Necessary Endings

The Employees, Businesses, and Relationships That All of Us Have to Give Up in Order to Move Forward

THE SUMMARY

Chapter 1—Endings: The Good Cannot Begin Until the Bad Ends

Why endings? Whether we like it or not, endings are part of life. They are woven into the fabric of life itself, both when it goes well and when it doesn't. Getting to the next level always requires ending something, leaving it behind, and moving on. Without the ability to end things, people stay stuck, never becoming who they are meant to be, never accomplishing all that their talents and abilities should afford them.

Endings matter in both our business and personal lives. Businesses must sometimes let go of old product lines or even entire areas of business whose day has passed if they are going to turn things around or enable growth to occur. In our personal lives, relationships need to end, practices must be relinquished, and life stages must end to open up the space for the next one.

Endings are not only part of life; they are a requirement for living and thriving, professionally and personally. But without the ability to do endings well, we flounder, stay stuck, and fail to reach our goals and dreams. Or worse, we remain in painful and sometimes destructive situations. Endings are crucial, but we rarely like them. Hence the problem.
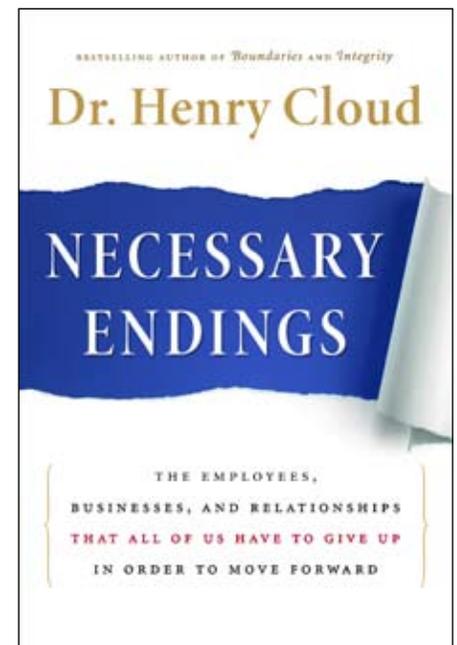
About the Author

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While endings are necessary, the truth is that we often don't do them well. Most of us humans avoid them or botch them. The global economic crisis of 2008 caused many companies to make major changes, like the American auto industry, which was forced to finally discontinue brands that cost more to make than they produced in profits. In the months after the meltdown, many leaders told me things like: "Some of this crisis was good for us. These are changes we should have made years ago." Which raises the question: why weren't those changes made?

Answers to the "why" questions typically have little to do with the business itself. Something about the leader's personal makeup gets in their way. Leaders are people, and people have issues that get in the way of the best-made ideas, plans, and realities. And when it comes to endings, there is no shortage of issues that keep people stuck.

The problem is that when we fail to end things well, we are destined to repeat the mistakes that keep us from moving on. We choose the same kind of dysfunctional person or demoralizing job again. Learning how to do endings well and how to learn from the experience allows us to move beyond patterns of behavior that may have tripped us up in the past.

Chapter 2: Pruning—Growth Depends on Getting Rid of the Unwanted or the Superfluous

In order to grow a rose to its full beauty, a gardener needs to learn to prune the rosebush. Pruning is a process of proactive endings. It turns out that rosebuds cannot reach their full potential without a systematic process of pruning. The gardener intentionally cuts off branches and buds that fall into any of three categories:

1.   Healthy buds or branches that are not the best ones (rosebushes produce more buds than the life of the plant can sustain).
2.   Sick branches that are not going to get well (this enables the plant to pour even more life into the healthy buds).

3.   Dead branches that are taking up space needed for the healthy ones to thrive (healthy branches need room to reach their full length and height).

Like rosebushes, your business and your life also need the same three types of pruning to be all that you desire. Pruning is the central theme of necessary endings: removing whatever it is in our business or personal life whose reach is unwanted or superfluous. The areas of your business and life that require your limited resources—your time, energy, talent, emotions, money—but are not achieving the vision you have for them should be pruned. Without pruning, the results of your efforts will be average. Not average compared to other people; average compared to who you could be or what you could do—average compared to your own potential.

