



In praise of chaos

Are you making the most of it?

When John and Betty bought their first pharmacy in 1995, generic prices were 70 percent of brand-name prices, there were no caps on professional allowances, most of their competitors were independents like them, and automation was practically nonexistent. Independent pharmacy was a good place to be. Less than two decades later, the picture is very different: their prescription count has shot up due to an aging population, but revenues have headed south (like the snowbirds!).



Realizing that their business had changed forever, John and Betty took measures two years ago to cut costs and try to increase revenue. But it has not been easy. Pharmaceutical companies and

government were flooding them with programs to expand their roles beyond dispensing and, allegedly, increase profitability, but John and Betty didn't know where to begin, growing increasingly overwhelmed by the demands of the daily business and the longer-term rebuilding process. They felt lost in a no-man's land.

Being confronted by major change in our lives, whether personal or professional, and deciding to let go of the past to tackle things in a new way presents us with a space, or gap, between the known and the unknown, similar to the no-man's land John and Betty are currently crossing – transition experts call it the “neutral zone”. When we arrive there, most of us are likely to feel confused, disoriented, lost, and uncomfortable. John, a very accomplished businessman, began struggling with decision-making. Betty, the calm and “controlled” one, felt anxious and unsettled. The neutral zone will do that to us, and our tendency to want to move on and get out of it as fast as possible is to be expected – but is it wise?

Think of Moses, who spent 40 years patiently guiding his people through the desert before they reached the promised land. According to the Bible, this was no accidental journey, but one intended to give Moses and his followers the time to introspect and learn. That is the unique opportunity the neutral zone provides for creativity and innovation.

Should John and Betty, or anyone else for that matter, embrace 40 years in the neutral zone? Of course not, but the parable underscores the principle that time spent in no-man's land can be enriching. Crossing the gap with our heads up is essential to any transition caused by major change, and allows for learning and creativity as we move from the “old” way of doing things to the “new”.

The chaos experienced in the neutral zone put John and Betty on a path to reinventing their pharmacy business, by taking the time to answer three fundamental questions: What aspect of pharmacy were they truly passionate about? In what pharmacy services do they excel? And what unmet patient/customer needs could they satisfy better than their competitors? They also took advantage of the “neutral zone” by investing in learning – a wise decision since learning, formal or otherwise, has been shown to enhance our ability to apply new perspectives to old problems and arrive at innovative solutions.

Making the most of temporary chaos experienced in the neutral zone can be very productive – a very fertile ground for creativity and learning, when crossed at the right speed. So when you find yourself there, take your time, look around, talk to others, reflect, brainstorm, learn, experi-

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ment, etc. Remember John and Betty, who took the opportunity to learn new skills and gather new perspectives by turning temporary chaos and uncertainty into an exciting new beginning – a prescription for success too often overlooked by business owners and leaders. **PB**

Before creating Transition Consulting Services, Hani Kafoury spent more than 27 years in the corporate world. His experience spans family-owned businesses to multinationals, where he worked his way from a sales representative to senior leadership positions in sales, marketing, government relations, communications and corporate affairs.