"Advice for Aspiring Needle Movers"
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"Move the needle."

When I attended the 2015 AZA Annual Conference in Salt Lake City, Utah, this was a commonly uttered phrase amongst the various speakers and presenters throughout the week. Leaders from around the professional animal care world wove these three words into their talks in a way that was meant to inspire change and innovation, to take the current standards of animal care and welfare up a notch as we looked ahead to the future of the industry.

This sounds like a fine goal on paper, and many of the talks were indeed quite moving and inspiring. However, for some in the audience, this phrase seemed to prod a at raw spot, and in one of these presentations – wherein leaders from four very prominent North American zoos stressed the importance of innovation and "needle moving" from the frontline keepers, trainers, and animal caretakers in attendance – someone decided to stand up and say something about it. During the Q and A at the end of the panel discussion, one young keeper raised their hand and had the following perspective to share. "All week long, I've heard a lot of people talk about the importance of 'moving the needle. But here's my experience: when I've gone to my supervisors and managers to share my ideas about what we can do better – about what I think I and my team can do to help 'move the needle' in our jobs – I'm always told about how my ideas can't happen, about why they are impractical, won't work, aren't in the budget, or just aren't going to happen. I've talked to a lot of other keepers like me, and they've had the same experience at their facilities. So, I wanted to ask you all today: how are we supposed to 'move the needle' when it feels like every time we try, our leaders are there to immediately shut us down?"

As I sat at the back of the room with a few of my colleagues from around the field, a low murmur of assent spread across the room, and even a few yelps of agreement and a bit of applause. This was an impassioned statement from a person who was clearly frustrated with the way they felt they were being asked to maintain the status quo, and I was personally impressed with their willingness to stick their neck out and share their experience with a group of people who had clearly experienced some of the same things in their own roles. I don't remember the exact response that the panel had – I recall some vague back-peddling and meager attempts to recontextualize some of the statements that maybe had come off as a bit more like finger pointing than they had intended – but that keeper's comments have stuck with me to this day, and I think a lot about the story they shared when I consider both how I can be a better leader to others, and about the advice that I might be able to offer to other people who feel that they have been equally ignored, marginalized, or dismissed.

As I've kicked around these thoughts for the last six years, I've come up with four broad suggestions that I've seen be successful, both within and outside of my work with Natural Encounters, Inc., and the Professional Development Committee of IAATE, that I think might be able to give some guidance to those who might feel like they're on their own in their attempts to improve their practices (and those of the people around them) in a way that might provide a starting point for changes that have the potential to revitalize – and maybe even revolutionize – the level of care, welfare, and guest experience at their places of business.

Question Everything

To identify changes that can be made for the better in any organization, people need to be willing to take a hard look at their current practices and evaluate whether the processes that have been in place for years are best suited for the situation at hand. In his article "The Enemy of Innovation is Inertia," organizational consultant TJ Addington has the following advice to share: "In a changing world, innovation (reexamining our practices for a changing environment) is a necessity for a healthy organization. When we live with what was rather than adapting to what is, we quickly lose our edge and ability to respond in an environment that has changed." We can look at change as a monolithic term, a massive shift required to weather things like a change in leadership or a global pandemic, but the very nature of our jobs as the caretakers of other creatures requires a nimbleness and flexibility that can sometimes get lost are we build systems and processes for organizing our days. When these processes succeed, we repeat them as we seek to replicate those rewarding consequences.