As bad as the results of not pruning can be, we still persist in avoiding it because of fear, pain, and conflict. Yet in order to succeed, we must prune. For many of us this creates an internal conflict. If we accept that pruning is necessary but struggle to align ourselves with this reality, we will have a hard time realizing our vision of the future and our potential. But if we can become aware of our resistances and internal conflicts, we can begin to face and work through them.

Once we get past our resistance, the first step in pruning is to ask "What does a rose look like?" In other words, you need to know what you are aiming at; you need to know what you are pruning towards. In our personal life, that means figuring out who you are and who you want to be. Two questions apply: How will you define success? And, how will you measure it?

All of your precious resources—time, energy, talent, passion, money—should only go to the buds of your life or your business that are the best, are fixable, and are indispensable. Otherwise, average sets in.

Chapter 3: Normalizing Necessary Endings—Welcome the Seasons of Life into Your Worldview

The first step to moving forward is identifying what you really think about endings and then assess where your internal resistance is. The second step is this: Make endings a normal occurrence and a normal part of business and life, instead of seeing them as problems. This ties into how the human brain works.

If a situation falls within the range of normal, expected, and known, the human brain automatically marshals all available resources and moves to engage it. But if the brain interprets a situation as negative, a fight-or-flight response kicks in that causes us to resist it. In the context of endings, if your brain sees them as normal, or good, you will embrace them and take action to execute them. Endings have to be perceived as a normal part of life. There are three organizing principles that will help you make endings both necessary and normal:

Accept Life Cycles and Seasons. Life is composed of cycles and seasons; nothing lasts forever. Sowing seeds happens in the spring; watering and fertilizing in the summer; harvesting in the fall; reviewing and transitioning in the winter. Problems arise when we don't accept the seasons. All have a start and an end. Endings are easier to embrace and execute when you believe something normal is happening.

Accept That Life Produces Too Much Life. One reason pruning is necessary is that the bush produces more buds than it can bring to full maturity. Life is the same. Life produces more relationships than you can nurture; more activities than you can keep up with; more products than you can focus on; more strategies than you can execute. So by definition you are going to have to be in the letting-go phase all through life. Successful people know how to prune and how to invest their resources for maximum impact.

Accept That Incurable Sickness and Evil Exist. Your business and life will change when you really, really understand that some people are not going to

change, no matter what you do, and that still others have a vested interest in being destructive. Once you accept this, some very necessary endings get easier. Until then you might find yourself working much longer than you should to get someone to change.

This chapter is about getting in line with reality. Many people wish for a different universe than the one in which we live. They want every day to be harvest day, and they want a world where they have no limits. They don't want it to be true that at some point, they run out of time and energy and have to make hard choices. They want a limitless life where time and space are not realities.

Chapter 4: When Stuck Is the New Normal—The Difference Between Pain With a Purpose and Pain for No Good Reason

Life and business involve pain. Sometimes creating an ending might cause a little hurt, like pulling a tooth. But it is good pain. There is another kind of pain, however, which should not be embraced, one that you should work hard to end. This is the pain of a misery that goes nowhere. Anytime you see pain that is going nowhere fast, it should be a warning. You may have become so acclimated to the misery that you no longer see it as pain but view it as normal. Or you have concluded that there is nothing you can do about it; it's out of your control. You develop what is called "learned helplessness."

So now we get to the next step in the process of making necessary endings a part of your repertoire. First, I asked you to look at how you felt about pruning in general. Next, I asked you to begin to normalize endings. And now the third step: Identify the internal maps that keep you from the endings you need to execute. Pain is supposed to move us to something; if it doesn't, something is wrong. Sometimes people get stuck and become more prone to inaction than action.

Normally, when you see something is good to do, you will do it, unless your mental software says that it

isn't good to do. We have all developed belief systems about endings and our past experiences with them. Following are five common belief systems that can inhibit us from embracing endings.

