



ESSAY - Roberta Bondar

## The Art of Adapting

What does an astronaut have in common with a grounded Earthling? Have you ever wondered what it's like when we first get into space? Used to living, working and training with gravity on Earth, astronauts in space are suddenly released into a new environment where performing previously routine activities now need to account for everything floating. We move into a period of confused thinking that comes with the sudden disorientation of seeing things at angles and upside down until we learn to adjust ourselves to be productive.

Did you know that there are similarities to entering the weightlessness of space to what happens when we face sudden change on Earth?

There is change everywhere and at anytime, in business and in our personal lives. Take trying out a new shopping mall, or a new school, new computer software, new anything. It makes us feel inefficient, much like rookies needing to gain experience as soon as possible in order to make good use of time. If we walk in one direction for our exercise and then one day decide to reverse our direction, we may miss a turn because things look different from another angle. We also may find that what we have done in the past no longer works. Sometimes we have done things so automatically that having to do them in another way will disorient us. Re-organization of any kind that is suddenly thrust upon us will prove to be disorienting.

If we are not prepared, we plunge in without knowing how long it will take us to adapt. Basically, we find ourselves in a period of disorientation until we figure it out. The more sudden the change, the more disoriented we become. Preparing perfectly so that we do not land in a disorienting period at any time means that we have to be clairvoyant. As human beings, this is just not possible. New and unknown variables can suddenly appear to confound us, especially if we set ourselves on a specific course of action without the tools to cope. We *can* understand and train, however, in the principles of dealing with transition to reduce the time in which we are disoriented.

Given that disorientation is normal, especially with sudden change, and that the severity can increase with the seriousness of the precipitating event, we must understand that this should be viewed as a transition period. The shorter the time spent being disoriented, the faster we will move into a new way of approaching and solving the initial problem. What are the top things that business leaders do that lengthen the time spent being disoriented? Answer: the logical things that make sense at the time but in reality just help them get lost as the original application becomes inappropriate.

Whether we are astronauts or down to earth business people, the confused feelings that accompany being disoriented are similar as the body has a limited number of



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ways to express itself. Think of it as having gravity removed from our normal activities where the rule that things will fall into place, courtesy of gravity, becomes violated. It stands to reason that we would want to achieve a new balance as quickly as possible if we are going to function at a meaningful productive level.

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