

**GOING THROUGH TRANSITIONS**

Tim Graf-Kolvenbach, May 2020

In his highly recommended book „Managing transitions“ William Bridges makes an important distinction:

**CHANGE**

Change is the shift in the external situation, the thing that has changed. It refers to rational logic and can be described in terms of structure, processes, tasks, (smart) goals and milestones. It can happen fast.

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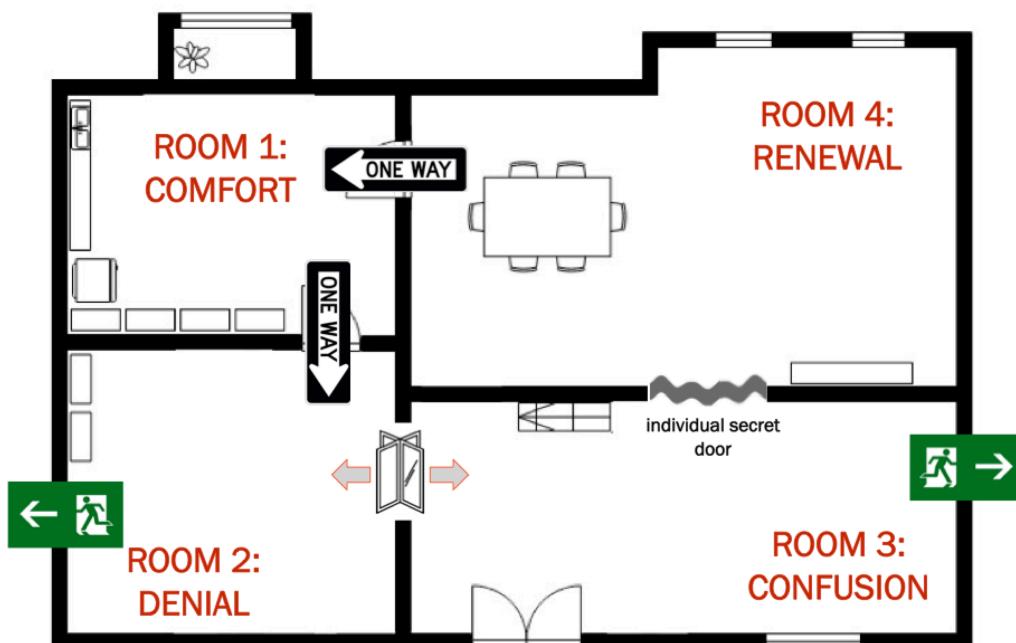
**TRANSITION**

Transition is the reorientation people need to make in response to the change, it's the gradual process of making sense of and come to terms with what is changing. It refers to the psycho-logic and can be described in terms of conflicts, needs, emotions, mindsets and values. This can take time.

To be successful in both - the implementation of change and in helping people through transition - we need to consciously and systematically manage both the *change* and the *transition*.

A badly managed change makes transition even more difficult. And a badly managed transition often causes change initiatives to fail altogether.

A helpful model for systematically managing transitions is the HOUSE OF TRANSITION with its four rooms COMFORT, DENIAL, CONFUSION and RENEWAL.



Almost every time we are confronted with a change and its accompanying transition process we hope that we can go straight from our current COMFORT into RENEWAL and quickly back to a new COMFORT. Unfortunately, that is not possible (as you can see in the image above, the door between COMFORT and RENEWAL is a one way door).

We all go through all four rooms, every single time there is a change. However, we do not stay in the rooms for the same amount of time, so some of us move more quickly through the rooms than others. Also the intensity of emotions, which we are facing in the rooms, varies from individual to individual.

That means, that when a team goes through a transition process, it is typical that you as the manager – maybe together with some early adopting team members – have already stepped into RENEWAL while others are still in DENIAL and/or CONFUSION. This can lead to disruptions in a team and people accusing each other. For example of being too fast (and uncritical) or too slow (and resistant to change as a matter of principle). As a manager you should be aware of your own position in the process and try to be compassionate with people in different rooms. Also you should intervene as soon as possible should you notice people pointing fingers at each other and help them build up compassion for the perspective of others.