However, every good trainer knows that behavior doesn't occur in a vacuum, and that the feedback we get from the environment around us has a tremendous effect on whether we choose to do something again or not. In speaking with a fellow leader a few years ago about the potential pitfalls of inertia, we came to an important conclusion: as mentors, we should always be ready and able to answer the question "why do we do that that way?" More importantly, if we ever find that the best answer we can come up with is "because that's the way we've always done it," we should be ready to follow that up with "…and that's not a good enough reason to keep doing it now." Being able to ask this question of those above us may be intimidating for some, and perhaps has even been heavily punished in the past, but I think it's an important exercise that can be turned inward to reflect on our own practices to see if they are, in fact, still the best way to do things *right now.* Do these diets still need to be split up this way? Is this disinfectant still the best tool for the job? Do we still need to grab up the macaws for medical exams, or could we train them to voluntarily walk into a towel? Is having two people clean these two areas on their own still the most efficient use of our time, or could we partner up to knock out both together? It's a common belief shared within NEI that every day is an opportunity to change an animal's life for the better forever. Why shouldn't we extend that same "clean slate" mentality to ourselves? Not only might it get someone out of a rut, but there's also a chance that they may hit upon something that might become the "new normal" for the foreseeable future.

Until conditions change again, of course. And when that happens, the best course of action might be to…

Raise Your Criteria…For Yourself

As animal caretakers, part of our jobs is to try to put some level of structure and consistency into the lives of animals that are designed by nature to be dynamic, responsive to change, and adaptive to the shifting conditions around them. We find patterns within our practices that work and repeat those that give us success within the timeframes and (often limited) resources that we have to do the best job we can. This structure can sometimes lead to predictability that can border on monotony, and I think one of the best things anyone in any role can do is to look for ways they can "raise criteria" for their personal practices in order to get out of their comfort zone and look for new efficiencies that might give them more time to tackle things like enrichment and training projects that sometimes get pushed to the side as we strive to complete the dozens of tasks that any one person is responsible for in any zoo, aquarium, wildlife rehab, or educational outreach position.

Let's consider the following hypothetical situation: the South America aviary at our zoo currently takes three people two hours to clean. What would it look like if we were to complete the task within the same time frame, but with only two people? Or with three people in an hour and a half? Or in two hours by myself?? I think these sorts of self-imposed limitations are an interesting thought-exercise in that they force people to look at their pace and their priorities to see if there's "fat" that can be trimmed or opportunities that have been missed. When I've done these sorts of exercises myself, documenting the amount of time that I spend performing the jobs that I might need to tackle on a given day, it's been eye-opening to see the flexibility in some parts of my roles had that I never knew existed, in large part because I found myself performing the same predetermined tasks in the same predetermined order. Structure is fine and nice, and there's a certain satisfaction that some people take in knowing the exact details of the exact job that they're going to do every day. This can be a pretty big hindrance if the goals are to "move the needle" and grow beyond the norm, however, and accepting that inertia is the enemy of innovation is an important realization that opens the door to letting the mind wander to ideas about how things might be done differently.

Pilot New Ideas

Say you've looked at your own practices and raised the criteria for them and taken an assessment of current practices and determined them to be lacking. Great! Good for you!

Now what?

Let's go back to the idea of change as a monolithic bugbear that can lead some folks to head running for the hills. Change can indeed be scary, and sometimes feel unnecessary to those who might feel that current practices are perfectly fine for our current conditions. For those averse to change, breaking that monolith into something much smaller and more manageable

through piloting can be a much more digestible way to move things along in one's "needle moving" journey. A good pilot program allows a team to try on new systems, ideas, and structures in a limited-time way that involves a much lower level of investment than agreeing to abandon current processes whole cloth. A well-designed pilot can be easier to digest for a leader who needs to green-light to them ("well, even if I don't like it, it'll only be for 2 weeks"), and it puts pressure on the people creating it to design a pilot robust and thought-out enough to provide usable data that can be collected to determine whether or not it was a success or a failure ("I was pretty sure this was going to save us at least 30 minutes each morning…but turns out it actually took us an extra 15").

