

Open to Change

By Jason Bader

Before the end of the year, my business associate Marshall and I got together to do a podcast on what we had learned over the course of this highly irregular year. Rather than dwell on the negative aspects, and there were certainly many of those, we chose to focus on the positive things we heard from clients as they navigated the ever-shifting currents of COVID-19. As a part of the distributor groups we facilitate, Marshall usually starts the meeting by asking participants to share a word that describes their work environment. This is very analogous to a therapist asking how a patient is showing up for today's session – not that I would know anything about that. These one-word answers will often set the tone for the meeting and give everyone a chance to have their thoughts heard. As you can well imagine, the word *change* was often uttered over the course of these sessions. What was intriguing was not that the word came up, but rather the context around change.

Before I get into the meat of the article, I did want to share some of the other words that we encountered. *Resilience* was a common theme. As I have shared many times in the past, distributors are a resilient lot. We rise to the occasion and find ourselves to be to be street fighters rather than precision strategists. To no one's surprise, *adaptability* was another common thread. When faced with a brick wall, we look to the left, the right, under and over. Sometimes, we even punch a hole right through the center. *Creativity* was another word of the year. In my 30 years of working in distribution, I would have to say that solutions were created at an astonishing rate. Prior to the pandemic, had we ever even heard of "contact-free delivery" or "curbside pickup"? Certainly not from wholesale distributors. Many of us heard the word *allocation* when trying to fill the shelves. Now this may not have been a new word, but it something many of our team members have not encountered in their relatively short career. We also heard the word *connection*. Isolation and physical barriers made us realize how important interaction, both personal and professional, really is. Even if we don't realize it, peer collaboration is more than a want – it is a need. But the most interesting for me was *change*.

We have all been excited to implement some new process, program or even product in our business only to have a contingency of employees fight this change tooth and nail. No matter what golden justification we shared, this group dug their heels in and slowed our path to progress like a 500-pound anchor. In some cases, we found ourselves so frustrated that we simply gave up and returned to the status quo. Live to fight another day.

Why are these folks so resistant to progress? Perhaps they don't see it as such. Progress may mean additional effort in instability. It may require additional education or skill sets. It may require financial investment at a point where future income is uncertain. These are all valid reasons. Perhaps there are generational conflicts and a simple dislike of those trying to implement change. There is fear of the unknown and their ability to measure up. Again, these are all valid reasons. But then, 2020 came roaring in and we experienced an unlikely biproduct – forced change.

Change was all around us. No longer could we do business, or life, in the same way. For business travelers like me, our flight plans were grounded. We couldn't go grab lunch at our favorite restaurants or that slide in for that caffeinated reprieve when day wasn't going as expected. Rituals changed. Recreation changed. Holidays changed. It was, and sometimes still is, uncomfortable to say the least. But we changed as well. We became more accepting of protocols and found different ways to interact. Our needs were met if perhaps our wants were not. Change just became part of our normal existence.

The impact of these forced changes has given us a window of opportunity if we choose to recognize it as such. Our most staunch resisters to change in our organizations were not immune to the upheaval of 2020. They were forced to adapt in their daily lives and many of them realized that they were no worse for wear. They were able to adapt and their world didn't collapse. This forced change in their personal life had created an opening in their professional life. Many of our participants shared that they had witnessed a diminished resistance to change in co-workers that had been the biggest barriers to progress. Wearing masks and ordering take-out had brought about something that no amount of coaxing, persuading, or threatening has been able to accomplish before. The door to progress had been opened a crack. It is up to the leadership to jump on this phenomenon.

Are there back burner projects just waiting to see the light of day? Have you been putting off e-commerce, barcodes in the warehouse, digitizing your AR process, or a whole host of high-efficiency enhancements? We may have just reached the tiny window of smooth implementation. Ok, that may be a stretch. How about a window of implementation with less hair loss and Maalox consumption?

I challenge you to look around your organization. Identify those who have been most resistant to new ideas. Has their behavior changed? Are they more or less resistant to change? Small procedural improvements may be nothing to bat an eyelash at. Seize this window because you never know when it may just slam shut. Good luck and I look forward to your ideas becoming reality.

About the Author:

Jason Bader is the principal of The Distribution Team. He is a holistic distribution advisor who is passionate about helping business owners solve challenges, generate wealth, and achieve personal goals. He can be found speaking at several industry events throughout the year, providing executive coaching services to private clients and letting his thoughts be known in an industry publication or two. Last year, he launched his first podcast, Distribution Talk. Episodes can be found at www.distributiontalk.com and through most podcast applications. He can be reached at (503) 282-2333 or via email at jason@distributionteam.com. You can find additional resources on his website: www.thedistributionteam.com