



Leading Change

by Michael H. Walker

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Efforts to transform large organizations – whether they be school districts or corporations – are rarely unqualified successes. Indeed, experience suggests that such efforts while not quite “much ado about nothing” more often than not might be considered “much ado about very little.” Indeed, many change initiatives that begin with “sound and fury” end up, in the final analysis, “signifying nothing.”

Several articles on leading change suggest a way to avoid this “transformation trap.” While these articles take a somewhat different approach to evaluating this issue, a number of common themes emerge from reviewing these articles.

Change is difficult. Transforming organizations is difficult work and takes time – there are no “quick fixes.” Barriers to change – both cultural and institutional – must be identified and overcome if transformation efforts are to be successful.

A sense of urgency must be established. Barriers to change almost certainly will not be overcome unless a sense of urgency is established that forces individuals at all levels in the organization to rethink current ways of doing business. Forcing people out of their “comfort zone” while unsettling is also essential to their actively considering new ways of doing their work and, in some cases, new ways of seeing the world. One of a leader’s key roles in managing change is to regulate the distress change creates so that the change effort is constructive rather than destructive. Heifetz and Laurie use the analogy of a pressure cooker. They state, “...a leader needs to regulate the pressure by turning up the heat while also allowing some steam to escape. If the pressure exceeds the cooker’s capacity, the cooker can blow up. However, nothing cooks without some heat.”

Effective change requires both an impetus from the top and support from the bottom. Change efforts that are exclusively driven from the top of an organization down are rarely, if ever, successful. Senior leaders need to provide an overall vision and direction for the change effort and must work to foster an environment that supports change. However, widespread engagement in the change effort is essential if a meaningful transformation is to be achieved.

Communication is the life blood of any successful change initiative. If “location, location and location” are the three most important things about real estate then “communication, communication and communication” may be the three most important things about bringing about successful change in an organization. Effective communication is necessary to ensure that employees at all level in the organization understand why change is needed, that their role in bringing about this change is vital, and to ensure that they have a clear picture about “how things will be better” as a result of the change effort.

Pilot projects should be undertaken and used to generate support for future success. Tangible examples of successful initiatives are essential to building support for future success. By establishing and publicizing successful pilot projects, confidence in the change effort will be enhanced. Moreover, even if a pilot is not successful, the lessons learned from these unsuccessful efforts that can be applied to future improvement efforts come at a very reasonable cost.

Brief summaries of four articles dealing with leadership and change follow.

**“Leading Change:
Why Transformation
Efforts Fail”,**

**John P. Kotter,
Harvard Business
Review
(March-April, 1995)**

In this classic article, John Kotter extrapolates from the struggles of more than 100 organizations in bringing about change. Kotter begins his article by stating, “The most general lesson to be learned from the more successful cases is that the change process goes through a series of phases that, in total, usually require a considerable length of time. Skipping steps creates only the illusion of speed and never produces a satisfying result. A second very general lesson is that critical mistakes in any of the phases can have a devastating impact, slowing momentum and negating hard-won gains.” He goes on to identify eight stages to transforming an organization:

Establishing a sense of urgency. Most successful change initiatives begin with an individual or group facilitating a discussion of potentially unpleasant facts about the organization’s performance. The focus of this effort must be “to make the status quo seem more dangerous than launching into the unknown.”

Forming a powerful guiding coalition. Successful change efforts are typically led by a coalition of powerful individuals. (In the context of this discussion Kotter defines power in terms of titles, information and expertise, reputations and relationships.) Efforts that don’t have a powerful enough guiding coalition can make apparent progress for a while. But, sooner or later, the opposition gathers itself together and stops the change.

Creating a vision. Successful change efforts almost always incorporate a vision of the future that is relatively easy to communicate and that appeals to all stakeholders. A useful rule of thumb is if you can't communicate the vision to someone in five minutes or less and get a reaction that signifies both understanding and interest, you are not yet done with this phase of the transformation process.

Communicating the vision. Transformation is impossible unless hundreds or thousands of people are willing to help, often to the point of making short-term sacrifices. Employees will not make sacrifices, even if they are unhappy with the status quo, unless they believe that useful change is possible. Without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured. In addition, in most cases of major change, senior leaders learn to "walk the talk."

