

# Cook & Company Commentary

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**"Great leaders draw lasting lessons from transforming events."**

- Pasternack and O'Toole, quoted in *Strategy + Business*, Fourth Quarter, 2002, p. 92.

## How Do We Take Advantage of Inflection Points?

By Gary M. Cook

### Our Mission

To help individuals, teams and organizations reach their potential through innovative coaching, team development and management consulting.

### Cook & Company Areas of Concentration

Coaching

Assessments

Team Building

Consulting

Training

Workshops &  
Retreats

Mergers &  
Acquisitions

Ethical  
Performance

In our last issue we discussed what an "inflection point" is, what happens when it occurs, and why it is so important to take advantage of it.

In this issue we will look at *how* to take advantage of an inflection point.

To reiterate, an inflection point is a point in time when a positive or negative experience allows us to suspend our usual way of doing things, and to be open to new ways of thinking. It is also a time when we tend to have a heightened energy level and sense of will to do things differently.

However, behavioral change is very difficult under the best of circumstances, as most of us know all too well. How many times have we set a desirable goal for ourselves, one that requires us to behave somewhat differently, only to abandon our efforts when we are no longer infused with the power of the moment of our goal-setting? Does the ultimate disposition of any of our New Year's resolutions come to mind?

It is all too easy to fall back on our accustomed patterns, habits and behaviors. We are creatures of habit and we tend to gravitate toward the known and the comfortable. Conversely, we fear the unknown and the uncertain; we are insecure in new territory.

Typically, we need a push to get us over these uncertainties and fear. Inflection points can create the conditions for that push.

Great moments in history can occur when inflection points create a powerful response. Think of Kennedy's challenge to "put a man on the moon by the end of the decade," in response to the Russian announcement of its successful launch of Sputnik. Think of the Marshall Plan, created as a response to the devastation at the end of World War II.

Similarly, great moments can occur for individuals under such circumstances. A couple of examples from my own coaching files:

- Bill, a project manager who had been in the same department for ten years, upon being told that he was not likely to move anywhere else in the company, put together a new vision of what he wanted to do with the rest of his business career. Within six months, the same EVP who had told him he was unlikely to move placed him as the project manager for several important new product candidates.
- Marie, a key manager in a highly successful technology firm, is told that she will not become an equity partner in her firm because of highly abusive behaviors toward her fellow managers.

Within six months she has recast her goals, her style, and her behaviors, and is well on the way toward some type of partnership interest.

But there are a number of reasons why it is often difficult for individuals to take advantage of these points in time:

- We may not realize that we actually are at an inflection point, and try instead to deal with the situation using our normal behavior patterns. R. D. Laing talks about “scotomization,” or our ability to develop selective blind spots regarding certain kinds of emotional or anxiety-producing events. We can easily do that when an inflection point occurs.
- We sometimes may not recognize the power that an inflection point moment can have to help us change the way we have done things in the past.
- We may not be skilled in looking at all of the options available in response to the situation we find ourselves in.
- We may not be good at laying out the probable risks and results of new courses of action, both from ourselves and others, and thus may not pick the best course of action.

If we believe that in one or more of the above dimensions we may not be able to arm ourselves with the best answers, it is probably time to consult with a “coach” who can help create opportunity from the inflection point moment with which we are dealing.

Indeed, the use of a coach at this time is so important that we at Cook & Company have trademarked the phrase, “Coaching at the Inflection Point™.” An experienced coach, especially one who realizes the power of inflection points, can help identify the opportunity, sort the options, and unleash the energy of these moments. And even if we believe we have the

perspective to deal with each of the dimensions above, often it helps to have a third party review our findings.

However, even if you can’t find/can’t afford a coach, most of us can find a third party who can help. But what should you look for in such a person?

They need to be:

- Empathetic – that is, able to put themselves in your position and see the world through your eyes.
- Objective – not swayed by what you or others (or themselves) *want* to happen, but rather combine what you and others want to have happen with what is possible to achieve.
- Experienced – even if they are not a coach, someone who you know has seen these situations before and mastered them is likely to be much more helpful.
- Honest – often our biggest problem in these situations is that our heart won’t let us believe what our minds suggest is the truth. Therefore, we all need someone who can tell us the truth, and do so in a way we are able to handle.
- Logical – typically, you would like to have someone help you who can think through with you both the current situation and a plan of action, complete with some milestones along the way (“by the end of next month I want my boss to agree that I now do X, and this is how I am going to approach her”).

Remember, inflection points happen infrequently and those who succeed in life tend to pay attention to these points and master the ability to maximize the benefit of their response to them!

#### Next issue:

In our upcoming Cook & Company Commentary, we’ll talk about teams, their values, their effectiveness, and how to improve their performance. We’ll also discuss some valuable new tools we have developed to cost-effectively help assess team performance.

In the meantime, from all of us here at Cook & Company, have an enjoyable and healthy Holiday Season!

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