

# MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN

## Create the Future through Leadership

In an increasingly competitive global marketplace where change is hastened at an astronomically rapid rate, those companies that cannot envision change and drive it forward are bound to fall far behind their competitors. Yet, the majority of those organizations which do attempt to implement change are unsuccessful. In fact, research conducted by Ken Blanchard Companies indicates that up to 70% of change efforts fail or get derailed, and those failed efforts can lead to huge monetary losses as well as defeated morale.

So, how can you lead your organization through a successful change initiative? It takes foresight, leadership, communication, cooperation, employee empowerment and a willingness to embed those changes deep within the corporate culture. And, it all starts with a single impetus: a corporate-wide sense of urgency that shatters inertia and creates the momentum to unite employees behind a viable change vision.

### Getting the Change Process Started

Today's businesses need to make changes that will sharpen their competitive edge. Yet, in order to initiate change on a large-scale basis and achieve success in a timely fashion, especially among diverse departments, a sense of urgency is imperative.

If the corporation were a ship, the captain would tell his crew that the boards in the bottom of the vessel were perilously in need of repair. If we don't tend to them now, we will soon be bailing out just to keep our heads above water: We need to take action now! On your "ship" it may be that the company is losing market share, customers are switching to the competitor, there are heavy third-quarter losses and jobs are on the line.

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specific problems, and unite with a clear understanding of the need for immediate adjustments, they will be more willing to step up to the plate.

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"Most change within a company comes about for continued survival," affirms Richard Deems, PhD, and co-author of *Leading in Tough Times*. "People need to understand that; and

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they need to know the 'why' behind the change. Give them the reasons up front and you will develop their support for the change. Without a sense of urgency, most people will

dig their heels in and fight you every step of the way."

After all, it takes hard work, sacrifice and willingness on the part of a large number of employees to accomplish a change vision. It's no wonder that people need a highly persuasive

reason to engage in a long-haul effort.

“We get comfortable with what we’re doing,” says Don Mroz, PhD, Dean of Post University’s Business School, “but this is dangerous, particularly in the competitive environment that we’re in right now. Without that compelling sense of necessity for change, an organization can become stagnant. You must find a way to engage your workforce. Involvement is the key. Complacency holds businesses back.”

Mroz suggests you raise the level of dissatisfaction regarding the current state within your organization, multiply that by your vision for the future and multiply it again by some first steps. If all of that is greater than the resistance to change, then your company will start to move in a new direction.

### Who Will Lead the Change?

According to John Kotter, respected change leadership guru—and author of *Leading Change, A Sense of Urgency* and *Our Iceberg is Melting*—after you establish a pressing need for change, you must then create a guiding coalition who together will build a clear change vision and will develop workable strategies to drive the initiative forward.

“Individuals, often representing a cross section of the organization, will volunteer for a seat on the guiding coalition with the understanding that this responsibility is above and beyond their day job,” explains Kathy Gersch, founding member of Kotter International. “You want a diverse group that offers a wide range of perspectives. If you choose well, you create a sort of octopus with lots of tentacles that reach out across the divisions and can engage people and maximize support for the change effort.” She also affirms

that having a volunteer panel brings power and creativity to the process. “You capitalize on the energy associated with a ‘want-to mentality’ and unleash these ambassadors of change within their various circles of influence.”

With the help of a facilitator, the guiding coalition can then process the common goals and create a change vision. The guiding coalition will determine how the organization needs to operate to achieve these goals and will define initiatives that can move the company in a new forward-thinking direction.

Not only is the coalition able to reach people closest to the processes that need to change, but it can also effectively communicate across initiatives. Gersch gives the example of a work-life committee that saw the absence of nearby childcare facilities as a huge deterrent to progress. Coincidentally, the R&D department voiced its need for larger facilities that were not in its budget. When the work-life group got funding to build a daycare center, they included space for R&D. Instead of problems staying in separate silos they become connected across the change effort—a powerful side benefit of a guiding coalition that has breadth of perspective.