### ALWAYS START WITH THE WHY

What makes people, what makes us embrace change, what makes us go and leave the safe harbour of our routines and proven practises?

Of course, some of us get bored as soon as things are becoming a bit monotonic. Typically, we find these people in management positions. That is, some of us personally prefer and drive change. Should you be one of them, always remember, that you're probably moving too fast for others and watch out that you don't lose their commitment on the way.

The ones among us who do not have such a high need for change, are more reluctant to get going and to leave our comfort zone. What makes these people change after all?

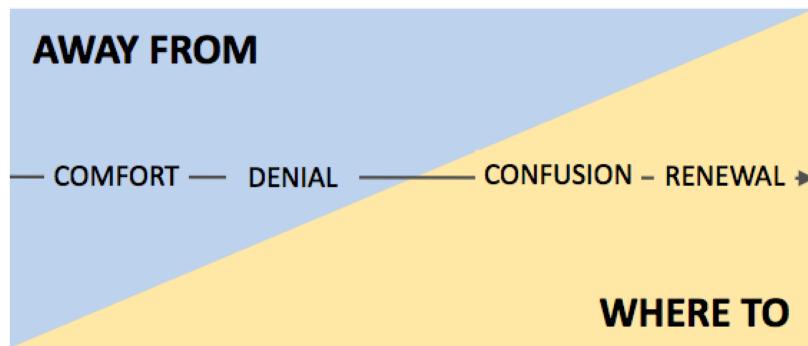
First and foremost it's the question whether we can see a good reason for change, a solid case for change.

However, a case for change typically has two sides:

- **AWAY FROM:** Which negative scenario do we want to avoid by changing? A good question to come up with a solid "away from" case for change is: What would happen, if we did nothing at all?
- **WHERE TO:** Which positive scenario do we want to reach? A good way to come up with a solid "where to" case for change is to first ask yourself: What would we miss, if we didn't act now? Then you describe the scenario and finally you ask yourself: What opportunities would open up for us, should we make it and realise this scenario?

Keep in mind that it's helpful to also have an answer regarding the aspect of timing: Why are we supposed to change right now (and not 2 years ago or later)?

As far as the house of transition is concerned, the two questions "What do we want to move AWAY FROM?" and "WHERE do we want to move TO?" are not equally important in all four rooms.



For the people affected by the change in the first two rooms the “AWAY FROM” question is dominant. Since initially people are not focusing on possible benefits (which the “WHERE TO” question tries to highlight) as much as on possible negative ones. That is, because at the beginning of a transition process we are more occupied with feelings of loss and resistance. Hence, our “go buttons” are pushed more likely by a negative, maybe even a little bit frightening scenario.

That's also why you don't have images of extremely healthy lungs or legs on cigarette packages but of damaged and therefore ugly looking ones. Or think back to when the Covid 19 pandemic started. What really got us going and change our habits was not the vision of a healthy society with as little corona cases as possible. It rather was the images from northern Italian hospitals in crisis mode.

However, starting with the room CONFUSION the “WHERE TO” question becomes more and more dominant for us. In order to encourage people to actively and creatively contribute to shaping the desired future state, a positive scenario can effectively foster our energy, endurance and motivation.

But note that pure positive thinking doesn't do the trick either, on the contrary.

In 1999 Lien Pham and Shelley Taylor conducted an extremely simple but very interesting experiment. They asked students who were preparing for an exam at the end of the semester to write down how much they learned every day. Half of these students were additionally instructed to mentally imagine at least once every day that they passed the exam successfully. After the exam, the students who had only written down how much they had learned had a) learned more and B) scored significantly better in the exam. The others had settled down on a positive but delusive illusion of superiority and had reported less learning each day.

