

Leading Change Initiatives

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In order to survive, organizations need the ability to make change happen rapidly and efficiently. The sad truth is that most change programs produce negligible results despite a lot of invested time and money. Most of them fail because leaders take a mechanical training approach believing if a specified set of courses is given it will lead to better performance. A typical measure for success is the percent of employees who have “gone through the program.” Unless leaders create an **environment** that allows the change effort to kindle, the result is little forward momentum, a disillusioned workforce, and the need for additional damage control.

In order to achieve successful change, leaders need to do the following things well:

1. Demonstrate an urgent need for change
2. Communicate a compelling vision of the future
3. Create the right environment before starting training programs – no mechanical fix to problems
4. Draw on the diverse ideas that are available
5. Be willing to accept risk – fosters creativity
6. Reinforce the small wins along the way
7. Integrate the new methods well into the culture
8. Demonstrate constancy of purpose over time – avoid jumping from one “program” to another
9. Understand the psychology of change

Need for change

The best way to describe this is the old "boiled frog" analogy. If you place a frog into boiling water, it will feel the heat immediately and jump out. But, if you put a frog into a pan of cool water and slowly heat it up, the frog will sit there and boil to death. It becomes used to the heat and cannot feel the danger until it's too late. Good leaders supply the "heat" early enough.

Communicate a compelling vision of the future

A good vision is more than a plaque on the wall. It lets everyone in the organization know where they are headed. It needs to be specific enough so people can see their role in making it a reality. It needs to be positive and inspiring so that people feel it is worth the effort (Joel Barker, 1985).

Building an environment of TRUST

Leaders interact with many people and build trust-based relationships with each of them. Trust between people can be compared to a bank account, where actions consistent with shared values represent deposits and inconsistent actions represent withdrawals. Every action, word, or decision between individuals either adds to or detracts from the balance. It is a very sensitive system that can be affected even by subconscious thoughts or small gestures. Making small or medium deposits is easy, but large deposits are rare.

Unfortunately, withdrawals can be large and devastating. The entire balance can be wiped out with a single action. As a leader you need to prevent this by having all your actions consistent with what employees hear you say.

A problem arises when people interpret actions of leaders as incongruent. In most organizations people are somehow punished if they bring up an inconsistency. In an organization of high trust, leaders reward people for pointing out gaffs because it allows correction or clarification but, more importantly, it fosters additional growth in trust by encouraging open dialog in the future.

That sounds simple but it rarely occurs. Usually leaders hate to admit mistakes. They believe it weakens their ability to lead and become defensive when employees push back. This normally backfires and reduces trust in the leader.

How to build an environment of trust - a 4 step plan

1. Start by laying a firm foundation with your team. Identify the values of your business along with a clear vision, behavior expectations and strategic plan.
2. Encourage people to tell you any time they believe your actions are not congruent with your foundation.
3. Reinforce them every time they do it, no matter how challenging that is. Make them glad they told you about it.
4. Take appropriate corrective action or help people think through the apparent paradox.

This method works because it uses what I call the “I am right” theory. Each of us has a set of beliefs based on everything we have experienced in life. We “own” these views and truly believe they are right. When another person observes a situation and comes away with a judgment different from ours, we think they must be wrong.

For example, as a leader, I see my consistency batting average as 100% because “I am right.” I believe everything done or said is justified and consistent with the vision. If not, I would do something else.

The trouble arises when we add another person. In their eyes my batting average is far from 100%. With extreme care, I may be able to achieve 60-70%, but inevitably I will do something viewed as inconsistent. One of two things can now occur.

First, the other person can say or do nothing. This reaction would normally seem the safer one. Why would someone remain silent in the face of an inconsistency? It is out of insecurity and fear. There have been previous opportunities to voice a contrary opinion where this person has felt punished rather than reinforced for voicing a dissenting opinion. It is just not safe to do it. We used to call such episodes “CTOs,” short for career threatening opportunities. Unfortunately they occur frequently.

What happens to trust in this situation? It goes down! The person has less trust in me because I appear hypocritical, acting in a manner inconsistent with our mutual values, behaviors or vision. My trust in them also goes down because my subconscious knows something is wrong but the other person is silent. If the issue is a substantial one, trust goes down dramatically.

Contrast that with a scenario where the other person verbalizes the problem immediately because it is safe to voice a contrary opinion. This is possible because an environment of trust has been built over a period of time. People know this kind of input is welcome. Here the outlook is much brighter. We can have meaningful dialog on the discontinuity. I can reverse my action with a statement like, “You’re right, I didn’t think of it that way. I’ll reverse my decision. Thanks for pointing out my gaff.” Another response could be, “I really appreciate your pointing out the inconsistency. I still believe my decision was correct and can’t reverse it. However, thank you for having the courage to speak up. Now I know there is an issue. If someone like you has a problem with it, others may as well. Let me explain further why I can’t reverse the decision.” Either way the trust level goes up in the minds of each of us. I have been listening. The other person knows they have been heard and their opinions respected. I know the other person is leveling with me.

With this approach you have a powerful correcting force when people believe things aren’t right. If something is out of line, they will tell you, enabling modification before much damage is done. Now you have an environment where honest feelings are shared and there are no large trust issues. People in your organization will interface with you gladly, spending less time fretting and more energy pursuing the vision. There is also less gossip and fewer rumors.

Valuing Diverse Opinions

People closest to the work generally have the best solutions. Leaders need to tap into the creative ideas of everyone in the organization to allow successful change initiatives. This

also allows people to "own" the change process rather than perceive it as a management "trick" to get more work for less money.

