

❖ The Gorilla Story

Why This Story?

Change is irritating. It is confusing, mysterious, unsettling, yet undeniable. It knocks us off balance. It frequently pushes us beyond our comfort zones. We're compelled to run faster and faster just to keep up. And there's no end in sight, no resting.

Because of the nature of things, we have to abandon what isn't working. We must create new ways of being in the world and with each other. This is very demanding, energy-consuming work. We find ourselves reacting to changes proposed or demanded by others—parents, businesspeople, legislators, boards of education, et al.—while the real task, it seems to us, is to proactively create our future together. The alternative is to react defensively to changes being thrust upon us, thereby creating a future not chosen, into which we stumble, instead of a future we actively helped shape.

How do we react to change in our setting? Should we navigate a proposed change? If so, how? How do we keep the best of the old, yet be open to creating new, responsive, and intelligent practices and protocols? Is change inside or outside us? How do we do it best? And who defines change? How do we remain sane and civil while exploring our common future? And where do we find the time (not to mention energy) to investigate, consider, and create?



Begin by reading the story yourself. Decide whether you will use the story in your training. Make some notes about how the story does or does not fit with your work at this time. You also might want to expand on the ideas above.

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The Story: The Gorilla Story



This story starts with a cage containing five gorillas and a large bunch of bananas hanging above some stairs in the center of the cage. Before long, a gorilla goes to the stairs and starts to climb toward the bananas. As soon as he touches the stairs, all the gorillas are sprayed with cold water. After a while, another gorilla makes an attempt and gets the same result—all the gorillas are sprayed with cold water. Every time a gorilla attempts to retrieve the bananas, the others are sprayed. Eventually, they quit trying and leave the bananas alone.

One of the original gorillas is removed from the cage and replaced with a new one. The new gorilla sees the bananas and starts to climb the stairs. To his horror, all the other gorillas attack him. After another attempt and attack, he knows that if he tries to climb the stairs he will be assaulted. Next, the second of the original five gorillas is replaced with a new one. The newcomer goes to the stairs and is attacked. The previous newcomer takes part in the punishment with enthusiasm.

Next the third original gorilla is replaced with a new one. The new one goes for the stairs and is attacked as well. Two of the four gorillas that beat him have no idea why they were not permitted to climb the stairs or why they are participating in the beating of the newest gorilla.

After the fourth and fifth original gorillas have been replaced, all the gorillas that were sprayed with cold water are gone. Nevertheless, no gorilla will ever again approach the stairs. Why not?

“Because that’s the way it has always been done.”

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