

# When a Classroom Revolt Is a Good Thing

By Kerry A. Bunker

DURING MY FORMATIVE YEARS as a trainer and facilitator, I worried a great deal about providing a comfortable and safe environment for executives to learn and grow.

I worked hard at keeping them happy and engaged, and I was particularly pleased when their daily diaries spoke about how much they were learning, and how wise, insightful, and likeable their trainer was. My lurking fear was always that a few of them might openly express dissatisfaction with the experience or reject my style. Above all, I didn't want them to rebel against my methods or test my control in the classroom.

But sometimes life has a way of presenting us with experiences that test our fundamental assumptions and reshape our paradigms. For me, one such moment came during the mid 1990s when I was leading a series of week-long programs for senior executives in the Canadian Federal Public Service.

The government was enmeshed in a major restructuring and the first large-scale downsizing in its history. We were charged with developing a process that could raise the level of leadership awareness surrounding the emotional consequences of these events.

We began with the core assumption that elevating the level of authentic emotional competence requires an inside-out learning process. Thus, we created a week of experiential intervention where the executives would encounter real-time exposure to a disruption that provokes the sense of loss and violation that is part of significant change and transition. In effect, we created a learning space where leaders were required to wade in the emotional water of a typical change event. The design worked. Boy did it work!

Participants in an early offering of the

program included top-level leaders from diverse departments across the organization. There were military generals, assistant deputy ministers, and two union presidents. They were a savvy lot that was long on experience and not shy about expressing their opinions. But, to our surprise, they had a strong and seemingly immature emotional reaction to the restructuring we injected into the week.

Led by one of the generals, the entire class revolted in opposition to the change. They vented feelings of anger, hurt, violation, and an open distrust of the staff. While they acknowledged being a bit childish in refusing to sit at new tables, they nevertheless remained resolute in their resistance. Even more troubling, they questioned our capacity to re-earn their trust in the time that remained. To make matters worse, the union presidents stepped up to *organize* a total-class walkout from the program—unless we allowed them to return to their pre-change status.

My initial reaction (and that of my team) was that the impact was far greater than we imagined and that things might be on the verge of falling apart. We spent the night debating how to respond to their demands and whether we needed to defend our intentions for the change process. As dawn broke on the new day, our approach was to *trust the process* and stay in the moment with our participants. We allowed, the venting, resistance, blaming, and, yes, even the revolt to run their natural course. Over time, the participants reconciled their intense emotions, squeezed powerful lessons out of the rebuilding process, bonded as a leadership collective, and came to believe in us and in the importance of the intervention.

Far from being the beginning of the end, the insurrection was the genesis of powerful professional growth. There were many such weeks to follow, all

unique in texture but all alike in the depth of mutual learning that was unleashed. We had indeed created a safe place for the human impact of change to be experienced, expressed, and examined. Senior executives peeked beneath their leader masks and exposed the feelings and emotions they found hidden inside.

For my part, I learned that asking leaders to take this path of learning required that I be more than simply a trainer or observer—I needed to be a fellow traveler willing to take and facilitate the journey with them. **Remaining detached, becoming defensive, dismissing the strong reactions, attempting to reassert control, blaming the participants, or trying to speed up the process are all dead-end streets, just as they are in leading real-world change.**

Instead, you must be an active co-learner capable of showing vulnerability and strength at the same time. You must own responsibility for the events that trigger their discomfort, while simultaneously facilitating and nurturing the leadership lessons that emerge once that emotion is harnessed. Likeability be damned! Your charge is to be an authentic and emotionally competent facilitator who can live in the moment, wade in the water, and model the process for others.

Sometimes a revolt is a good thing.

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