Empowering others to act on the vision. Effective transformation requires getting rid of obstacles to change, changing the systems or structures that seriously undermine the vision, and encouraging risk taking and nontraditional ideas, activities, and actions.

Planning for and creating short-term wins. Real transformation takes time, and a renewal effort risks losing momentum if there are no short-term goals to meet and celebrate. Most people won't go on the long march unless they see compelling evidence within 12 to 24 months that the journey is producing expected results. Creating short-term wins is different from hoping for short-term wins. The latter is passive, the former is active.

Consolidating improvements and producing still more change. Until changes sink deeply into an organization's culture, a process that can take five to ten years, new approaches are fragile and subject to regression. If victory is declared too soon, momentum will be slowed and the powerful forces associated with tradition will take over. Instead of declaring victory, leaders of successful efforts use the credibility afforded by short-term wins to tackle even bigger problems.

Institutionalizing new approaches. In the final analysis, change sticks when it becomes "the way we do things around here." Two factors are particularly important in institutionalizing change in organizational culture. The first is a conscious attempt to show people how the new approaches, behaviors and attitudes have helped improve performance. The second is taking sufficient time to make sure that the next generation of top management really does personify the new approach.

“The Work of Leadership”
Ronald A. Heifetz
and Donald L. Laurie,
Harvard Business
Review
(January, 1997)

In this article Heifetz and Laurie introduce the concept of adaptive change – the sort of change that occurs when people and organizations are forced to adjust to a radically altered environment. The authors argue that providing leadership in an organization where adaptive change is needed is difficult for two primary reasons. First, in order to make change happen executives have to break a long-standing behavior pattern of their own – providing leadership in the form of solutions. Instead, the locus for problem solving when an organization faces an adaptive challenge must shift to its people. Second, adaptive change is distressing for the people going through it. They need to take on new roles, new relationships, new values, new behaviors and new approaches to work. Rather than protecting people from outside threats, leaders should allow them to feel the pinch of reality in order to stimulate them to adapt.

Heifetz and Laurie suggest six principles for leading adaptive work.

Get on the balcony. Organizational leaders have to be able to view patterns as if they were on a balcony. It does them no good to be swept up in the field of action. Leaders have to see a context for change or create one. They should give employees a strong sense of the history of the enterprise and what’s good about its past, as well as an idea of the forces at work today and the responsibility people must take in shaping the future.

Identify the adaptive challenge. When organizations cannot learn quickly to adapt to new challenges they are unlikely to be successful. A key role of a leader of adaptive work is to clearly define the adaptive challenge and to effectively communicate it throughout the organization.

Regulate distress. Adaptive work creates distress. Leaders must find a way to balance the need to create the sense of urgency needed for change without overwhelming the organization. To do this, leaders must create a *holding environment* in which the pressures facing the organization are strong enough to drive change while not so strong as to create an explosion.

Maintain disciplined attention. Leadership is needed to help an organization maintain its focus on the tough questions associated with adaptive change. Without this disciplined attention the conflict that inevitably results when significant change takes place will not be used as a source of creativity and new ideas but as a destructive force that works against change. Disciplined attention is also needed to ensure that the tough questions that must be addressed in an adaptive environment are not avoided. Scapegoating, denial, focusing only on today’s technical issues, or attacking individuals rather than the perspectives they represent –

all forms of work avoidance – are to be expected when an organization undertakes adaptive work. People need leadership to help them maintain their focus on the tough questions.

Give the work back to the people. All too often, people look up the chain of command, expecting senior managers to address challenges for which they themselves are responsible. Indeed, the greater and more persistent distresses that accompany adaptive work make such dependence worse. Nonetheless, adaptive work requires employees at all levels to assume greater responsibility. Leaders must work to support these efforts by working to develop the “collective self-confidence” needed for employees to dare to take risks and accept responsibility. This self-confidence comes from success, experience, and the organization’s environment.