### Bring the Vision to Life and a Voice to the Vision

“If you are going to succeed in achieving a major change initiative, all of the stakeholders need to be involved, engaged and aligned,” says Sekani Michel Williams, president of Watershed Strategies. “You need to gain their understanding of: what it is you are trying to accomplish, how

the company can get there [the strategic plan] and what their individual roles are in making that happen.” When formulating a vision and strategy, Williams suggests breaking the vision down into categories, drawing the goals out in a map and then creating a theory of how to make the vision come to life. Name specific activities and projects that need to be taken on, write down how these are going to be achieved and assign someone to be accountable for the success of each initiative.

Once the vision and strategy are clearly stated so that they can be understood by all stakeholders, then they must be properly communicated.

“Your goal is to achieve a shared vision,” states Mroz. “Over communicating is what it takes to cement that vision in. Yet, most

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leaders under communicate the change vision. You need to draw people in so that they feel part of the bigger picture. By offering a clear, concise vision and personalizing it as much as possible [what’s my role in it? what’s in it for me? how can I make a difference?], you get people to rally around it.”

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On the other hand, if it is not clearly communicated, the vision becomes loose and incongruous and runs the risk of sounding too autocratic, says Mroz. He feels leaders need to make their change vision meaningful for people and they need to encourage two-way communication so that there can be a real conversation around it. People must be able to internalize the vision and integrate it

into who they are. It's also important that it align with the personal values and vision of the workforce. Above all, he says be sure to use multiple forms of communication: conversations, town hall meetings, water cooler chats, departmental meetings and work groups to reinforce the change vision.

"Passion is important," he adds. "Talk from your head and heart. Emotion shows people you really believe in the vision and it shows you are a real human being who wants to help them and the organization succeed."

In his book *Leading Change*, Kotter underscores the fact that the change vision must be communicated in a way that is "clear, simple, direct, uncomplicated, memorable, consistent and often repeated." Marian Thier, president of the coaching firm Expanding Thought Inc. and Listening Impact, agrees and adds that the change vision message must be crafted so that it reaches out to four distinct listening audiences:

- Self-concerned **Inner-Personal Listeners** who want to know: "How will the change impact me?"
- Outward-looking **Extra-Personal Listeners** who need to understand how the change initiative will affect others: their employees, their department, the organization
- **Problem-Solving Listeners** who want all the facts and details of the change before getting on board in order to weigh its effect on current problems and determine its feasibility
- **Conceptualizing Listeners** who listen for ideas and look to make the vision for change bigger

Repetition is essential when communicating a change vision, Thier adds, and she points toward research that shows in order to effectively communicate a change vision you must reach out to your audience at least eight times, using at least three different modalities.

Furthermore, it's important to communicate a change vision in person as well as in writing, says Deems. He advises leaders to make the initial announcement in person early in the week, early in the day—and then to stay visible. "Don't hide away in a locked office; a closed door makes employees nervous and suspicious. Walk the halls, be accessible, keep an ear open for comments and get a sense of how people are reacting to the vision," he says. "Allow discussion and questions to percolate among those involved in the initiative—and get those questions out in the open."

### Recognize and Empower the Real Change Heroes

Corporate change is about getting as many people as you can on board the change effort, says Tom Armour, co-founder of High Return Selection. "Smart people drive change and drive it well once they sign on," he says. "When groups of employees are empowered, the success becomes infectious, and exponential."

To empower employees, Armour suggests that you start by getting them excited about the change and then do everything in your power to provide recognition to those who affect change and are part of

the solution. Make them heroes within the organization and do so publicly so that others see that individual efforts are being valued and appreciated.