While it's very possible that a new idea might come simply from someone's personal inspiration or desire, pilots focused on solving challenges experience by entire teams – or even an entire facility – often have the best chance of gaining the buy-in of others. In sharing his personal process for developing pilot projects that have turned into successful long-term programs, NEI Supervisor and ABMA President, Scott Trauger, suggests the following steps:

1. Identify the problem you believe is there; this could be inefficiencies, or just something you feel could be done to help a certain situation.
2. Think of possible solutions to said problems.
3. Identify where any challenges may lie.
4. Create a first draft proposal to send to your mentor(s) with actionable items.
5. Go to your mentor(s) and ask for their help and feedback. This may involve both positive and negative responses to certain aspects of the plan, and both should be considered valuable information.
6. Redraft your solution with this added data and information and send it back to your mentor(s) one final time for revision.
7. Present the idea to leadership. It is important in this step to ask, "what's in it for them?" This will help you to better present your information to that specific audience.

Part of the elegance of this outline is that it shows how well-thought-out change is iterative and highlights the importance of integrating the thoughts and feedback of others along the way. I can't think of a better way to put it than in the subtitle of the book ***High Five! The Magic of Working Together*** by Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles: "None of Us Is As Smart As All of Us."

Start From Yes

The final tip I'd like to share today involves being the kind of person you want others to be when you are presenting your new "needle moving" ideas to people who can help make them a reality: start from a place of "yes." If our goal is to reexamine the commonly held practices, beliefs, and assumptions that have formed part of the history of our work environments, it's a good practice to try to be as open to the ideas of others are you would like for them to be to yours. Birthing a new idea is an exciting process, and as we turn these fresh new ideas and concepts around in our minds to chip away their rough edges to make them stronger and easier to swallow, it can be easy to become enamored with them to the exception of the new ideas of others that might also be looking to achieve similar goals or address similar issues.

One aspect of successful teams is the ability to share ideas openly, and to be willing to withhold judgement of the ideas of others as doubts or concerns might creep into your mind. Make no mistake: skepticism is healthy, and there's certainly value in someone playing devil's advocate, but when someone's advocacy for that devil becomes their default position on ALL new ideas, it's a good way for them gain a reputation for being a roadblock on the path towards progress. To help create an environment where others are willing to hear you out, "starting from yes" means being willing to take a starting position of agreement when a plan or proposed change is shared with you.

A valuable lesson I've learned from my boss and mentor, Steve Martin, is the importance of beginning discussions of a new idea by having everyone share their ideas about what it would take to make it be a success. Even with ideas that at first glance may seem impractical (or even impossible), Steve's done a great job of helping to foster a culture where skepticism can be put on hold at least long enough to answer the following question: "if this *could* work, what would that look like?" Change is iterative, and there will be plenty of time to discuss challenges as we move down the road, but when that road is paved with possibilities instead of plagued by the potholes of doubt, the journey is a lot more fun for everyone involved, and the whole team gets to share in the satisfaction of contributing to the roadmap that got you to the destination.

For those whose default may be to "go negative" when someone challenges the status quo, one of the best bits of advice I ever received was this: whenever you find yourself in an argument with another person, start from a place of assuming that *they* are right, and that *you* are wrong. Sometimes when we think we're right, it's easy to fall into an endless loop that doesn't actually explain your position: I know that I'm right. How do I know? Because my idea is better! Why is my idea better? Because I'm right! Starting from a place of assuming you might be wrong forces an examination of your position to look for chinks in the armor that you may have yet to consider, and in the best case lead you to integrate the best parts of other people's ideas to create something better and stronger than either person started with. Isn't collaboration amazing?

A Path Forwards (Then Backwards, Then Forwards Again)

Change can be hard. Change can also be exhilarating. And, more often than not, change is not linear, and is rarely successful when it happens overnight or is simply dictated by others. Questioning the status quo and being boldly creative about alternatives to it is the starting place for the kernel of an idea that have the potential to blow up into something truly remarkable.

If we're ever going to truly "move the needle" in our field, we need to be willing to take a hard look at the things we are doing and how we are doing them, and to be thoughtful and open as we carve out the sketches of new possibilities. Be bold. Be daring. And most importantly: don't wait for anyone else's permission, because YOU are the one that's going to come up with the new idea that takes us all into the future.

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