1.   Having an Abnormally High Pain Threshold. Some people become accustomed to a high level of pain in their upbringing, and they begin to think of it as normal, which causes them to stay in situations they should have ended long before.
2.   Covering for Others. Some people take too much responsibility for others. They feel like "it all depends on them" and don't end things when they should.
3.   Believing That Ending It Means "I Failed." For some, to end or "quit" anything makes you a quitter instead of wise. Even worse, the label often gets attached to the self, so we think "I am a quitter" rather than "I decided to fold on this particular hand." In other words, our identity gets linked to a specific outcome. Obviously, that makes it hard to end anything.
4.   Misunderstood Loyalty. Loyalty is not infinite, nor should it include taking responsibility for someone else's life (like not making a decision that would be good for them but requires the other person to take some responsibility for the outcome).
5.   Codependent Mapping. It's actually harmful to take responsibility for helping other people avoid pain; it isn't loving or supportive.

Chapter 5: Getting to the Pruning Moment—Realistic, Hopeless, and Motivated

Successful people and successful leaders all have one thing in common: they get in touch with reality. If you are looking for the formula that can get you motivated and fearless, here it is: you must finally see reality for what it is; in other words, that what is not working is not going to magically begin working. If something isn't working, you must admit that what you are doing to get it to work is hopeless. The awareness of hopelessness is what finally brings people to the reality of the pruning moment. It's the moment when they wake up, realize that an ending must occur, and finally feel energized to do it. Those that have the

greatest difficulty abandoning things are often those unable to face reality.

Fully embracing reality is not only the "Aha!" of the pruning moment, it is also the fuel that can give you the courage to execute the difficult decisions. It brings empowerment to do what is otherwise difficult. The first step that will motivate you to do what is necessary is to see that what you are doing has no hope of getting you what you want. With this realization, you will instantly feel the epiphany that you must make changes. So hopelessness can bring us closer to fearlessness, as it does not take courage to stop doing what you know is not going to work.

Let's look at it from the other side. Hope is one of the most powerful forces in the universe. And that is the problem. Hope is always about holding on when it looks bad and being able to hold on sometimes for a long time. But there is a difference between real hope and false hope. False hope is a desire with no grounds, no foundation. It is hope based not on reality but on our desires. In the absence of real, objective reasons to think that more time is going to help, it is probably time for some type of necessary ending.

The key question is this: What reason, other than the fact that I want this to work, do I have for believing that tomorrow is going to be different from today?

Chapter 6: Hoping Versus Wishing—The Difference Between What's Worth Fixing and What Should End

The last thing you want to do is go through a major ending for no good reason. The other last thing you want to do is to continue to hold on when an ending is needed. But how do you tell the difference? Let's look at some helpful signs that you can rely on to determine whether you have real hope and should carry on or just a wish that may need an ending.

The first sign—remember that the past is the best predictor of the future. When a credit card company decides whether to extend you credit, they don't look

at how hopeful or enthusiastic you are to pay them back; they looks at your past performance in paying people back, and then they know what to expect you to do in the future. You might object that people can change; that's true, but the key is this: there needs to be good reason to believe that someone is going to do better. Without any good reason to believe differently, the past is the best predictor of the future.

A second sign is to look forward into the future. Take past performance and project it into the future:

--Do I want this same reality, frustration, or problem 6 months from now?
--Do I want this same level of performance a year from now?

If the answer is no, then it is time to ask some other questions:

--What reason is there to have hope that tomorrow is going to be different?
--What in the picture is changing that I can believe in?

The third signpost—look at the people you are dealing with. People often forget to think about whom they are depending on to "get it done." Instead, they look at what they want or wish to happen and forget who the person actually is. Is there a reason to expect them to act a certain way? Do they have a history of being dependable, creative, and of following through? Or the opposite? And if I'm expecting them to act differently—why? Is there any objective reason for that, other than their desire to change or my hope they will? Without an objective reason, the odds are high they will act consistently with their history.

Chapter 7: The Wise, the Foolish, and the Evil—Identifying Which Kinds of People Deserve Your Trust

The time when you get to hopelessness can be one of the best moments for your future. To give up hope that something is going to change when it is not going to gets you unstuck immediately and brings

energy. It brings life to the sickness of hope deferred. Some of the most difficult decisions involve people. How do you know when to invest the effort with someone to work on making things better and when you should tell them that you are done talking about it?

