It’s just an email, not a saber-toothed tiger

The beginning of Bill Kirst’s life was tumultuous to say the least. Born to American parents in Tehran during the Iranian Revolution, Bill’s family moved to Warsaw, Poland the day after communism fell. Several years later, they landed in Moscow shortly after another end of a communist regime. Mind-bending change. Last year he joined Microsoft as a Director of Change, so some would say destiny guided his career path. But there was much more to it than that.

He’s led people through change for more than 20 years, saying it’s a passion that found him, not the other way around. During that time, he’s learned a lot about dealing with the loneliness of change and the importance of embracing it rather than dealing with it.

Don’t miss the latest edition of the Powered By The People podcast to hear Bill’s thoughts on the psychology of change and why we react the way we do when our boss says, “Hey, do you have a moment for a chat?” Here’s a short preview.

Following the shifting wind

People ask how I found my way to leading others through change. I didn’t set out for it. It’s like sailing. Sometimes the wind shifts your sailboat and you have to adjust. I was doing technology consulting where people were having difficult discussions about which path to take. I learned I was one of the few people in the room who could calm folks down and give them a sense of vision. Someone told me, “You do this really well. It’s called business transformation or change management.”

The power of storytelling

When a lot of change is happening in your life, sometimes the only way you can make sense of it is by creating a sense of who you are and a sense of the world. You can do that through storytelling. Looking back at those times in my life when things didn’t make sense and my heart was breaking a little bit, what I did was write poetry, read books, write lyrics. That was how I got through those tough chapters. To me that’s what change is all about: making sense of the world through stories and co-creation.
Listening to the silence

I love a quote by the author Wayne Dyer where he says it’s the silence between the notes makes the music. During COVID I think many people gave themselves permission for the first time to really look inward. In some ways it was like the silence between the notes. We slowed down. The world slowed down. We spent more time in silence than we did in the notes. It was in that silence that we started to inquire who am I in the world? What’s really important to me? And what mark do I want to leave on the world?

Fleeing the tiger

A lot of human psychology goes into navigating change. We think we’ve evolved, but the brain hasn’t that much. We still have a very reptilian brain.

If we get an unexpected email with news we don’t want, the body has an adrenaline-driven fight-or-flight response, as if we’re running from a saber-toothed tiger. That’s where meditation and mindfulness in the face of change has really helped me.

Your own reality

There are things you do that are so unique they make you who you are. Do not give that up. Focus on that and then craft your own reality. I think that’s the piece that helps people get through change because then they don’t have to sacrifice who they are. They can say, “Yes, I see where we’re going, but I’m going to do it this way with my own strengths, my own skills, my own gifts.”