

- [Business Tips](#)
- [Political and Cultural Observations](#)
- [Personal Notes](#)

## Morrie Shechtman

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From: Morrie Shechtman

Subject: Monthly Newsletter



Morrie Shechtman

It wasn't your imagination – there was no June newsletter. Somehow the month got away from me. There was an announcement of the release of a new book by a good friend and colleague, Mark Deo. I appreciate the positive response of many of you to Mark's book. He has a finely tuned understanding of marketing, shared by very few others. So, here's the July newsletter. Enjoy!

### Business Tips

#### *"How Do You Know If Your People Are Getting It?"*

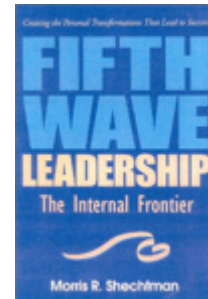
The prolonged economic crisis that we're experiencing is putting a spotlight on what works and what doesn't work in organizational and business life. In particular, it is highlighting the characteristics of people who understand what has shifted in the global economy, and what they need to do in order to assure the survival and growth of their companies. In other words, they "get it." They have three critical characteristics:

1. They are change adaptive
2. They are willing to put relationships at risk
3. They are comfortable being judgmental

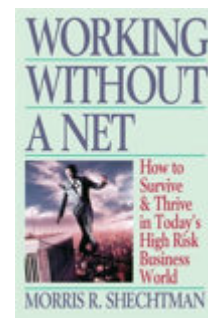
Change adaptive people understand that all change involves loss. Good or bad, change is a process of identifying and coming to terms with the give-ups that accompany the gains implicit in any change (even if the gains involve simply holding on to what you've got). The pace of change, in our time, is not only brutally fast (and continuing to accelerate), it is forcing a lowering of expectations, at all levels of the culture, that most people alive today, have never experienced. I cannot remember a time when I have seen so many people, from so many different walks of life and socioeconomic strata, consciously lowering their expectations and re-ordering their priorities.

Change adaptive people also have the ability to manage their emotions. And I want to emphasize *manage*, not *control*, their emotions. They let themselves experience painful and uncomfortable feelings, and they understand that these feelings are as necessary and helpful, as pleasant and happy feelings. They assume that all feelings are transitory and survivable. On the contrary, change resistant people believe that "bad" feelings will last forever.

People who are willing to put relationships at risk believe that individual



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integrity is the foundation of healthy relationships, and strong and vital organizations. They believe that if you fail to respect yourself, you will fail to respect others, and ultimately, fail to respect any group that you're a part of. In the final analysis, they believe that any relationship worth having is worth leaving.

In this economic climate, it is very tempting to make compromises; particularly if these compromises appear to insure your survival. And certainly some compromises are understandably worth making. One compromise you never want to make is around key relationships that drive your business. That is, relationships with your most significant stakeholders - leaders, employees, customers, lenders, or vendors. Getting into bed with the wrong people can lead very quickly to a fatal disease. And any relationship that violates a core value will sooner or later (usually sooner) corrode and poison an organization from within.

The willingness to be judgmental presupposes clarity of individual core values. This insures complete alignment between an individual and an organization, and eliminates the likelihood of internal sabotage. Given the economic pressures and the fierce, ever increasing competition, the last thing a business needs, these days, is well paid saboteurs, who undermine business momentum by constantly contradicting the values flow of an organization.

One of the least understood prerequisites for a strong, stable, and vital organization is an absolute certainty, amongst its members, of what is right and what is wrong, in all significant individual and organizational behaviors. This certainty provides all stakeholders with the structure and boundaries that are as reassuring and comforting to adults, as discipline is to children. Without this certainty, people flounder, get de-focused, and act out destructively in order to get the limits set. Judgmentalism, in its most helpful manifestation, is the commitment to tell people where you stand and what you believe is acceptable, so that they can decide where they stand and what they find acceptable. This allows people to make choices that are good for them, precisely because they are put up against a clear and measurable standard. No one achieves values clarity in a vacuum. All clarity emerges from the context of a well-articulated and firmly supported system of beliefs.