If you are a responsible and loving person, you might assume that other people are like you—responsible and loving. But the truth is that not everyone on planet earth is like you. Not everyone takes responsibility for themselves or care about how their actions are affecting other people, themselves, or their mission.

In dealing with people, the one thing that will help you the most is the ability to diagnose character. Once you learn the character traits that give real reason to hope that tomorrow can be different, you can know better whom you want to invite into your tomorrow. You can actually know that there is a real reason to go forward.

There are basically three types of people in the world, or better, three styles of behavior that a person can exhibit in a particular time or context. These three categories of people are very different in what motivates them and what sustains them, so you need to realize: you can't deal with everyone the same way. The three types are:

1.   Wise people
2.   Foolish people
3.   Evil people

Wise people are those who can receive feedback, learn from their experience, and make adjustments. The way to identify a wise person is this: when truth presents itself, the wise person sees the light, takes it in, and makes adjustments. Wise people will always grow and get better, so if you are dealing with one, you have good reason to hope.

So how does that help you in dealing with hopelessness? It tells you whether or not more time is justified in finding out if someone can get better. Whether or

not a person has the traits of wisdom will likely tell you if they will be fixable or not. You can't fix people who will not take feedback, because from their perspective they don't have a problem. But if a person can take feedback or coaching, and use it, there is a real reason for hope.

The foolish person is different. He will reject feedback, resist it, explain it away, and do nothing about it. The fool tries to adjust the truth so he doesn't have to adjust to it. He always sees the problem as being "out there" rather than in him. Giving feedback is then hopeless, and ultimately there is no point in continuing to give it.

Note: foolish does not mean dumb or lacking talent. Actually, a fool may be "the smartest person in the room" or the most gifted or charming. Because of that, fools often keep us confused because of their many wonderful attributes. The bottom line, however, is their lack of willingness to receive feedback.

So how do you deal with a fool? Since talking doesn't get anywhere—stop talking! You need to have a different conversation. Talk about a new problem: the new problem to talk about is that talking doesn't help. So, now the conversation shifts to limits and consequences. Set limits that stop the damage of their refusal to change, and where appropriate, give consequences that will cause them to feel the pain of their choice to not listen.

There are always consequences to behavior; the question is who is going to pay them. With fools, the only time they "get it" is when it begins to cost them. So, in terms of when to have hope and when not to, if you are hoping that someone who is in denial is going to get it and change, but there is nothing in the picture to force that change other than your desire, that is probably a wish and not real, objective, hope.

The third group I call "evil." For some people it is a big step to realize that there are people in the world who hurt you—not unintentionally the way a foolish person does but because they want to. There are

some people whose desire it is to hurt others and do destructive things. With them you have to protect yourself, your loved ones, your company, your mission, etc.

Many leaders think they can reason with anyone and get through to them. But evil people are not reasonable. They seek to destroy. Do not hope for the evil person to change. It could happen, and does, but not by giving in to them, reasoning with them, or giving them another chance to hurt you. It happens when they are forced to. Jail does some people good.

Understanding the differences between wise, foolish, and evil people will help you recognize if there is a real basis for hope, or if you are just engaging in wishful thinking.

Chapter 8: Creating Urgency—Stay Motivated and Energized for Change

Endings, no matter how needed, are hard. They involve change, and for many reasons that we have seen, we resist the changes that we need to make, even when they would be good for us personally or for our business. We have looked at some of the things that stop us or slow us down; now we want to look at some of the accelerators that will get us moving, and some of the thinking patterns that we need to address. In short, to get moving we need to address the need for urgency and the things that can stall us.

So how do you create urgency? One way is to "play the movie forward." Make the threat to your future as real in your mind as it is in reality. Imagine what life will be like one year or five years from now if nothing changes. Second, imagine what the future will be like if you do make changes. See both the positive and negative possibilities. Then look at what will be necessary to bring about the one you want.