Gabriele Oettinger took results like these as the starting point to find out what really helps accomplishing ambitious goals. She found out that positive thinking only helps when you combine it with anticipating the obstacles that might come in your way. And when you envision the effort that it might cost to tackle these obstacles in very concrete terms.

She coined this phenomenon “mental contrasting” and based on her research she came up with the WOOP method: Wish, Opportunity, Obstacles, Plan. You can learn more about her research and WOOP in her book “Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation”.

### THE FIRST ROOM: COMFORT

When it comes to transitions a change process typically finds us in a state of comfort and satisfaction. Some of us might even be a bit oversaturated, feeling self-content and resting on our laurels.

Often years or even decades of successful performance make individuals and organizations blind to their own shortcomings. In the worst cases we are increasingly suffering from narrowmindedness.

That is why the main challenge in this room is to unfreeze, as Kurt Lewin called it. We have to wake ourselves and - as managers - the people we're responsible up. Unrest is what we need to create.

We can do that by making sure that we establish - or even intensify - our connection to the outside world of our team, department or organization. Because change is often but not always coming top down the hierarchy. For example, many middle managers have social networks that reach beyond the borders of their immediate organisational context, which gives them access to information, trends and developments that signal a need for change. But often it's also members of the operative staff, who are usually closest to the customers or have (both business and private) networks that include people from competing companies. This is where (weak and strong) signals for change emerge.

What you want as a manager is someone who can take you and your people to the epicentre of the case for change, i.e. to the place where the need for change is created. Often this is a customer, be it the external or an internal customer, who is increasingly and urgently feeling a (new) pain point or a strong need, which isn't satisfied by your company yet. He might even be on the verge of turning to a competitor, because there he hopes to find his needs fulfilled in a better way.

Hence, asking outside people to come and personally tell us – or even show us – their needs and pain points first hand can support the kind of atmosphere of unrest that you’re aiming for.

And of course, all that has already been said about negative “AWAY FROM” scenarios in the section above is especially relevant in this room.

The uncomfortable role of a manager in this room is – if needed – to be the “advocatus diaboli” and be very clear and frank about why and in what way things have to change. It is like shaking people, communicate with a strong sense of urgency and draw people’s attention to risks and threads.

Of course, you might also want to communicate possible benefits and talk about the “where to” scenario. But as mentioned above, in order to create unrest it’s often more effective to start with envisioning a negative or even a worst case scenario.

### THE SECOND ROOM: DENIAL

The main difference in DENIAL compared to COMFORT is that we now realize in our hearts that there is a demand to change that we can not ignore any longer. Although we act as if the change would not affect us and it was time to return to COMFORT, unfortunately it’s a one way door between CONFORT and DENIAL. Once we have started to (mentally) wrestle with the change, we are irreversibly involved and affected by it. Unless of course, the initiators of the change should surprisingly decide to abandon it.

“To deny” doesn’t mean to ignore the change or to pretend it wasn’t happening, since we are mentally occupied a lot by thinking and fighting the idea to change. It’s more about pretending that the change has nothing to do with us or that it will go away (for example, because we are convinced that management isn’t serious about it or will be promoted soon enough before it can see the change through). As a consequence, we deny to confront ourselves with the challenge to change and we refuse to make a contribution.

In essence, when we are in DENIAL we typically react to a change with open (e.g. blaming) or passive (e.g. withdrawing) aggression. That’s why the room of DENIAL is not a friendly room. The atmosphere is full of negative and hostile emotions.

The most important thing to do for a manager is to clearly and unmistakably step in as soon as someone starts to communicate disrespectfully, for example by insulting you or others.

And since many change initiatives come top down the hierarchy, people also blame you as their direct manager for it (although you may have not had any influence on the decision). Many managers find this blaming unfair and take it personally. But wait a minute. Wasn’t it your decision to become a manager in this company? And above that, isn’t it your decision to stay in your management position now that this change is being pushed through? And as a consequence, isn’t it your personal challenge now to come to terms with this kind of rejection by some of your people?

