

Saying Goodbye – What Leaders Need to Know

The parting leader's fundamental job is to create emotional room for the new leader.

By Ron Wiens

AT A GLANCE:

- ⊖ The success of a changeover of leadership largely depends on how endings and beginnings are handled emotionally.
- ⊖ Saying goodbye means acknowledging people's feelings about and recognizing the importance of the departing leader.

Saying Goodbye – What Leaders Need to Know

ENDINGS...AND BEGINNINGS

When someone leaves, there is always a sense of loss. If it is the leader of an organization, the sense of loss for individuals, and for the collective as a whole, can be quite profound. This is especially true when a highly respected leader is leaving. Most often, the leader naturally wants to minimize the impact of her leaving and, as such, focuses on the arrival of the new leader. She wants the new leader to succeed and go further with what she has built.

The natural tendency is to spend time reassuring people about the new leader—that the people should have faith in the new leader. As a dying spouse often wishes for the survivor to remarry at some point in the future, the leaving leader wants people to carry on and prosper with the new leader.

Unfortunately, too much focus on the merits of the new leader can backfire. People will not have room in their hearts to accept the new, until they have made space through letting go of the old. The spouse on her deathbed does not line up a blind date for her husband. He simply wouldn't accept it. He needs to say goodbye first.

The parting leader leaves a significant sense of loss. Knowing this, the astute leader's parting gift is to help the members work through the loss. If the leader leaves without saying a meaningful goodbye, then several things are prone to happen:

- ⊖ The leader's relationship with her people becomes retroactively devalued. "How important could I have been if she didn't even bother to say goodbye to me". "She just moved on to that better job, and dropped us like an old sock."
- ⊖ When there is no goodbye, then it takes much longer for the loss to become palpably real—to truly sink in. (This is why we have

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funerals. People see that the loved one is gone.) If the loss is not real, then people delay letting go—perhaps even secretly wishing for their trusted leader's return. This creates an emotional overlap of leaders in the member's mind. It's like marrying a new spouse before leaving the old one. It creates confusion and it invites comparison of the new leader to the old.

- ⊗ The member may feel lingering loyalties to the parting leader. The member may feel that they are dishonoring the old leader when they connect with the new leader. This slows acceptance of the new leader.

THE IMPACT OF SAYING GOODBYE

- ⊗ The member feels that her relationship with the leader has been honored and that it was meaningful and important to the leader.
- ⊗ The leader, in effect, gives the member permission to grieve, to remember the time spent together—and then to let go.
- ⊗ The members let go of the old leader, and then can focus on developing a fresh connection to the new leader.
- ⊗ It helps the leader move on and embrace her own new job.

HOW TO SAY GOODBYE

In the closing weeks, the parting leader needs to focus on saying goodbye. The parting leader's fundamental job is to create emotional room for the new leader.

There is no magic to this. It is straight forward. The parting leader needs to honour the relationships that she has had. She should do this by talking personally with as many people as possible. She needs to tell people how she valued them individually. She needs to say what she has personally gained from working with them. She needs to show leadership in emotional intelligence by talking of her own sadness in leaving. This gives others permission to talk of their own emotional experiences of the leaving. She needs to smile and laugh about the good times that were had. As it comes up, she needs to comfortably listen to the praise that comes her way. We often say goodbye through focusing on what was good.

The success of a changeover of leadership largely depends on how endings and beginnings are handled emotionally. The parting leader's

job is to consciously and explicitly focus on the full impact of the ending.

3

THERE CAN BE NO BEGINNING WITHOUT THERE FIRST BEING AN ENDING. THERE CAN BE NO GOOD BEGINNING IF THERE WASN'T FIRST A GOOD ENDING.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Wiens is a Partner in Totem Hill's Ottawa and London offices, and an innovator in the fields of Leadership and Organizational Change. To contact Ron, send him an email at

RonWiens@totemhill.com.

totemhill
www.totemhill.com