If this is what people believe who "get it," how do we know when people are not "getting it?" This is critical information in building a culture that will not only survive this economic crisis, but will thrive in its aftermath. There are a number of criteria which I have come to call "The Big Three." When the following behaviors are being exhibited, people aren't getting it:

1. You change the way you are, when you're around someone
2. You give people feedback and they tell you why you're wrong
3. You have the same conversation over and over and over again

If you feel like you can't be yourself around a person you work with, and you need them to make some changes in what they're doing, there's a disconnect between how they see themselves and how the prevailing culture sees them. And this usually means that an unacknowledged special deal has been struck, which is destructive for everyone involved, and for the company as a whole.

There's lots of ways that you can be told that your feedback is wrong. You can be told directly (which is rare); you can be told that you're the



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only one that's ever felt that way; you can be yabuted to death; or, trickiest of all, you can be readily agreed with, but nothing changes. All of these are conveying the same message – "I have no intention of changing who I am, so either take it or leave it."

When you have the same conversation over and over again, you're missing the message being sent; which is – "Change is so frightening for me, that you're going to have to raise the ante, to help me get through my fears." If the pain of not changing is less than the perceived pain of changing, nothing happens.

If you want to help people "get it" and fit into growing, learning, and constantly evolving business cultures, you need to help them identify and begin to grieve and say good-bye to the necessary losses that come with change. In essence, you need to help them say good-bye to who they used to be and welcome who they can become.

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## **Political and Cultural Observations**

### **"Let's Have An Honest Discussion About Race"**

I agree with our Attorney General that we are way overdue for an honest discussion of race. So let's have one. But before we do, let's get rid of the dishonest, politically correct rhetoric that has dominated the dialogue so far, and deal with reality:

There are no "minority groups" in America. There are only groups that have succeeded and there are groups that have failed. If we truly had "minority groups," we'd have affirmative action programs for Orthodox Jews – that's a true minority.

The model for success in our culture has always been, and continues to be set, by middle and upper middle class white folks. If you want to be successful, you act like them, or you learn how to deal with them.

Maintaining your "cultural integrity" is the road to poverty. As in business, staying the way you've always been will guarantee you what you've always gotten. Culture is an evolving concept, dominated by change.

If you want to succeed, you better know the difference between values and rituals. Values are time immemorial principles that speak to the kind of world that one wants to live in. They are culturally neutral, people neutral, and situationally neutral. They apply to everyone and everything, and can evolve out of a myriad of backgrounds and cultures. Rituals are habits and learned behaviors that fit a specific time and place, and bring certain predictability to everyday life.

Success is all about assimilation; and assimilation is a prolonged process of loss. It is a loss of the rituals we grew up with; the habits that gave us great comfort because of their familiarity. It is not, and should never be, a loss of core values. It is, in fact, a discovery of those values in a context that, initially, may seem foreign and strange. Any society that has effectively shared its benefits with the majority of its citizens has required assimilation to a clearly understood norm. Whether or not we recognize it, that's what we mean when we refer to the United States as a "melting pot." Those societies that have failed to provide for their

people (and have, in fact, brutalized and dehumanized them) are uniformly committed to segmentation and tribalism. You don't need to be a cultural anthropologist to see this.

Successful people understand, mostly on an intuitive level, how to grieve. And they have integrated the grieving process into the repertoire of their skill sets. They long ago realized that to gain the benefits of the society they find themselves in, they would have to pay a price – they would have to sustain some losses. Over the course of three decades, I have worked with many successful African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and other “minorities.” To a person, they have all had to identify and decide to leave behind parts of who they were, in order to become who they would like to be.