When your people are in DENIAL your whole personality and your inner strength in terms of a healthy but not arrogant sense of self worth are asked for.

And in order to support your people to step further into CONFUSION you now have to be crystal clear about your and the company’s determination to carry the change through. And you should also be crystal clear about the negative consequences it will or might have.

People in DENIAL are mostly concerned with the question “What is at stake?” rather than “What’s in it?”. Possible losses dominate our imagination over possible gains. Therefore, as a manager you should address this question proactively. And should people then in fact tell you their worries, you should never talk them out of it, for example by saying “I understand that you’re worried about this. But hey, look here, there’s also a great opportunity for us/you that comes with this change...”. Because this way, people will not feel heard, respected and acknowledged for what worries them. And this will most probably alienate you from them.

Bottom line, the room of denial is a room of grieve. We are moaning our losses (or what we fear to lose). For example, a typical loss is showing through when we ask ourselves "Am I going to like my future job as much as I do now?" or "Am I going to be able perform my job as good and skilfully as I do it now?". Related to our occupational identity (i.e. the degree to which we define our personality by what we do professionally and how successfully we do it) these are existential worries. That is why it is not helpful for us, when our managers hear our worries but quickly point out what they think we could gain from the change. What we want our managers to do is to acknowledge, that this is a substantial problem for us and that the change might indeed result in a longer lasting disadvantage for us. We want them to admit that the change isn't all shiny and happy (although that's often what the official communication rallies around).

Apart from grieve the room of DENIAL is characterised by feelings of depreciation, i.e. a feeling that what we had been doing and investing for years is now regarded as useless or even problematic. It is as if the change implicitly telling us: "What you have been doing so far wasn't good enough." Emotionally we are not able to hear the message "Times have changed. What you have been doing so far was perfect. But now under new circumstances we all have to adapt."

As a manager you can try to restore self esteem by telling people more often and maybe more clearly than before what you appreciate about them. Give positive feedback regarding strengths, especially those skills that you think will help the person to be effective under the new circumstances.

The general rule in the room DENIAL is: The more you try to convince your people that they don't have to grieve or worry, the more resistance you might get. Let people grieve and worry and be frustrated and angry. What's even better: Be proactive and give them the chance to vent their frustration and anger, for example by asking openly "What are you afraid of what could be at stake for you personally due to this change?" And then: Listen, acknowledge, listen, acknowledge, listen, acknowledge.

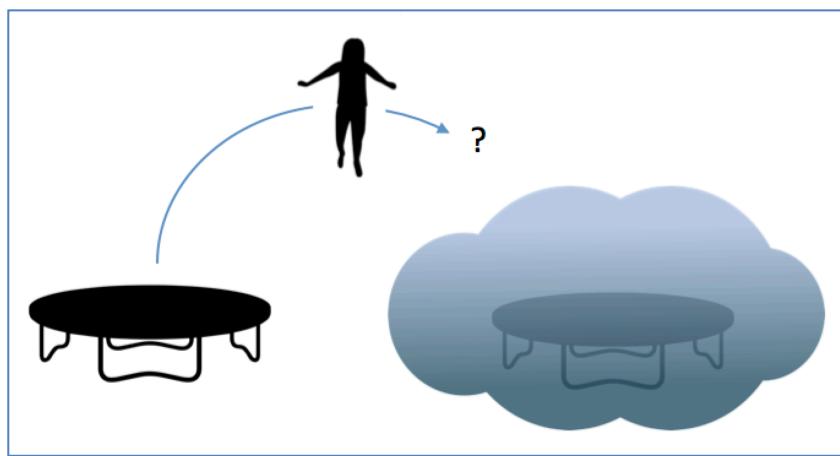
### THE THIRD ROOM: CONFUSION

In the room of CONFUSION we finally decide to accept that there is a change we have to confront ourselves with. We are not fighting it any longer, but unfortunately this makes room for another range of uncomfortable emotions.

