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A Lesson From Sherlock Holmes

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If you're leading a person or organization into change, never forget that some people want things done today as they have been in the past. Nobody illustrates this better than the ancient Pharisees who believed righteous people only hung around with each other. Because of this Jesus stirred up controversy when he spent time with sinners.

The underlying problem involved the Pharisees assumption that behavior should continue into the present and future as it has in the past. They assumed their form of religion was the best and that Jesus, and all others, should conform to it. The Lord challenged their assumptions with a word picture.

In Luke 5:37-38 he said, "No one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins."

The rules his critics played by didn't allow for any changes in the existing system. Jesus made it clear that the old system could not contain his message and the growth it would produce. Like Jesus' critics, all leaders establish ways of doing things. And like his critics, most haven't had anyone challenge the assumptions on which their behavior is based. Doing so often triggers resistance.

Because people may feel something is right before they process the information, analogies allow you to talk about the subject in a nonthreatening way. Its purpose isn't to prove the validity of a point of view so much as to open the listener to the possibility that a historical assumption should be reconsidered.

Learn a Lesson from Sherlock Holmes

Suppose you're trying to persuade some strategic players on your team to reevaluate and reprioritize the core values of the organization you’re leading.

"We've already done that," someone interjects.

"Besides, core values don't change!" another person points out.

You realize you're dealing with a group of individuals who have assumed once core values are adopted they're no longer subject to evaluation.

"But what if something was missed?" you ask.

"Couldn't have happened," a third person interjects. "Too much time and effort went into developing them."

You pause a moment and say, "I don't want us to fall into the trap that caught Dr. Watson in a Sherlock Holmes’ case."

Bewildered, everyone tilts their head and stares at you. Finally, someone asks, "What do you mean?"

You lean forward in your chair and say, "It was the case where Dr. Watson dismissed a dog as unimportant because it had done nothing on the night of the crime. Sherlock Holmes wisely noted that the significance of the dog was precisely that it had done nothing."

Your audience is unsure where you're headed. After a moment you smile and continue, "Sherlock Holmes realized the fact that the dog didn't bark meant the criminal must have known the dog. And that important fact narrowed down the list of potential suspects."

Having told the story, you make your point. "I think it's possible, just possible, that something may have been overlooked in the articulation of the core values. I'd like us to consider reviewing them once more to be sure they still represent us--and we represent them."

The purpose of that analogy wasn't to win an argument, but to overcome the resistance of your team to reevaluate the assumption that stated core values shouldn't be reexamined.

So the next time you’re leading others into change, remember to learn a lesson from Sherlock Holmes . . . or someone else whose story could loosen resistance.