Protect voices of leadership from below. Giving a voice to all people is the foundation of an organization that is willing to experiment and learn. Leaders must rely on others within the organization to raise questions that may indicate an impending adaptive challenge. In addition, they must provide cover to the people who point to the internal contradictions within the organization. These individuals often have the perspective needed to provoke rethinking that people in authority do not.

**“What Leaders Really Do”,
John P. Kotter,
Harvard Business
Review (1990)**

In this article, John Kotter distinguishes between leadership and management. He argues that management is about coping with complexity while leadership is about coping with change. He does not argue, however, that leadership is more important than management or vice versa; rather, he makes the case that although managers promote stability and leaders press for change, only organizations that embrace both sides of that contradiction can thrive in turbulent times.

To distinguish between management and leadership, Kotter points out that organizations manage complexity first by *planning and budgeting*. By contrast, leading an organization to constructive change begins by *setting a direction*. In addition, while management develops the capacity to achieve its plan by *organizing and staffing* the equivalent leadership activity is *aligning people* (that is, communicating the new direction to those who can create coalitions that understand the vision and are committed to its achievement). Finally, management ensures plan accomplishment by *controlling and problem solving*. But for leadership, achieving a vision requires *motivating and inspiring* – keeping people moving in the right direction, despite major obstacles to change, by appealing to basic but often untapped human needs, values and emotions.

Understanding the differences between leadership and management is important to organizations that want to develop people into outstanding leader-managers. Doing so requires more than merely recruiting people with leadership potential. Equally important is managing their career patterns. Individuals who are effective in large leadership roles often share a number of career experiences. They are given a significant challenge early in their careers. In addition, later in their careers, they have a chance to grow beyond the narrow base that characterizes most managerial careers. (This may result from lateral career moves, early promotions to unusually broad job assignments, or special task-force like assignments.) The organizations that are best at developing leaders do not leave this process to chance. Instead, they make an intelligent assessment of what feasible development opportunities fit each candidate's needs.

“Learning For A Change,”
Alan M. Webber,
Fast Company
(Issue 24, Page 178)

In this article, the author discusses with Peter Senge his book *The Dance of Change: The Challenges of Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* and the challenges associated with producing and sustaining momentum around change. Senge suggests that instead of viewing organizations as machines it is useful to view them as being a part of nature. Consistent with this perspective, he points out that just as nothing in nature starts big, so the way to start creating change is with a pilot group – a growth seed. He goes on to suggest that there are a number of self-reinforcing factors that help a pilot program take root. People develop a personal state in it. People see that their colleagues take it seriously, and they want to be part of a network of committed people. In addition, there is a pragmatic factor – it works. There are real results so people realize that it's worthwhile to become engaged. The most fundamental reinforcer of a pilot program, according to Senge, is hearing people say that they've found a better way of working. Personal enthusiasm is the initial energizer of any change process and that enthusiasm feeds on itself.

Senge goes on to point out, however, that even if a pilot has the potential to be successful that success is not guaranteed. He identifies 10 challenges to change that pose a threat to a successful change initiative:

“We don't have time for this stuff!” People who are involved in a pilot group to initiative a change effort need enough control over their schedule to give their work the time it needs.

“We have no help!” Members of a pilot group need enough support, coaching, and resources to be able to learn and to do their work effectively.

“This stuff isn’t relevant.” There need to be people who can make the case for change – who can connect the development of new skills to the real work of the organization.

“They’re not walking the talk!” A critical test for any change effort: the correlation between espoused values and actual behavior.

“This stuff is...” Personal fear and anxiety – concerns about vulnerability and inadequacy – lead members of a pilot group to question a change effort.

“This stuff isn’t working!” Change efforts run into measurement problems: early results don’t meet expectations, or traditional metrics don’t calibrate to a pilot group’s efforts.

“They’re acting like a cult!” A pilot group falls prey to arrogance, dividing the organization into “believers” and “nonbelievers.”

“They...never let us do this stuff.” The pilot group wants more autonomy; “the powers that be” don’t want to lose control.

“We keep reinventing the wheel.” Instead of building on previous successes, each group finds that it has to start from scratch.

Where are we going?” The larger strategy and purpose of a change effort may be obscured by day-to-day activity. Big question: Can the organization achieve a new definition of success?