my mouth continued to talk, my brain was otherwise occupied – calculating the amount of time left before the break and an opportunity to take my shoes off!

You may not be aware that trainers and speakers care a lot about their feet. There's nothing worse than having your feet give out before the time allotted for your program. I've found it's the shoes that make the difference. The shoes that were causing me such agony had been carefully chosen. They were manufactured by a company that had provided me with fool-proof, comfortable shoes for the last five years. The leather was soft and pliable. I had worn them around the house, several times, attempting to break them in. When I pulled them out of my suitcase that morning and put them on they felt fine. It was during the three city block walk to the meeting location that I had my first clue that I might be in trouble. If only I could take them off, but the truth is, a presenter in her stocking feet loses credibility. So, I gritted my back teeth, kept the smile on my face, and continued.

Assuming that you're quickly tiring of my shoe saga, I'll get to the point. Sometime in the future, you'll need to deliver a change message. It may be a performance appraisal, a learning session, or the kick-off for a change initiative. If you're doing your job as a leader, each change message you deliver will contain suggestions, ideas and maybe pointed directions for new, desired, maybe even mandated behaviors. Changing an entrenched behavior is like throwing away an old comfortable pair of slippers for a brand new, stiff pair of shoes. If the behavior change is your decision rather than an idea of the people you're leading, it's like asking them to wear a pair of shoes they didn't even get to shop for. How have you prepared for the breaking-in period?

Most of us, faced with sore feet, will slip back into an old pair of shoes. I know I have. People trying out new behaviors feel awkward, uncomfortable and ill-at-ease – emotions that aren't pleasant. No wonder that behavior change is difficult. If nobody pays attention, why not just slip back into the old patterns that are so well known, so comfortable, and so easy? The real job faced by leaders (that would be you) during times of change isn't delivering the message; it's how you intend to coach during the behavior break-in period.



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This coaching may be **your** new tight-fitting-shoes behavior change. Here are a few hints to help you be a better coach.

- The first 10 days will make or break the change. If a person never actually wears the shoes, the shoes or the behavior will never become comfortable.
- Describe the desired behavior in as much detail as possible and with as much enthusiasm you can muster. (Glimpses of fun wouldn't hurt either!)
- Stay close to the people who are trying to change and give them a steady stream of effective feedback.
- Reward the person who's trying to change with verbal and written encouragement as you see them try.
- Don't ignore the person who isn't trying. They're hiding and if you don't get them to wear the new shoes, they'll never become part of the change effort.

Remember my session on change and the shoes that started all this?

The audience was eager to participate and I stopped thinking about my feet and refocused my attention on our time together. After the program, as I was putting my materials away, I realized that my feet didn't hurt anymore. I had survived the breaking-in period and was rewarded with

a new pair of wearable work shoes. Every once and a while, not having an alternative is a good thing!

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