Second, create "ending alliances." The reality of human behavior is that we are affected by those we are near. If you are trying to bring change into a com-

pany, you must form power alliances—coalitions with people who will be influencers of change, working with you to make things happen. You need the same thing in your personal life. Are the people around you supporting you and creating energy for change? Or are they people who are comfortable with the status quo? Whichever it is, it's going to shape you.

A third way to create urgency is by casting vision. Although "vision" is an overused term these days, the overuse has happened for a good reason. Human brains are designed to create what they see in the future. Our internal resources begin to align with that reality and create it. This is why CEO's cast the vision of what they want the company to look like over and over. When people can see it, they can create it. If it is communicated strongly and clearly enough, they almost cannot not create it.

A fourth way is to set a deadline, and creating consequences for making and missing that deadline. If the deadline is for yourself, get someone involved who has the power to execute those consequences for you.

Chapter 9: Resistance—How to Tackle Internal and External Barriers

Many of us have some internal resistance to change or growth that hinders us from moving forward. One reason for this is that we have incompatible wishes. We want two things that can't both happen at the same time. For example, we want more time with friends, and also to really work on our marriage, or we want to save more and buy that new car.

Part of maturity is getting to the place where we can let go of one wish in order to have another. The immature mind "wants it all." But the truth is that the most valuable things come with a cost. To win, we have to give up some things for others.

This can be very difficult if we are attached to a particular outcome. If our commitment is to do what is best, we have freedom to make decisions differ-

ently than if we are committed to that "best" being a certain option. Detachment from any one outcome is a common trait that all great performers have in common. Here is the key question: What particular outcome are you unwilling to sacrifice to realize your vision of the future?

Another way of thinking that facilitates avoiding endings is "I'll do it later." When we say it, we think we are actually going to do it later, so we feel the momentary relief of the problem being solved without having to go through the work to accomplish the ending. The reality is that it is not done, and the next time it comes up on the radar, you'll probably engage in the same trick of resistance. A good question to ask yourself is, if you are going to do it later—exactly when are you going to do it?

A third way we side-step endings is with selective memory. We only remember the good things, and ignore the bad. People do that in relationships all the time, to avoid a break up. A woman may think "he has a couple great qualities," but ignore the whole picture of the relationship. Maturity is always about seeing both the positive and the negative, and dealing with all of it.

These are internal resistances, which occur within our own heads. We also face external resistances. They are kinds of resistance that come from other people. Their challenges and questions are not the helpful kind that a good confidante might provide. I'm not talking here about the resistance that comes from people who love us and want to stop us from making decisions they believe are not good for us. I'm referring to resistance from people who have ulterior, self-protective, or self-interested motives.

Some people put up resistance because your decision is going to affect them in some way and they don't want to change. Other times, the resistance comes from someone who is threatened personally by what you are doing. When you do something difficult but worthy, it confronts people with their own lives. Finally, some people are just entrenched against change.

Those people must be distracted. Get them focused on other things, get them out of the organization, or subject them to peer pressure.

Trying to move forward will always bring some kind of resistance. Getting things done is hard, or more people would do it. So accept the fact that endings are difficult and hard to implement—and then get on with it.

Chapter 10: No More Mr. Bad Guy—The Magic of Self-Selection

One thing that inhibits us from embracing endings, especially where other people are involved, is that we don't want to be in the position of being a bad guy, rejecting someone or saying he or she is not "good enough" in some way. It makes them feel bad and is a horrible dynamic in a relationship. Self-selection is a better way.

Example—you have an employee who is not performing. You like him and don't want to be the bad guy by letting him go, but you can't let things continue unchanged. Self-selection might look like this:

"Terry, I want to talk to you about this position. The kind of person I want puts time and energy into building a team, achieves a yearly growth rate of x percent, and regularly develops other leaders. Right now, you aren't that person, but I'd like you to be, and I hope you choose to become that person. But that is up to you. I want you to think about it and let me know if you want to and what your plan is to become that kind of person."

That is a totally different kind of ending. It has two outcomes, one guaranteed, the other unknown and hopeful. And you don't have to be the bad guy. They get to make the selection themselves.

