



Guiding Teams through Ambiguity

By Rabbi Andy Kastner

Inflection points are natural. They occur when something around us changes – the market, culture, perhaps the way in which communities define themselves. Inflection points are moments where adaptability is required in order to stay relevant, competitive and to meet the needs of a new era.

2018 marks the centennial of the Jewish Federation of the East Bay. 100 years is a natural time to look back, look around, and look beyond, to envision a future of what could be. As we look out and see a community that has changed dramatically, and, on the heels of our recent [Portrait of Bay Area Jewish Life](#), which gave voice to many significant trends and communal shifts, we are asking ourselves what changes we must make as an organization, not to survive, but to thrive and best meet the needs of enduring and emerging community needs. It is, for us, an inflection point.

This piece intends not to discuss the nature nor outcome of our inflection point, as we are still very much in it. Rather, I wish to share how ambiguity, the omnipresent by-product of inflection points impacts a team and offer reflections on how to navigate through it.

Understanding Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a powerful force. It is that liminal space between a realization that something has to change, and the final landing point that has not yet been identified. Within these two points lies a spectrum of possibilities. Ambiguity can impact our teams in a variety of ways. For some, it can be comfortable or invigorating, one that comes with a sense of potential, opportunity and creativity. While more commonly for others, ambiguity grips with anxiety and vulnerability. Setting a path ahead through an inflection point is not just about the strategy. As leaders we must also “say the thing” – hold the uncertainty, that is, acknowledge that with wayfinding comes ambiguity, and an awareness of its ability to impact our teams.

Bob Sutton, professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University, writes, in a piece entitled, "[How to Be a Good Boss in a Bad Economy](#)" "...in stressful times people have an acute – and often unmet – need for four remedies: **predictability**, **understanding**, **control**, and **compassion**."

These categories have been helpful frames to guide our own pathfinding through ambiguity.

Establish Predictability

Job Security – Within the ambiguity of an inflection point, it's natural for staff to feel like their job is at risk, either in the form of layoffs during a transition or as a result of moving an organization in a different direction. Remaining in a constant state of paranoia is surely eroding (not to mention it's negative effects on productivity and morale) and must be proactively addressed in periods of instability. One of the more famous studies on the importance of predictability during stressful times comes from Martin Seligman's signal/safety hypothesis (quoted in Sutton's article mentioned above).

"Seligman observed that when a stressful event can be predicted, the absence of a stressful event can also be predicted. Thus a person knows when he or she need not maintain a state of vigilance or anxiety. Seligman cites the function of air-raid sirens during the bombing of London in World War II. They were so reliable a signal that people felt free to go about their business when the sirens were silent."

While on a different scale than war time, of course, ambiguity can stoke fear similarly. Providing clear (as clear as possible) timelines or benchmarks of what to expect and when, as an inflection point unfolds, staff are more likely to feel safe, even if the situation will be unclear. For instance, if a supervisor is able to provide some assurance that there will be no staff reductions for a specific period of time, staff can breathe easy, that they are secure for the defined period of time, even if, at the end of that time period they may be at risk.

However, commitments of job security are not always an option. Another approach of establishing predictability is to communicate calendar benchmarks that impact both the work of the organization and the change process. For example, one could say, "we will provide consistent and stable services for the first two quarters of the year. By early spring we seek to have identified distinct directions for where we are headed."

Show up and be around – These are both important and not always the same thing. Leaders are busy and at times need to be offsite. It's critical to make time to be present at the office to be seen and to be available. Not all of the important encounters that we have with our teams are scheduled or planned. Some staff may just need a 5 minute impromptu check-in to be reassured. Others may benefit from just seeing you, physically present, just like everyone else, doing the work amidst uncertainty.

And show up. That means, not just in body, but ensure that you have enough in the tank to be intellectually and emotionally available. Often, leading through ambiguity requires a pastoral nature. A commitment to showing up and being around, provides the predictability of presence.

Foster Understanding

As the change process unfolds, we are all seeking to understand what is happening, why change is needed and what will be. Fostering understanding, even if all of the information is not available (or appropriate to share), cultivates trust, and some sense of *terra firma*. As best as possible, leaders must explain why the changes you're implementing are necessary. Create consistency of communication, offered simply and clearly. We often hear what we want to hear, or misunderstand when the circumstances are particularly complex. This is especially true in times of ambiguity.

Be willing to invite more people to the table than you might normally. While expanding the circle can foster enhanced understanding, it does not mean that everyone has a vote or a veto. Those who are new to the table may be invited to contribute, or are present simply for the sake of their own learning. Remember, it is often those who know the most about the organization who are the least likely to be asked what they think (and are often the most vulnerable). This is an exercise in trust building. While discretion is often essential in sensitive decision making, we must beware of the back room deals and the impact of closed door sessions. It is the fuel of the fire of ambiguity.

Create Conditions for Control

People feel frustrated or unsafe when they don't have a certain level of control. Ambiguity, in its very nature, is a situation that can make the acquisition of control evasive. In these periods, while we may not be able to enable our teams to determine *what* happens, we might be able to provide some agency

on *how* or *when* something is to happen. Offering this reframe from *what*, to *how* or *when*, however subtle this distinction may be, shifts our focus from the big looming question, to smaller, achievable benchmarks. Easy wins. Doing so can create not only an enhanced sense of control, but the conditions for creativity or appropriate risk taking.

Embody Compassion

Ambiguity can deeply impact the way that colleagues relate to one another. With dis-ease in the air, alliances are forged, and suspicion percolates. It is within this that trust must be affirmed, fortified and compassion must reign. Compassion can take on many forms. At its heart it is an expression of generosity – a willingness to offer empathy, help, and a sense that we are in it together. Compassion is deeply relational and it is the force that draws people closer together.

What it's all about

There is no doubt that navigating inflection points and the ambiguity that comes with it is not easy. Indeed it comes with some highs and potentially many lows. It could signal a new beginning, or the beginning of the end. Yet, perhaps the greatest and most enduring offering that we can extend to our teams is to nurture within them the capacity to open up a consciousness of the process of change, and, an orientation to the ambiguity of change that is devoid of fear.

For me, Ram Dass said it best, [in a talk delivered in 1995](#) where he discusses the development of spiritual practices and the cultivation of compassion. "When you look at the way change affects people that are unconscious – change generate fear, fear generates contraction, contraction generates prejudice, and ultimately violence. The antidote is the consciousness that does not respond to change with fear."

As leaders, this is our mandate and a path for how we may hold our teams and hold each other through ambiguity.

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