By Johanna Lubahn

These days the corrosive power of fear is getting a good airing out. *Harvard Business Review* recently wrote about ten conditions that impede workplace improvement. Topping the list? *Fear of failure*.

Elizabeth Gilbert of *Eat, Pray, Love* fame has a new book, *Creative Living Beyond Fear*. She writes, “If you want to live any kind of creative life whatsoever, you’re going to have to cope with your fear. There’s a lot of serious fear-work that has to be done.”

Edward G. Brown of *The Time Bandit Solution* fame has long helped sales executives conquer their fear of rejection by exploring its deep sources. (Full disclosure: Brown co-founded the company I work for.)

Unspoken Fear on the Tip of the Tongue

So maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised by the results of our recent survey. After all, we hadn’t set out to research fear. We didn’t even use the word. We simply asked scores of executives, “In your experience, what is the number one reason that people resist company change initiatives?”

They went straight to fear! Eighty-four percent of our respondents used “fear” in their first sentence!

Why was I surprised by this readiness to discuss fear? Because when was the last time you heard somebody at the office openly admit to being afraid?
Instead, they euphemize their fears: *If I just give good service, customers will buy more. Our clients are really happy with what we are currently doing. I don’t have time to do it the new way. I think we should study this further.* In other words, they deny their fears. Why? To avoid censure or ridicule. Everybody knows there’s no crying in baseball and no fearing at the office!

And yet with a little probing, scores of respondents were speaking freely and at length about how scared executives are and why – as though it were the most natural thing to talk about. No doubt their openness was influenced by our promise of total anonymity, but the avalanche was like nothing I’ve encountered before. It was clearly a topic about which many had pent-up emotions and opinions.

You have to ask: What if it were safe for people in the office to admit their fears? No, not “admit.” What if they could calmly point out what they fear and why, confident that the fear would be calmly addressed in a business-like fashion? I mean, if they were getting a new system, they wouldn’t have to “admit” they needed to be trained on it. Everybody knows a new system means new training. If everybody knows change entails fear, why drive fear underground?

If workers can’t reveal fear, what happens to it? It doesn’t evaporate, any more than an untreated infection cures itself. Fear goes underground, skulking about disguised as some other kind of animal, crippling ambition, creating havoc for the leaders of change and hardening resistance among the fearful.

Each to His Own Fear

Recalling Tolstoy’s keen insight about families (*All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way*), a similar dynamic prevails in change initiatives: All the fearful are afraid in their own way. And their fears are usually a matter of self-image.
At the front line, whether it’s a new system or behavioral change, people fear what others (customers, peers, managers) will think when they see them struggling, slowing down, or making mistakes. They fear impatience on the part of the boss as they learn. Even with a patient boss and customers, they fear the loss of their self-image as they go from high-performers to learners.

And again, I want to stress what our respondents told us: It’s fear. It’s not any of those euphemisms that are unresponsive to cheerleading or coaxing. It’s fear cocooned in more “acceptable” objections.

Senior managers get to learn how to adapt in the privacy of their corner offices, with private coaches if they so desire. Only when the change requires a new set of behaviors, at odds with those that got them to their high positions, do they feel the fear of not measuring up. Then their resistance sets in.

But where does the rubber meet the road in any change initiative? Where middle managers live. That is why the fears of middle managers are different and potentially the most crippling for an organization. Middle managers only get some of the information that senior management has about the why and wherefore of the change, and yet they bear the greatest responsibility for getting it done. Not to infantilize bright adults, but can you remember a time in your childhood when your parents were away and a crisis arose that you had to face but were unprepared for? That’s a powerful recipe for fear – huge responsibility and not enough knowledge.

We often see this fear when top performers are promoted to management – to become managers of performers, no longer performers themselves. The top salesperson lobbies for the job of sales manager and gets it, then realizes, What I used to do doesn’t cut it now! If I go from top salesperson to failed sales manager, it will be in front of all these people who used to look up to me! Middle managers have no place to hide.
How many of them depart an organization after a change initiative saying, “It just wasn’t for me anymore,” when the truth was simply, “I have fears and don’t dare name them.”

