

## Direction, Renewal, and Testing Assumptions

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Summer is a good time of the year for thinking. With a change in workflow during summer break, I've been able to slow down and ask: "Is what we have been doing really working?" Last year was unusually challenging and recent conversations with my staff have prompted my own curiosity about how we can continue to improve. As my own thinking typically leads to numerous questions before arriving at any answers, here are three questions I will continue to reflect on looking forward:

1. **What if we truly knew that ALL of us were headed in the same direction with common goals and ways of teaching about the fraternity/sorority experience?**
2. **What if fall 2016 was the semester for *renewal*?**
3. **What if we all committed to brand new ways of thinking?**

### Direction

As a large and diverse group of advisors, we generally lack consistency in the way we direct our fraternal communities. How much more effective could we all be if collectively we had common goals for our work transcending across national organizations and across campuses? We already have the basics covered: higher GPAs, successful recruitments, and high attendance and participation at leadership retreats and other programs. But the way we define "scholarship" or success in recruitment could be vastly different. At the same time, while a campus may be focusing on one outcome, our national organizations are putting energy into another. And this goes both ways. How many times are the initiatives of national organizations thwarted by the demands of campus standards?

From campus to campus, or HQ to HQ, education about what it means to be a member of the fraternity/sorority community is vastly different, some due to community need and the rest potentially due to a lack of direction or to the desire to be on the cutting edge. Some of us might be focused on the student journey – on placing importance on the learning. Some are focused on outcome, on moving forward, on producing strong chapters, and on delivering the "best" programming. Still others are just attempting to keep afloat, weighed down by the realities of university politics, unbelievably poor decision-making of our students, and the list goes on. Not only can this be exhausting, but it pulls our students in different directions, sometimes causing them to play tug-of-war with their priorities. How will we ever move forward, together?

Admittedly, I don't have a full or clear picture of what consistency looks like here. However, I am convinced we could make progress if collectively we knew where we were going. We might start by teaming up with one nearby campus. We could find a way to exchange new member

education experiences, council training, or service opportunities. Staff could work together to brainstorm new initiatives to carry out on both campuses and encourage our student executive boards to work together to see these become reality. Obviously there are a million factors that could get in our way but one element of shared experience between two communities would support the notion of a more unified fraternal experience.

## **Renewal**

Another practice worth exploring in the upcoming semester is *renewal*. Balance is out, renewal is in. Boyatzis and Smith (2012) say mindfulness, hope, compassion, and playfulness are the keys to true renewal – the process of balancing the damage stress causes to our neurological networks and systems. Stress happens without intention, but true renewal will only happen if we make it happen. So, what is it that renews you? Boyatzis and Smith suggest the following to provide the most renewal:

- Yoga
- Moments in nature
- Coaching or mentoring someone
- Modest exercise done regularly
- Talking with others about your shared values or purpose
- Helping a friend (with a compassionate approach)
- Doing something for another person
- A loving moment with your partner

Honestly, I have found regularly prioritizing renewal takes some courage and lots of practice. Permanently blocking out my calendar for a yoga class on Monday nights, and keeping it there, requires me to honor the boundary I've created and to sometimes say "no" to students. Additionally, I know this practice takes some planning. Monday night is a sealed deal, but Tuesdays and Wednesdays are truly my marathon days. Renewal, to me, is about identifying the days when I'll feel most drained, and finding ways *during* those days to be restored. This semester, I hope to be better at that because I truly think it is vital to sustainability in this field, or any, really. It isn't about using all our vacation days, or even getting enough sleep, but it is more about small, energizing blocks of time (even 15 minutes) filling us up and giving us energy, allowing us to be our optimal, awesome selves.

*Read more about Sacrifice Syndrome and the practice of renewal here:*

<http://er.educause.edu/blogs/2016/5/stress-and-renewal-and-what-you-can-do-about-it>

## **Testing Assumptions**

What if we threw out everything we've ever used to train and strengthen our communities and started over? It sounds dramatic, but maybe radical is what we need. In *Immunity to Change*,

Kegan and Lahey (2009) outline the process of testing the assumptions we make about creating change. They believe we make big assumptions about what we think is working or not working and we need to accept that they are just that – assumptions. For example, at Case Western Reserve University, we've been tossing around the idea of doing away with all retreats (defined as full day or overnight student training experiences). While retreats have become a student affairs staple, are we positive they are truly achieving the intended impact? Our conversations have led us to imagine how to accomplish the same (or stronger) results in alternative, less time intensive ways. The goal of testing assumptions is not necessarily to improve immediately, but rather to collect valuable information about the productivity and impact of our work. Then we can use the information found to revise the assumptions we have (Kegan and Lahey, 2009).

It is certainly worth our time to think about what our semesters would look like if we committed to doing *something* differently – especially if we have the notion what we are currently doing could be done better. Because, you know what they say about doing the same thing and expecting a different result.

So these are my 'what-ifs', and I think they're all connected. We need a vision for where we are going as larger community so the sum of our work can truly move us forward. We must practice renewal so we can have the energy to meet new challenges and to stick with the old. Then we can use that energy to help us consider new ways of thinking and commit to making changes testing our assumptions.

## References

Boyatzis, R. & Smith, M. (2012, April 3). *Positive renewal: Can you even keep going?* Retrieved from: <https://weatherhead.case.edu/news/2012/04/03/positive-renewal-can-you-even-keep-going2>

Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.