

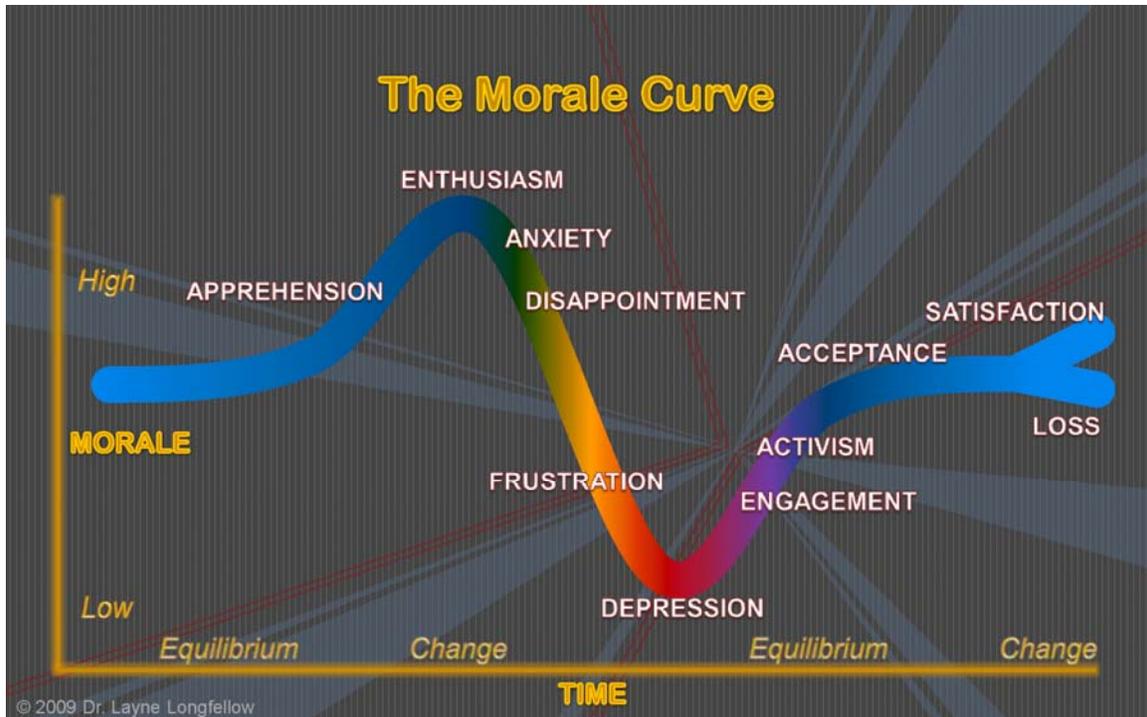
OBAMA & THE MORALE CURVE ---

SHIFT HAPPENS

The currents of Obamanism are shifting; we can all feel it, and we look around for the cause. The cause is simple — Shift Happens. (If ever that pun were appropriate, this is it.)

Morale shifts predictably over time. As we cast about for the “events” to which we can attribute changes in the nation’s attitudes, we ignore the underlying human element: the luxurious enthusiasm that greeted the Obama election actually ensured what would come next — a trough of morale as deep as the peak of enthusiasm was high. The decline would be happening no matter the events of these last nine months; the “events” are not irrelevant, they are just not determinant.

Adaptation to positive change follows a predictable pattern, (Fig. 1) called the “Morale Curve,” and America is having an Obamanable one.



The Morale Curve was identified in the '60s by Dr. Walter Menninger, when investigating premature resignations among Peace Corps volunteers.

Those premature dropouts make sense when you think about it – it was the idealistic 60s, and Peace Corps volunteers embodied the ethos of the era – they signed up to save the world.

The world notably resists being saved.

And the real job of Peace Corps volunteers turned out to be the essence of ordinariness – laborious repetition

in the teaching of basic skills; manual labor of the most peasantly sort; securing the basics of life that could previously be taken for granted (drinking water, for example); all carried out in a non-native language.

This is a redefinition of self that requires Protean adaptive skills; it is hardly surprising that many didn't make it.

Fast forward to a new century. The people of America and the world responded with unprecedented excitement to the election of President Obama. There was widespread agreement that the world needed saving perhaps as never before, and this man's dignity, intelligence and charisma suggested he just might be the man for the job. He seemed to sign on with all the audacity of hope of those volunteers of last mid-century.

But audacity lost hope in a number of those volunteers. Menninger found that morale typically bottomed out around six to nine months, when resignations from the Corps peaked. It's now nearly

nine months from January 20, 2009, and the wolves have been at the door for about the last three, sensing their window of opportunity. They got their timing just right. They, we the people, and the media all gave them credit for bringing the ratings down. In truth, all they did was ride the natural wave that would have crested and fallen, flowed and ebbed, in any case.

Ironically, the Obama morale curve has been exaggerated by its historical context. Typically, a moment of positive change is preceded by a period of equilibrium, of moderate morale. But U.S. morale prior to the Obama election was at record lows. This potentiated our enthusiasm with a palliative dose of relief.

And typically, as positive change approaches, uplifting morale is accompanied by a sense of apprehension – “Am I really qualified for this new job?” “Will this marriage work?”

Then the moment of the promotion, or of the wedding -- or of the new, capable

leader -- releases a burst of enthusiasm.

But no being and no circumstance is perfect; fantasy inevitably beggars reality, so we enter the "Crisis of Disappointment" -- disappointment follows unrealistic expectations; frustration provokes anger. Nationally, vested interests have exacerbated this natural process, and we are seeing the wrathful outcome, from "tea parties" to town hall meetings.

Among Obama supporters, this natural process of disappointment has become depression, and the depth mirrors the height of the initial enthusiasm - the higher and less realistic the initial enthusiasm, the deeper the trough of depression.

It is for this reason that the Morale Curve came to be included among the inoculations that volunteers received before going abroad:

First, get realistic about the real tasks ahead, so the high is not illusory.

Second, know that disappointment and depression are "normal"; don't get depressed over being depressed.

And what to do to lift the depression? Anything. Seriously, a recommended cure for situational depression is activity of almost any sort; hence the "Crisis of Engagement."

Those volunteers who "hung in there" became active in the mundanity of manageable change – change they could believe in. As they immersed themselves in their "real" tasks, their depression lifted.

Almost as a prophetic prescription, community activism and national service were at the heart of Obama's inaugural exhortations. Do something.

But HE is the President. He is the leader, and must take the responsibility for initiating the activism that might lift the apparent depression. That was the function of

his address to the joint Houses – he came out fighting, acting out against the events and the forces that have been exaggerating the trough of morale. In so doing, he did exactly what the underlying natural human process required. To whatever extent an uptick in his approval ratings follows, it is a function of his activism – and of what just naturally follows the “bottoming out.”

Barack Obama will not govern perfectly, reality will not match fantasy, our hopes and dreams – and his – will become the dailiness of governing. So in these early months, as President Obama’s approval rating drops to equal that of President Bush on Sept. 10, 2001, it will serve us to see our flagging fervor as a typical curve of human adaptation, and to take it in stride as the natural process that it is. We’re at about nine months.

So get down, take on the mundane, ordinary, daily tasks of democracy, and enter the Crisis of Engagement. It’s far more enjoyable than feeding at the trough of depression.

"Be the change you wish to see," Gandhi is quoted. "Change we can believe in" is the change we become.

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