Ability to accept Risk

No progress is made without some kind of risk. As a leader, you need to empower people so they feel free to try and not get squashed if they fail. Tolerate setbacks along the road to success and don't lose faith in the eventual outcome. Try to manage the risk so the consequences are minor if failure occurs. For example, have a back up plan in place for changes that involve risk.

Build a reinforcing culture

Many groups struggle in a kind of hell where people hate and try to undermine one another at every turn. They snipe at each other and "blow people in," just to see them suffer or to get even for some perceived sin done to them. What an awful environment to live and work in, yet it is far too common.

Contrast this with a group that builds each other up and delights in each other's successes. These groups have much more fun. They enjoy interfacing with their comrades at work. They are also about twice as productive! You see them together outside work for social events and there are close family-type relationships in evidence. Hugging is spontaneous.

As a leader, you want to develop this second kind of atmosphere, but how? A good place to start is with yourself. Make sure you are practicing positive reinforcement in a way that others see and recognize. Create an atmosphere where everyone understands and places high value on effective reinforcement. Become a model of reinforcement and praise those in your organization who excel at it. Ken Blanchard has a seminar called "The Power of One" where he emphasizes the incredible leverage of a well-focused individual. As a leader, you invoke that power when you train everyone how to reinforce others by reinforcing them when they do it. It sounds convoluted, but it's really just common sense.

A technique used in my organization was the reinforcement note. Whenever anyone wanted to express appreciation for another, they were encouraged to write a short e-mail about it. The person would address the note to the one that they wanted to praise. I asked for a copy of each one and printed them out. In many cases an "atta-boy" note from me would go back to the person being reinforced. More frequently, I sent a "thank you" note to the person who originated the R+ note praising them for taking the time to write it. During my weekly staff meeting, I would read a selection of the R+ notes from the past week, highlighting any themes. The meeting notes would show every meeting started with these reinforcing activities. This was critical because it sent a signal to everyone in the organization that the culture was more important than the crisis of the day. When you have a winning culture, groups can handle any crisis with grace

Too often leaders become distracted with the immediate crisis and dive right in with the urgent problems of the day. Each problem becomes a stumbling block to trip over. They forget that every day there will be a new dragon to slay and that the culture is what allows elegant resolution to these issues. Spending a few minutes at the start of each meeting reflecting on what is going right makes sure everyone is in top shape with a winning attitude and gives the group the ability to tackle any problem.

We started keeping track of the number of reinforcing notes. The first year we got about 70 notes. By consistently reinforcing this behavior, we got more than 200 notes the second year, and more than 1200 notes the third year. After that, there was no need to keep counting, but each year I was delighted to clean a large stack out of my desk for year-end cleanup. Normally, the stack was more than a foot tall! People at all levels knew their good works were documented and appreciated, often with a public acknowledgement. Further, they felt reinforced for praising others, so the process fed itself, and a culture was developed.

At the same time, we encouraged verbal reinforcement that was not documented. Any time someone saw another person doing something right, they were encouraged to offer praise. Especially important were the “thank you’s” any time a person went out of their way to help someone. This caught on like the reinforcing notes and had a powerful impact on the work environment. Making this a reality required that supervisors (and others) reinforce people when they praised their co-workers. As they felt good about doing it, they did it more often.

The key is to create the culture at all levels. It isn’t enough for just the boss or a few supervisors to reinforce people. Teach *everyone* to do it. That multiplies the impact by however many people you have. As the culture develops, you’ll see it spreading to other parts of the organization. People will begin to notice your area is much more positive and productive than before. It will sparkle and upper management will start asking how you did it.

Reinforcement builds confidence in people. Jack Stack, in his book “The Great Game of Business,” put it this way:

“One of a manager’s main responsibilities is to build confidence in the organization. To do that, you have to accentuate the positive. If you accentuate the negative, it eats away at the organization. It becomes a demotivator, and management is all about getting people motivated. A manager who doesn’t motivate isn’t doing his job. You can’t motivate if you are continually focusing on the negative.”

A reinforcing culture transforms an organization from a “what’s wrong” mindset to one of “what’s right.” The positive energy benefits everyone as the quality of work life is significantly enhanced. In addition, the quality and quantity of work increases dramatically because you have harnessed energy previously lost in bickering and put it into positive work toward the vision. What an uplifting way to increase productivity!
Instead of beating on people and constantly dwelling on the negative, you’ll be

generating good feelings and loyalty while you drive productivity to unimaginable heights. That is worth doing and easy to accomplish!

Don't get discouraged if you make a mistake in reinforcing. Sometimes you will. It is an area of significant peril, but its power is immense. Continually monitor your success level with reinforcement. Talk about it openly and work to improve the culture. Consider every mistake a learning event for everyone, especially yourself. Often these are comical in nature.

Let your reinforcement be joyous and spontaneous. Let people help you make it special. Reinforcement is the most powerful elixir available to a leader. Don't shy away from it because it's difficult or you've made mistakes in the past; embrace and make love to it.

Integrate New Methods into the Culture

Document procedures in a user friendly way- avoid long complex manuals that nobody has the time to read. Have a check list for new employees and make sure they understand the culture. Reinforce consistent behaviors.

Constancy of Purpose

Effective change programs require constancy of purpose. Avoid the "flavor of the month." Expect setbacks as part of the process and don't jump ship to a new program when things get rough. Don't call it a "program". Instead refer to it as our culture.

Understand the psychology of change

If you think of change as a **system**, you can help people through the process more quickly. Recognize there will be times of confusion or anger and use the energy to propel the process forward rather than slow it down.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on*

www.leadergrow.com.

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The
TRUST
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