“Minorities” have struggled and continue to struggle in business, because they choose to hold onto habits, mannerisms, and ritualized behaviors that either puzzle or offend customers and clients. I have worked for many years with managers, executives, and business owners, in a myriad of industries, from Fortune 50 companies to family businesses of twenty people. And during those years, in hundreds of organizations, I have come across a handful of true bigots – individuals who discounted and dismissed people because of their race, gender, religion, or ethnicity. The rest were quite willing to give all comers the opportunity, given *their* willingness to act in a manner that was compatible with the values, norms, and language of the organization and its clientele. These employers didn't always like everyone they hired, nor did they want to be their best friends. But they were willing to invest time, money, and other resources in their training and development. And after this investment, the return has been and continues to be, predominantly disappointing and poor. The vast majority of “minority” individuals who go thru this process choose not to use what they were taught, or go right out and use it in a manner that puts off the clientele.

I have met a number of the leaders and spokespersons for “minority” groups (and have seen most of them in the media). And I have always been impressed by the fact that, without exception, they speak the King's English, they dress like Wall Street bankers, and they work a room of donors like Bill Clinton. And, yet, when the issue of accountability for irresponsible acts and reprehensible behavior arises, they exploit the victimization card in a heartbeat. This reaches its zenith in the intellectual apologies and rationalizations for criminal behavior. I have often wondered why these leaders don't assume and insist that their followers act like them.

Making the choices I'm talking about and sustaining the concomitant losses is not easy. In fact, it is extraordinarily difficult and courageous. It means facing a slew of obstacles – family, friends, and subculture, and risking one relationship after another. I think of two individuals I worked with over the years, who have achieved much, faced very tough choices, and said goodbye to big chunks of their past.

One is a Black man in a managerial role in a large financial services company. He comes from humble roots, has siblings who have made poor choices in their lives, and has not had great encouragement to succeed, from the subculture he was raised in. He has an amazing commitment to his work (I don't know anyone who works harder); he is an avid and lifelong learner; and he is a superb teacher. What I admire and respect about him most, is his willingness to entertain information that is not only new, but even alien to what he has

previously thought, and stay open and receptive to it. If it then makes sense to him, he incorporates it and uses it immediately to make changes in his life and the lives of others. This requires the courage to leave parts of him behind, which I've seen him do a number of times.

The other is a Hispanic woman who is a vice-president and key leader in a high-end retail business. When I first met her, she was a secretary/assistant, who struck me as having extraordinary insights into the people around her. As she steadily mustered the courage to share her insights with company executives, her talents were progressively rewarded and she rose rapidly through the ranks, to a senior management position. Her greatest struggle, as she gained more and more responsibility and authority, was not with the corporate hierarchy – they were consistently ahead of her in recognizing her readiness to move ahead. The most resistant obstacles were her family of origin, her subcultural ties, and her own internal battle to leave behind the role she had been raised to play. Those closest to her, with few exceptions, were not supportive – at best, they had resentful respect for her advancement. Her courage has always impressed me, and I have nothing but admiration for her commitment to continually take herself on – to steadfastly maintain her core values and let go of rituals that threatened to hold her back.

My grandfather was an Orthodox Jew. He went to temple every morning before he caught the bus to go to his job in the center of the city. His religion infused his life. He and my grandmother respected and observed the Sabbath, kept a kosher home, and lived a very modest life. He never learned how to drive, and never desired to own a car. He spoke English at work and to his grandchildren, but he was most comfortable speaking Yiddish. He saw much horror in his youth and experienced much loss and suffering in his life. And he never remembered a time when there wasn't a virulent anti-Semitism.

My grandfather modeled, for me, the values that have permeated and directed my life – individual responsibility, accountability, a love of learning, and a drive to continually grow and succeed. But the greatest gift he gave me came during a conversation when I was a young man. I remember it vividly, because he was a man of few words, and rarely talked to us directly. He looked me straight in the eye and said – “If you want to be successful, don't act like us.” His meaning was clear as a bell. And I have never forgotten his words.

I have tried, in my life, to never compromise my values. Honing to them has not always been easy; nor has it been easy to say goodbye to many of the rituals and customs I grew up with. There is some sadness mixed in with the growth and gratification, but the choices have been well worth it.