Stepping from DENIAL into CONFUSION means to step from aggressive feelings and anger to volatile feelings and insecurity. In DENIAL we are often so strongly convinced, that we are right, that we might feel and come across as self-righteous. In CONFUSION however, we are in doubt. That makes some of us feel lonely and withdraw. Others become more needy to be comforted than usual.

As you can see in the picture above, which displays all four rooms, there is a revolving door between DENIAL and COMFORT. That means, that it is a very common phenomenon, that we fall back into DENIAL, move into CONFUSION again and fall back once more and so on. In CONFUSION the feeling of insecurity can be very intense and from time to time we get so frightened that we prefer to fall back into the illusion of unambiguousness, which DENIAL has to offer. It is much like the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, which offer a reassuring black and white pattern for people who are not willing and able to face the complexity of our globalized society.

A helpful picture of how most people feel in the room of CONFUSION is the picture of a jump from one trampoline (our routines in the past) to another (the yet unknown future state). However, the trampoline, which we are trying to jump to, is in the fog. We can not see it, we are not even 100% sure that it is there at all. In DENIAL we do everything to not jump off the old trampoline (although we know it's broken and not working for much longer). In CONFUSION we're in the middle of the jump and the familiar context isn't valid anymore and at the same time the new context isn't visible yet, let alone is it already consolidated and effective. For many of us this causes a feeling of detachment and vulnerability.

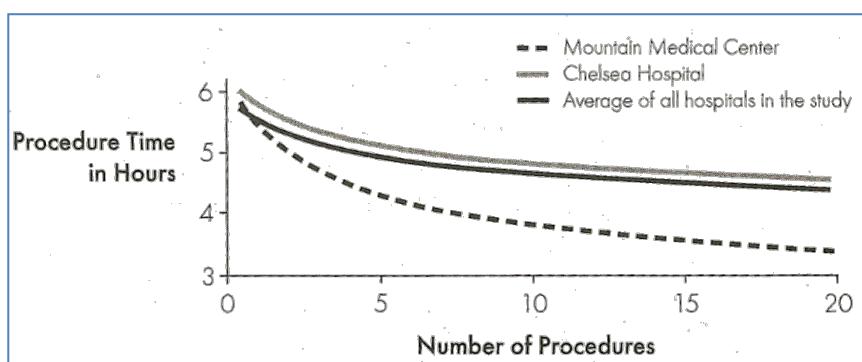


For managers the most important thing to do in CONFUSION is to strengthen the relational bond both between themselves and their people and also between team members. For when the organizational context is getting more and more unpredictable and familiar patterns of reasoning and acting are questioned, the stability and reliability of the social context (i.e. the ties of trust and familiarity between people) become much more important.

You can do that by enhancing the frequency of checking up on your people, e.g. by meeting more often but for a shorter time. This gives you and your people the chance to stay in close touch and quickly update one another both on the information as well as on the emotional level.

What might be even more important than getting into contact more often is the question how you get into contact with others. As managers in times of change we are tempted to increase our impression management and show off as super competent and on top of things. But the exact opposite might be more effective. In order to help people – and also yourself – to constructively cope with CONFUSION and insecurity, it has proven to be helpful to relate to others with your insecurities and not without them. By admitting our own doubts and insufficiencies we contribute to creating a climate of psychological safety.