A Blanket Approach to a Patchwork Problem

If workplace fears vary throughout the organization, then it follows that the organization’s approach to implementing change should vary as well. Does it? Our respondents ruefully admitted otherwise.

A typical response: We are scrupulous about taking time up front to hear from people. We ask them about their concerns, and we always learn a lot. They raise fears – I mean “concerns” – we hadn’t thought of. And then? Well, then we go ahead as planned – blanket approach, I’m afraid. Yes, as I say this, it does sound naïve, but it’s the same everywhere.

Converting Fear into Courage

Courage is “the ability to do that which frightens you.” If you’re charged with leading change, these steps can help you convert people’s fear into courage.

- Elicit people’s fears in a safe and structured environment. Don’t be afraid to use the word, and make it safe for them to use the word, too.

- People quail in the face of big risks, but can be coaxed to take lesser risks. If you know they fear for their self-image, have them first make changes that don’t endanger their self-image. We call that the Off-Broadway Principle. Stage your show where a failure won’t hurt. Correct mistakes before going big. Do this within 48 hours of making the change so that they immediately build confidence and experience.

- As they gain courage and reward from small successes, encourage them to take bigger risks. Let their success beget more success as their fear of failure subsides. Help them create a vision for how success will look.
• Don’t overlook re-training in the basics. When change happens, people tend to forget that many of the basics remain the same, so they abandon them on the way. You’ve seen it happen with a new sales technology, for example. It provides so much information and output that sometimes new users forget about the basics like eye contact, smiling, and etiquette with customers. Re-drilling on the basics reminds people of how much value they already bring.

• Everybody knows you need a good communication plan that you work consistently. But it needs to vary by audience. And it needs to openly address the fears you uncovered. To the front line: *We know your performance will slow temporarily – that’s to be expected. Here’s what we’ll tell customers as you learn the new process.* To middle managers: *Tell us what information you need to embolden you to embrace the change and support it openly.* To senior management: *Here’s how we will enable your learning.*

• Expect every person, at some point, to put on the brakes against change. We all know some people who are just naturally positive. It’s in their DNA to accept change, to roll with it, confident that they will come out in good shape. That’s true, and that’s why they are often selected to be the change agents in an organization. But beware. Change has a way of exposing deeply hidden weaknesses. When it happens to these people, they are poorly equipped to deal with it. Expect it, watch for it, and manage it when it happens.

• Keep fear in perspective. Acknowledge it, provide for it, but don’t accentuate it at the expense of improving. As the other co-founder of my company likes to say, “There’ll always be War, Pestilence, Famine, and Death. We still have our jobs to do, and with excellence.”

• Teach people to lessen their fears the same way they reduce dangers outside the office. Mountain climbers tether themselves to a buddy to ease the way over perilous chasms. Set up a buddy system for people to encourage one another through difficult change.
• When people must confront something difficult, they often display outward manifestations of fear (shaky voice and hands, a defensive tone, an apologetic posture). Reluctant to display them, they tend to avoid the confrontation. Better to teach them communication arts and skills to conquer these outward appearances. Change the physical and the mental will follow. Act fearless? Feel fearless.

• Create a daily plan so that you can tell each day if courage is indeed advancing and fear is indeed retreating. You want to keep this exercise from being an amorphous, uncertain effort with do-gooder intentions but little concrete reward. Break it down into specific steps: This is what I will assess today. Tomorrow we will focus on this specific challenge.

Remember, you are not just deploying your company’s change initiative. You are leading people to do more than they believed possible of themselves. You are helping them become the best that they can be, knowing full well that self-improvement in the workplace carries over into other important parts of their lives. Anais Nin wrote, “Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.” You are expanding people’s lives.

Johanna Lubahn works with companies in 20 different countries and uses Cohen Brown’s unique tools, methodologies and her consulting experience to generate results that impact the bottom line. Examples of bottom-line results can include: improvements in NPS scores, revenues and employee engagement. Contact details are Johanna_Lubahn@cbmg.com, +1 517 349 4066.