Chapter 11: Having the Conversation—Strategies for Ending Things Well

Sometimes we make a decision and are sure it is the right thing to do to move forward, but we don't. We sit on it. Not because we are unsure or afraid of the future; not because we second-guess the decision; we don't move forward because we dread the conversation. We know it will be hard and aren't confident of how it will turn out, so we postpone it.

How do you deal with that? One key ingredient is to be prepared for the conversation itself. This preparation can make all the difference in the world. Often the person on the other end will argue, or plead, for a different ending, for one more chance, etc. Before you have the conversation, make sure you are clear in your head what you want the result of the conversation to be. Have specific goals for the conversation so you don't get off-track.

When talking, balance care for the person with the truth. People hear better if they know you care. Watch your tone so it communicates care and respect. Recognize that emotions can run high, resulting in people forgetting or distorting what was said. At the end of the conversation, get agreement on what has happened and what is to follow if any further steps are required.

Chapter 12: Embrace the Grief—The Importance of Metabolizing Necessary Endings

Endings can be difficult, even painful, and sometimes are cause for grief. The grieving process is a mental and emotional letting go. What that means is to face the reality that it's over, whatever it is, and to feel the feelings involved in facing that reality. It means to come out of the denial and numbness emotionally and feel whatever you feel. The reason this helps is because grief has movement to it; it goes somewhere. It goes forward.

When people don't face their grief, they can get stuck in the past, hanging on to false hope or staying angry at something that has happened. Or they do strange things on the rebound, which are really attempts to keep from feeling the grief involved in letting go. It's a defense mechanism.

If we were really invested in something that is ending, we will have to work the grief through our system in order to be ready for whatever is next. We need to metabolize our experience. To metabolize it, we have to do what our body does with food: keep what is usable to you, and eliminate what is not. if you don't do that, you are probably going to repeat the mistakes and not benefit from what you could have learned. You'll have the same blind spots that led you into trouble before.

Chapter 13: Sustainability—Taking Inventory of What is Depleting Your Resources

One of the most important reasons for a necessary ending is sustainability. If you are doing anything that by definition cannot continue because the source itself is being depleted or damaged, an ending is not only necessary, it is vital and urgent.

If what you are doing is continually draining you, your energy, or your resources, you are on a path to an end of something. And that is a fact that you cannot ignore. Watch out for situations in life or in business that diminish you or your assets over time. That kind of situation should be an alarm to move immediately to stop the outflow, reorganize, bring in some sort of help, make a change, or do some kind of ending, which is more than necessary. It is vital in the truest sense of the word.

Pastor's Perspective

There are a lot of things I like about Necessary Endings. The first is the recognition that endings are necessary—not just optional. That's one of those truths that are easier to accept intellectually than practically, but I'm convinced it is of paramount importance for any individual, church, or organization that wants to move forward. Long ago I was encouraged to create a "to stop doing list" as well as a to-do list; it has been really helpful in facing the reality that some things need to end.

Many churches don't seem to understand this concept. I remember talking to a church a couple years ago that didn't. They were struggling because they couldn't staff all the ministries they had going. When we looked at it, we found that they would need a church five times as large as they were to actually staff their ministries. They had never been willing to stop anything; every program had its fans or champions, even if there weren't enough. The pastor didn't want to offend or hurt anyone, so they kept muddling on, frustrated and ineffective. Had they been willing to focus their energies on a small number of key ministries, I think they would have done much better.

One thing that makes it difficult, especially for Christians or Christian organizations, is that we see ending something as a lack of faith rather than wisdom. I found Cloud's distinction between hoping and wishing helpful here. Hope—or faith—is based on something. There is a reason to hold on. If that is a clear sense of God's direction, even without evidence, that is still different from holding on just because we want something to happen. Without anything to base our decision on, we are just wishing, and in my experience that seldom works out well.

Another thing I found helpful was recognizing that we often know what to do and don't do it, either because we just don't want to be the bad guy (especially in the church!), or we are afraid to have the conversation. We are afraid we won't say it right, or that we won't hold our ground, or that there will be negative consequences that we don't want to face, or something else. The approach of allowing the person on the other side of the conversation to "self-select" what they want to do is a great tool for setting up those conversations in a positive way. That's something I'll be making use of in the future.