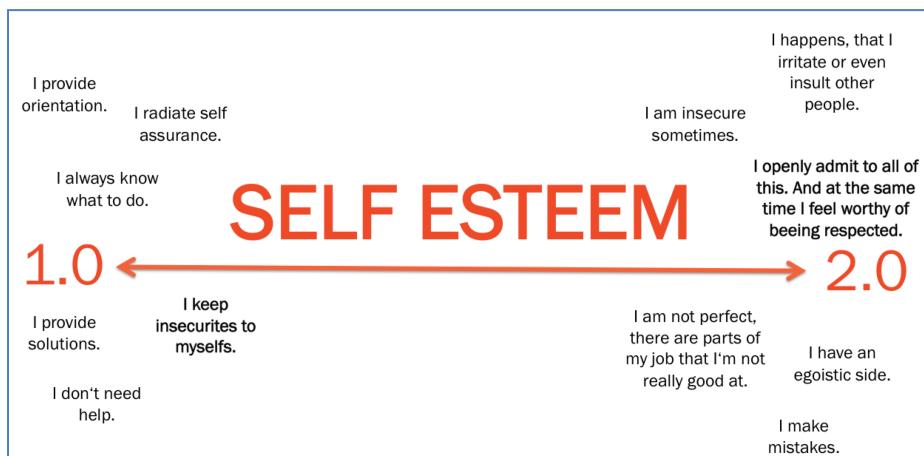
Amy C. Edmondson found that psychological safety plays a crucial role when it comes to change. In teams with high psychological safety people feel safe to take interpersonal risks: they speak their minds more (also and especially towards management), they bring in vague and potentially ineffective ideas, they admit insecurities and mistakes. Edmondson did a research study in hospitals, where she examined surgery teams from different hospitals, which had to acquire a new surgical technique: minimal invasive surgery.



As you can see in the image above, there were teams that acquired the new technique much faster than others (Mountain Medical Center) and above that, they could also reduce the duration of the surgeries far more than others (already after five surgeries with the new technique they had reduced the procedure time from 6 to 4 hours and

eventually they brought it down to three and a half hours). This of course is of great economical benefit to the hospital, since surgeries are one of the most expensive parts in most hospitals. But what is even more important: A shorter surgery is much less stressful and harmful for the patients. One of the decisive factors that the superior teams reported was a higher score in psychological safety. You can learn more about psychological safety at Wikipedia (also Google found it to be the most important factor for determining team success) and in Amy C. Edmondson's book "The fearless organization".

As already mentioned above, as a manager you can contribute strongly to psychological safety. What you want to do is to try to put yourself into a mindset of self esteem 2.0.



Self esteem 2.0 is an understanding of self esteem which transcends our conventional heroic understanding of self esteem as always being as solid as a rock, as firm as the world's centre. It is a mindset where we feel confident and allow for insecurities at the same time. It is rooted in a very basic feeling of trust in our own lives and the belief that eventually things will turn out OK for us. Be it due to our own efforts and/or with a little help from our friends (and maybe also fate, chance or god). To restore this sense of confidence and trust is completely up to us. It is something that we can only do for ourselves, nobody can do that for us (albeit we can turn towards others for assistance and help).

Finally, it's important to remember that the phase of CONFUSION is not only a time of discomfort. It is also a time of creative unrest and usually people will develop the most creative ideas how to make the change work and how to use it as a chance to make things even better in this room.

That's why as a manager, you should be on the look out for these ideas. People might not be confident enough to articulate them, since their ideas are not perfectly thought through concepts yet (which might be what people usually are supposed to come up with).

But it can also turn the other way round and as the manager you might find yourself in a situation where you are faced with an overwhelming flood of ideas. For example, at the height of the shutdown during the Covid 19 pandemic – and therefore at the height of uncertainty – a high ranking manager from the Austrian ministry of infrastructure reported in a coaching session that he was confronted with too many innovative ideas by his team and its stakeholders. He and his team had to fight off many of these ideas, since they did not have the resources to try them all out. And naturally, many of these ideas were rather crazy and unfeasible. But it shows that despite – or just because of – its unsettling feelings of insecurity the room of CONFUSION is a zone of high creativity.

### THE FOURTH ROOM: RENEWAL

As you can see above, the door into RENEWAL is an individual secret door. What that means is that you have to come to the decision to actually embrace the change all by yourself. Again, nobody can do that for you. And for some of us

this can happen rather fast, for others it takes more time. For some it's a sudden step, for others a gradual process. As a manager, you shouldn't put pressure on people, but instead let them follow their own pace as much as possible.

