

## Coffee Hour with the ED: Navigating Constant Organizational Change

**By: Mimi Mitchell, Executive Director**

Change is the one true constant in life, yet within an organization, it is often met with the most resistance. When we hear the word “restructure,” “pivot,” or “evolution,” our natural human instinct is to tense up. We find comfort in predictability and routine; when that routine is disrupted, fear can easily set in.

Over the course of my career in the non-profit sector, I have had a unique perspective on organizational transformation. I served with four distinct organizations where I sat on both sides of the table. At Community Mediation Center, I saw the organization change its name to Virginia Conflict Resolution Center, shift its focus and eventually close down during the 2008 economic crisis. At Habitat for Humanity Peninsula and Greater Williamsburg, I was a team member experiencing and adapting to that shift from the ground level as the organization grew in size and scope. Later, as the CEO at VOLUNTEER Hampton Roads and now here as the Executive Director of Greater Fredericksburg Habitat for Humanity, my role shifted to actively guiding, designing, and managing that change.

Whether you are a passenger on the journey or the one with the GPS directions, navigating constant change requires intentionality, resilience, and most importantly, perspective.

### Working Through the Fear of the Unknown

The first step in navigating change is acknowledging that fear is a completely normal, biological and psychological response. When things shift, our brains immediately begin asking internal questions: *How does this affect my daily workload? Will my role change? Can I handle the new expectations?* To move past this fear, we must look it in the eye and recognize that change itself isn't inherently dangerous—it is simply a transition to something new. As individuals and as a collective staff, we must learn to work through that initial discomfort. True professional and personal growth does not happen when we are entirely comfortable; it happens when we stretch our boundaries. By normalizing the feeling of unease, we take away its power to paralyze us, allowing our teams to prepare to embrace what comes next.

We often default to looking at organizational changes as something negative—a disruptive hurdle we are forced to jump over. But when we shift our perspective, we begin to see that change is actually an incredible vehicle for good. It opens doors for us to discover new efficiencies, build strong operational foundations, and discover untapped talents within our own team members.

### Elevated Stewardship for Our Community

In the non-profit world, we do not operate in a vacuum. The decisions we make inside our office walls reverberate directly out into the neighborhoods we serve. When we change how we operate or rethink our programs, it's not just for the sake of trying something new. We do it to be better stewards of the resources, trust, and missions we're responsible for.

A stagnant organization cannot effectively serve a changing community. If the economic landscape shifts, as it has recently for many nonprofits, or the housing crisis deepens, as it has over the past few years, or if the needs of our local families evolve, our organizational strategies must evolve alongside them. Embracing necessary changes ensures that every dollar donated, every volunteer hour logged, and every community partnership formed is maximized to its fullest potential. Change is how we keep our promise to the community to remain sustainable, impactful, and relevant.

### Leading with Empathy and Realism

One of the hardest lessons a leader must learn is that change does not move at a uniform pace for everyone. As an Executive Director, I must navigate transitions through a lens of deep empathy. It is vital to recognize that not everyone will go along with a change immediately, and some may choose not to go along with it at all.

I am a firm believer in maintaining an open-door policy, specifically because people process transitions differently. Some team members are early adopters who thrive on fast-paced evolution, while others require steady information and time to adjust. True empathy isn't just about managing a timeline; it means proactively creating a culture where employees feel safe to share their honest pushback.

Not long ago, I introduced a major workflow restructure to our team. Shortly after, a staff member walked through my open door, visibly anxious but passionate, to voice their strong disagreement with the new direction. Instead of becoming defensive, my priority was to ensure they felt comfortable and heard. We sat down, and I listened as they laid out their concerns regarding the daily operational impact of the change. By validating the frustration that comes with a broken routine, we were able to shift from an adversarial dynamic to a collaborative one. I walked them through the "why" behind the shift, and together we adjusted a few elements of the execution to make the transition smoother for their department.

People process change differently. Some team members are early adopters who thrive on fast-paced evolution, while others require steady information and time to adjust. Leading with empathy means having those difficult, face-to-face conversations and maintaining open doors for honest dialogue. However, it also means holding a realistic standard: the organization must move forward. We cannot force absolute alignment, but we can provide clarity, kindness, and an unwavering commitment to honesty. I am honest about why certain changes need to be made and how I plan to make those changes. I am honest about where we are as an organization, where I see us going, and how I see the changes helping us to get there.

### **The Pillars of Evolution: Trust, Patience, and Discernment**

When the ground beneath an organization feels like it is moving, two things act as our anchor: trusting yourself and trusting your team. As a leader, you must trust the vision and experience that brought you to this point. For the staff, there must be a mutual trust that leadership has the organization's and the community's best interests at heart. We must lean heavily on each other's strengths, knowing that no single person builds a house—or an organization—alone.

Alongside trust stands patience. Patience is absolutely pivotal when navigating organizational change. Cultures do not shift overnight, and new workflows take time to become second nature. There will be bumps, administrative missteps, and learning curves. A successful transition requires the patience to let a new system breathe and develop before evaluating its success.

Finally, navigating change successfully requires a great deal of discernment. **Only implement changes that are truly necessary.** Not everything needs to change. There is a vast difference between strategic evolution and changing things just for the sake of doing something different. A wise organization identifies its core pillars—the foundational practices that work beautifully—and protects them fiercely. We change the methods when they no longer serve the mission, but we never change the values that define who we are.

So, navigating organizational change? What about it? Let us remember that change is the tool we use to sharpen our impact. By leaning into trust, leading with empathy, and practicing patient discernment, we can transform the anxiety of the unknown into the excitement of what we will build together next.

That is all the ground we have to cover for now—until our next coffee hour, keep brewing up fresh ideas and making a difference!