



JUSTIFYING INACTION WITH NEGATIVE FANTASIES

Ever make a suggestion and encounter only negative responses? Ever caught yourself responding to the ideas of others (or even to your own ideas!) with the same "impossibility" thinking?

Whether from weariness, fear, or the lure of complacency, we're all sometimes guilty of not taking initiative when it's appropriate to do so. Here are the 5 negative fantasies or myths we use to try to justify inaction, along with suggestions for out-thinking and overcoming each.

1) Nothing is Wrong: Preferring not to look under the covers, this one is usually heard when some form of assessment is suggested. If measuring customer satisfaction is suggested, the response is: "But our customers must be happy because they aren't complaining"; if an employee survey is suggested, the response is "But our employees must be happy because turnover is low". In response to suggestions that 360-degree leadership assessments be done, you'll hear: "But our quality of management must be good because what needs to get done is getting done"; or "We must be doing well because profits are up, dividends are being paid, etc." The fundamental premise here is that there is no apparent reason to assess, so why assess?

To discredit this myth, begin with the observation that absence of evidence isn't evidence of absence! We can't manage what we don't know, and no one is in a position of omnipotence. Just like preventive medicine costs less than medical treatment, it is better to be proactive than reactive. We must ferret out risk; identify vulnerabilities while they can still be prevented. The alternative is post-impact damage control.

Realize that if nothing is wrong, then that's all the more reason assess!

Being able to provide employees/shareholders/customers with documented evidence of just how great everything is will be a great PR move.

2) Something IS Wrong, but Shhhhh!: Typically propounded by those who

don't cope well with any form of confrontation, this myth typically sounds something like: "No one is screaming at the moment, and we aren't suffering any consequences at the moment, so even though we know that something is wrong, let's let sleeping dogs lie. And besides... who wants to be the one to point out that something is wrong?"

Beware of such faulty logic. It's like trying to justify never getting a physical check-up because you're not sick at the moment, or never taking your car in for service because it's running just fine right now!

The best way to debunk this myth is to acknowledge that the prospect of knowing the truth can indeed be frightening. However, as in the medical arena, early diagnosis always increases the likelihood of recovery, and usually reduces the cost of treatment.

3) Nothing will Change Anyway: This is the voice of the defeatist. "We've tried to initiate change before, but we always get shot down, so it's clear that our leadership doesn't want to change. In fact, we tried advocating change once several years ago, and nothing ever came of it."

It's true. Nothing will change - unless and until someone decides to step up to the plate and advocate strongly for what "should be". Someone must be willing to become the internal champion. If that person isn't you, who within your organization might you approach to discuss taking on this role?

Alternatively, don't hesitate to start by taking a few baby steps. Initiate change in one department or one subsidiary, or collaborate with your colleagues to pool your resources, and inaugurate change in just one topical area. It's hard to justify doing nothing when several people who want to improve are in alignment about the need for change.

4) It'll cost too much Money: Seemingly a very reliable excuse. I daresay that absolutely any initiative can be totally squelched by the voice that says: "Our budget is tight and we just don't have the financial resources."

While this may be accurate, it's all too often a myth that's offered as an excuse to halt needed change. When this is the case, the following suggestions may help expose or at least circumvent the myth.

First, could the cost elements involved in the suggested change straddle two different fiscal years? Or, could some of the necessary steps be completed by internal personnel rather than using a vendor? Could a bartering arrangement be negotiated with the vendor for a reduced fee or for in-kind services?

Finally, without dishonoring the very real need to wisely disperse scarce resources among competing needs, it's possible that the old axiom: "pay now, or pay more later" could be a sufficiently compelling argument.

5) Transition at the Top is Imminent: As an excuse for not taking on any new initiatives, this one is almost unbeatable: "Our President is about to leave; now isn't the right time for us to undertake anything new - not until the transition has taken place."

In fact, quite the contrary could be true. Conducting assessments before leaving the big chair demonstrates a fiduciary commitment to the organization; and the one who'll be taking over will appreciate having information that will flatten the learning curve and help in prioritizing new initiatives.

Rather than being deflated, disabled, or demoralized by these myths, learn to recognize them for what they are - negative fantasies created to justify inaction - and learn to refute them by using the counterarguments provided here. In doing so, you'll become one of the very few who can successfully steward forward movement in organizations rife with negativity.

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