



The Passive-Aggressive Side of a Digital Transformation



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As with most significant changes, digital transformation can elicit both passive and aggressive reactions. In the correct context and with the right audience, both perspectives can be valid and useful. How can IT leaders embrace these representations to enact true transformation within an organization?

Like with anything that is inevitable in life, it is easy to get into a passive-aggressive behavior pattern. Like aging, sickness, your children's life choices and election results, digital transformations can stir up all kinds of emotions. Generally speaking, passive-aggressive behavior is difficult to tolerate. But in the case of inevitable circumstances that we must live

with, we do experience both patterns. If a change is indeed inevitable, we accept the new norm with a “if we can’t fight them, join them” attitude and then we gradually find a way to embrace the new norm as our own.

The Digital era is practically upon us. Admittedly, I am not looking forward to a fully digital future where practically all transactions involve digital products and services bought, paid for and delivered between digital buyers and sellers. You may not be particularly fond of this picture either. But we must embrace this change because it is inevitable.

Different Approaches to DX

The reason I believe digital transformations illicit passive-aggressive reactions is because there are two distinct messages that I am hearing from articles, blog posts, conference presentations, and other sources:

1. The sky is falling: This idea is typically accompanied by a reference to a “KODAK Moment”. that refers to KODAK’s failure to embrace digital photography and their resulting demise from this shortcoming.
2. Digital transformation is not a revolution, but an evolution: Organizations that pragmatically execute their digital programs are keeping up with or even pulling ahead of the competition.

As a fairly pragmatic person, given a choice, I would support the second viewpoint. After all, any internal transformation is a journey. No changes happen overnight. This was evident in a recent Abraic-sponsored market study by an independent authority to learn what CIOs opinions were on digital transformations. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that an overwhelming majority of

interviewed CIOs thought, like me, that a digital transformation is more of an evolution rather than a revolution.

The Pragmatic Approach is Not Always the Answer

Armed with the market study results, I made a presentation at SIM Connect Live in Dallas this spring with a message that there was no need for panic. The presentation focused on critical success factors for a long game, such as alignment to overall strategy, governance, agility, and continuous improvement.

Most of the attendees agreed with this pragmatic approach, except for one. She presented an entirely different perspective regarding her own digital program. Her organization is behind the curve, so she needs funding and executive support. Indeed, when discussing digital transformation execution, the success factors you should reference are operational in nature. When starting a new digital program or obtaining management support for existing programs, you need to build a sense of urgency among sponsors and stakeholders. This is where a “KODAK Moment” reference is a must!

Here is a quick reference guide to the two ways to present ideas about a digital transformation:

DX Representation	Urgency (the sky is falling)	Evolution, Not Revolution
Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top executives • Digital program stakeholders • Resisters to the digital program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital team members • IT • Willing participants in the program
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain support • Defend a business case • Solicit participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning • Governance • Experimentation • Team alignment • Team member recognition
Talking points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KODAK Moment is inevitable in any industry • Examples from disrupted industries • Stories about the next generation building a dramatically new expectation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KODAK actually failed because they attempted to transform into a pharmaceutical company • Let's follow our vision, not act out of fear • To mitigate risk, let's take gradual steps
References	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations from technology visionaries • Business and technology media (who look for shocking content) • Reports from competition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer success stories • Media content that highlights execution success factors • Budget constraints • Consensus from business and IT middle management

This shows that with digital transformation, both passive and aggressive behaviors are applicable. The tactic that should be chosen depends on your audience and what you are trying to prove.

Other Key Factors to Consider

From the standpoint of a timeline, you should start with the sense of urgency. In this case, the “KODAK Moment” example is your friend. Keep stressing the need for immediate action until ample budget, team, and executive support have been secured. Once a digital team is created, it should adopt a pragmatic approach to execution. In the meantime, you may still need to resort to building urgency if you meet resistance from stakeholders and business partners.

One area where both perspectives on digital transformation must reach a compromise is risk. If you are successful in building a sense of urgency among your top executives, they may feel that an express digital program is a leap of faith. To reduce anxiety, you

can explain to them that the program will be executed based on best practices, thus mitigating risk.

Another area where the perspectives must intersect is team motivation. A digital transformation team should forge forward in a calculated fashion. However, even the most talented teams can lose motivation and the stakes are much higher with a digital transformation team versus a typical operations or IT project team. There needs to be a true sense of urgency because the team is working to build the organization's future. If it fails, the organization could fail along with it.

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