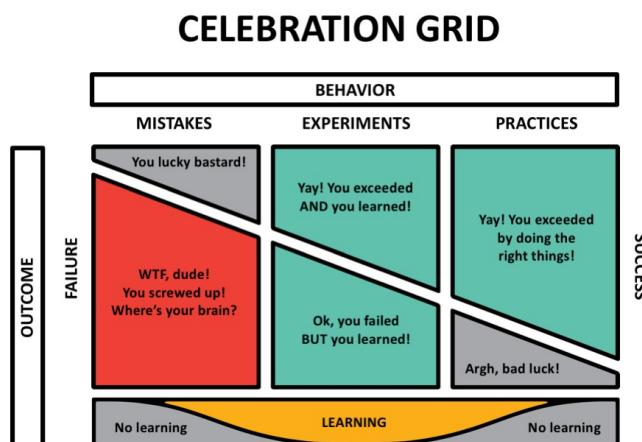
As far as the case for change is concerned (see above), the "WHERE TO" question becomes dominant now. It's already gaining importance in the room of CONFUSION, where people are starting to become more and more receptive for a positive vision of what might be achieved by mastering the change. In RENEWAL creating and communicating a positive vision is essential, because it provides us with the necessary orientation without which we would not be able to direct our attempts and our experiments in the right direction.

However, in RENEWAL we are usually still anxious to make mistakes. Although we do start trying to make the change work, we have not found our way back to the level of competence, effectiveness and skilfulness, we had back in the old COMFORT. So in order to help people stepping into a new COMFORT, it is mandatory to empower them (give them the freedom to create and decide), to encourage them (push them to make a risky decision by themselves) and to support them (serve as a sparring partner).

What you want is that people are taking risks, that is, that they try new approaches although they are not 100% sure that these approaches will be effective. So what want is that your people engage in experimenting. Of course not in a unsystematic and childish but in a planned and responsible way.

The beauty of a

The so called celebration grid from management 3.0, a resource for agile work tools, can be helpful here.



The celebration grid highlights that learning is strongest in an experimental mode. When we look at mistakes (left column), we can learn but often we don't, since we are in defensive mode (red colour), which makes us play down or even hide our mistakes. When we're looking at proven practises (right column), we can also learn but often we also don't, since in the few cases the practises don't work we attribute it to bad luck. In experimental mode however (middle column), we can innovate and take risks without having to be afraid to fail. In fact, experiments cannot fail. Since when you conduct an experiment, you always learn, no matter whether the outcome is what you expected or not. In the latter case you learn a lot about what doesn't work and that is also very important information.

The key is, that an experimental mindset helps us share our learnings, especially when we don't get the results we were striving for. Typically people are more ready to openly talk about setbacks when everybody around them also is in an experimental mindset. Because then we experience a climate of collective learning and openly sharing setbacks will be met with positive feedback ("Thank you for sharing this with us").

In practise you can use the celebration grid by looking at it with your team and ask yourselves: When have we applied proven practises during the past weeks and what were we able to learn? Where did we (or one of us) make a mistake / faced a setback and what did he/she/we learn from it? And finally: Who conducted an experiment in the past four weeks? How did it go? What can we all learn from it?

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The less you find you and your team spending time analysing failures and practises and the more you talk about experiments the better.

Finally, in RENEWAL as a manager you should look out for the tiniest of successes, i.e. things that go in the right direction and seem to work (at least a little bit) and put them into the centre of attention. Because, as Roy Baumeister argued in his article “Bad is stronger than the good”, due to evolutionary reasons our brain focuses on risks, failures and negative events much more rapidly and much more intensively than on successes, praise and positive events in general. That is why at its core leadership always means influencing attention – your own and that of other people. Away from the negative events, which is where our attention goes anyway, to the – albeit very small – positive events and by doing so making them as big as they deserve to be.