

Cook & Company Commentary

Fall 2002

What Happens at an "Inflection Point?"

By Gary M. Cook

The concept of *Coaching at the Inflection Point*TM seems to resonate with many of us. As James Kouzes and Barry Posner recently said: "Stuff happens in organizations and in our lives. Sometimes we choose it; sometimes it chooses us. It is unavoidable. What is important is the choices you make when stuff happens. The question is, when opportunity knocks, are you prepared to open the door?"

A friend of mine who is a cardiologist always has a session with his patients after he has installed a pacemaker. The patients are interested in how the pacemaker is performing. However, they are even more attentive to suggestions about improving their lifestyle so they might live longer. Why?

The combination of the proximity to death and the reprieve given by the pacemaker create the classic "teachable momentTM." Others call it a "window of understanding" that opens, however briefly. It is that "teachable momentTM," window of understanding, or what we call an "inflection point," that offers perhaps the most powerful opportunity to create behavioral change. For patients, it can be personal eating and exercise habits, but for individuals in organizations, it can be critical interpersonal behaviors, material improvement in which may spell the difference between advancement and stasis, between survival and dismissal. What happens at these moments, how do they create opportunities for change, and how can we best take advantage of them?

The pacemaker example gives some initial insight here. What appears to happen are three sequential steps:

1. Something happens that *cannot be ignored*.

For the pacemaker patient, it may be the result of having a cardiac "event," perhaps even a near-death experience. In the world of organi-

zations, it can be a negative event such as: a threat of termination; a performance review which moves one from a "high potential" category to "meets expectations;" or an off-hand statement about personal performance ("you are good, but contrary to what you think, no one around here sees you in the top 5% of performers"). But it can also be a positive experience, such as: "We want to promote you rapidly in the next five years," or "We want you to run the marketing organization even though you have always been in IT."

It can also be the result of an event outside the business environment, such as a divorce, death of a life partner or child, perhaps even a moment of extreme candor from a family member or close personal friend. Or it can be the result of something broader that impacts your work, such as a downsizing, a merger or acquisition, or an external competitive threat.

Whatever the situation, it cannot be ignored; we cannot, as we so often normally do, put it out of our mind easily. In other words, it *demand*s our attention.

2. That something causes us to realize that "I need to evaluate." What I need to evaluate is not always so clear.

- Is it something that is important to me now (perhaps versus what I thought was important)?
- Is it how people are seeing me now

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(perhaps as opposed to how I thought they were seeing me)?

- Should my goals be different (do my old goals need adjusting, or perhaps, do I *have* any goals)?
- Why I am still in the same job?

Or, it can be something else. Whatever the case is, it involves a perception that the “I” in one’s being needs to:

- Make some determination through a process of conscious thought, evaluation, comparison, or review— that, typically, *is unlike how I usually think about things.*
- Most likely, take some action based on that thought process.

It is very important to realize that we suspend our usual processes of thought at an inflection point. In some cases, we strive to become “consciously competent” where we have been “unconsciously competent or incompetent.” In others cases, we strive to become more self-aware, or even self-aware for the very first time in our lives. For example:

- A chief scientific officer and CEO in a small company realizes that many of his direct reports are not at all happy with what they call his micro-management leadership style — what he thinks of as merely applying the scientific method so that he can make rigorously-based management decisions. He begins to realize that science requires a much higher standard of proof, sometimes at the expense of speed of response, and that management

sometimes requires the exact reverse. He has a flash of understanding and tries from that point on to manage decisions in the scientific realm quite differently from how he makes those in the management realm.

3. I realize I have the energy and the will to make something different happen in my life.

Think about our New Year’s resolutions. Typically – and even though we know that in the past we have not always lived up to our resolutions – we feel energized and empowered as midnight on December 31st approaches, allowing us to make a fresh start. In fact, New Year’s Eve may be one of the few inflection point moments that happens to most of us, happens repetitively, and happens even if we haven’t fulfilled our past promises to ourselves.

This is the point at which we realize that we have not only thought about some important aspect of our life in a different way, but also realize that perhaps we have more ability to change than we thought, and perhaps further, that we actually have the energy to try to make that happen.

When this process takes place, a magical moment in time exists where we tend to suspend the usual rules about how we manage our life and thus we are open to new ways of viewing ourselves and others and to new standards of behavior. Simply put, these moments can create the conditions for introspection and desire for change that might otherwise not occur in an individual’s entire lifetime!

In the next issue, we’ll explore how to take advantage of these inflection points.

Last issue we talked about the consequences of the Enron debacle and other recent organizational suicides. For those of you who are interested in how Boards of Directors should interpret these events, I highly recommend an article by Jeffrey Sonnenfeld in the September, 2002 *Harvard Business Review*, entitled “What Makes Great Boards Great.”

Sonnenfeld argues that the essence of Board effectiveness is not in the rules and prohibitions Boards set, but in the way their members interact with each other and with their management teams. In other words, the author makes a convincing case that those characteristics of high performing teams – e.g., trust, respect, candor – are the characteristics that highly effective Boards possess. Worth a read!