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Jenny Schade, president of JRS Consulting,

identifies another key aspect of empowerment: make sure employees understand that their efforts are part of a larger vision. She points to the tale of the two bricklayers. Working side by side, each is asked the same question: what are you doing? The first mason says he is building a wall; the second responds "I'm building a cathedral." Whose work do you think will shine? "Companies need to make sure employees know what the vision is, but, as importantly, employees need to understand how they support that vision and how their efforts are having an impact. It's important to empower employees by letting them know that they are an important part of the big picture," says Schade.

Equally crucial, she adds, is making sure your employees have the tools (skills and training) that will empower them to do their best.

Marv Russell, author of *Linebacker in the Boardroom*, says creating an environment for success starts with a leader who can engage a workforce by earning and then developing a strong level of respect and trust. He can lead the way to success through encouragement and by investing

time in developing the capabilities of his employees.

### Energize Efforts via Short-term Wins

The reason for planning short-term wins is to help sustain enthusiasm for the change effort and demonstrate to employees that their hard work is paying off. “It’s easy to get demoralized when the vision is so grand and seems so far off in the future that the reward is disconnected from your day-to-day activities,” says Williams. “It’s important to give employees a sense that what they are doing is worthwhile, is going to be recognized and is working toward that larger goal.”

When planning the change vision, Williams advises leaders to be sure to include some short-term goals. “Break the long-range goal into smaller more manageable chunks that can be accomplished and rewarded more quickly. In that way, employees are able to see the results of their contributions in quarterly improvements and can envision the gradual buildup that will result in a major change down the line.”

In addition, he suggests letting each team see the results of the other teams. “Scorecards are a great way to show how each division is doing—they make results visible and encourage an open dialogue between departments. Everyone wants to know what the most successful team is doing so that they can incorporate those tactics or approaches into their own change effort.”

“Short-term wins build credibility for the whole initiative,” says Schade. “Get employees directly involved in the process. Let them identify what success looks like and determine

when they have been successful. Then, internally convey these wins to the rest of the employees. In this way, it feels less like a management initiative and more like an employee initiative.”

### Look at Gains, Yet Champion Change

Gersch warns not to let short-term wins result in a loss of focus or a buildup of complacency. “This is often the point at which many change efforts fail to reach their long-term objective. As progress becomes evident, there’s a tendency to let up on the pedal and slip back into the old way of doing things,” she says.

It’s a critical stage and she often advises companies to bring new people, new skills and new initiatives on board at this time because there is still a lot to be accomplished before the ultimate opportunity is reached. It may be time to put a new guiding coalition in place to refresh the energy and to evaluate how far the change effort has come and to gauge how far it still has to go; this will keep things moving forward.

### Make Successful Change Stick

After successfully implementing change, an all-too-common mistake is failing to anchor the new approaches into the corporate culture. Armour says he has seen many companies slip backwards due to a failure to ingrain the new approaches, processes or tools. “Human beings will often revert back to their old and comfortable ways if those ways are still accessible,” says Armour. “To anchor new approaches, the old ways need to be dismantled, but this is easier said than done. Those old ways may be supported throughout the company’s culture in business planning, management

practices, performance and reward systems, hiring methodology, and more,” he points out.

To avoid seeing change break down, Armour asserts that leaders and managers need to systematically examine the organization to determine what supports the new way and what hinders it. Companies that neglect to do that generally return to their old habits in six to ten months. “You need to scrub all procedures to make sure there are no magnets that will pull people back into their old ways,” he says.

“You need to cement into place new systems and behaviors that support the change effort and make sure everything is updated and in alignment with the change initiative. Anchoring the new approaches firmly into the corporate culture is important to prevent back sliding,” Armour concludes.

As you can see, implementing a change initiative that involves producing a major shift takes time, dedication, widespread support and cooperation. It also requires a willingness to move out of our comfort zones in order to embrace new approaches that can lead to positive improvements, growth and a stronger position in the marketplace. It’s critical to remember that change is ongoing and crucial to survival in today’s fast-changing, competitive environment. Don’t forget to embrace and start creating the future now. ■