I hope, as a society, we can move beyond the clichés of identity politics, condescending caretaking, and “minority” victimization. We need to help people discover their *value* and their *values* and be able to move beyond their ritualistic constraints and disabling pasts. It has been my experience, that the ultimate act of courage is the willingness to overcome one's history.

## Personal Notes

### “Me and Michael Jackson”

I have always considered Michael Jackson to be a tragic figure. And I mean “tragic” in the classical sense of the original Greek dramas, where an event, or series of events, once consummated, sets off an inevitable, lifelong pattern of choices and interactions that have a destructive, often fatal outcome. Everyone from media pundits to TV shrinks has noted Michael’s lack of a true childhood, and his rocket-like ascendancy to stardom. He has been labeled lately, a case of stunted or delayed development; a perpetual child in search of a true family. Much of this analysis has some truth. For me, though, the true tragedy lies in the reduction of Michael Jackson, from the earliest of times in his life, to a single characteristic – his uncanny ability to perform and absolutely captivate and galvanize an audience.

Over the years, I have worked with many superstars – fabulously successful business people, professional athletes, well-known entertainers and politicians. What has always struck me, about most of them, was their own definition of themselves. They all had reduced themselves to a single, admittedly extraordinary, characteristic. They were driven and shrewd, strong and fast, blindingly beautiful, or compellingly charismatic. This view of themselves, rarely extended beyond this characteristic. And this was, at one and the same time, their greatest strength and their saddest weakness. It caused them enormous internal torment, because if that characteristic was all they were, they could never have enough of it to reassure themselves that they were ok. I always remember a strikingly beautiful model/actress I worked with, that literally disfigured herself in one vain attempt after another, to “fix” features that she considered imperfect.

When I was in middle school, in the Jurassic period (the 1950’s), I was chosen to be one of forty students to go through a super-accelerated, “gifted” program at what we were told was the best public high school in the nation. The former Soviet Union had launched a satellite (Sputnik) and appeared to be way ahead of the U.S. in space exploration. Our reaction was to launch a national initiative to create a space program and fast track the development of space scientists. Our group of forty was some of the first participants in the program. We had all our core courses together for all four years of high school, with hand-picked faculty. The curriculum was designed at the top universities in the country and flown into our school on a regular basis. And we graduated from high school (after taking the requisite AP tests) as college juniors, with advanced placement in math, chemistry and physics.

We were continually told, when we were chosen, and all through the program, how smart and brilliant we were. We were intellectually and practically segregated from the other students, and our specialness, and that of the program we were in, was constantly reinforced. Our parents were flattered and we were thoroughly seduced by all the attention. The casualties from the program were numerous. In the years after graduation that I kept in touch with a number of people, there were a number of suicides and wasted lives. And I can only speculate at the number of participants who lead meaningless and empty lives. One of my friends in the program, an M.D., Ph.D. in his early twenties, has never had a meaningful relationship, to the best of my knowledge.

For reasons that I had no conscious awareness of at the time, I turned down the advanced placement opportunities and didn't apply to the selected group of universities that we were targeted toward. I entered the University of Michigan as a regular freshman, and got my degree as an English major. I remember that many people felt sorry for me and my parents, and few understood my choices at the time.

Being smart has served me well, in a number of ways. It has helped me develop a unique career, using my various backgrounds in an atypical and creative manner. It has also been an albatross. It has narrowed my perspective on many aspects of life, and has lead me to be rigid and unbending, when flexibility and openness would have served me better. And it has been a consistent challenge to my ability to fully connect with, and become intimate with those I care most for.

So, what does this have to do with Michael Jackson and lessons about life? What it says to me, is to be careful, in your view of yourself, as well as your views of others, to not pigeon-hole people to their most outstanding characteristic. It is very tempting to do this with our children, with our friends, and with those that we admire and respect. And it may seem normal and positive in the short run. In the long run, it is no gift. We are a lot more than our most outstanding talent.

Morrie

Tell us what you think – [click here](#) to send us an e-mail with your feedback.

We've had a number of requests for materials about our work. Here's the link to our online store: <http://www.fifthwaveleadership.com/store.cfm>



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