

Leaders don't protect the status quo; they challenge the status quo in the pursuit of excellence. They change compensations plans, realign the organisational structure, purchase another firm, create a new go to market strategy, develop a new product or raise performance expectations. This can create disturbance in the organisation and the need for change, both personal and organisational is inevitable.

What makes change so challenging?

Change has an external dimension and an internal dimension. Externally, there are aspects of change that are quite concrete: moving from one city to another, getting a new job, the loss of a loved one. Internally, there is the adaptation to the change, which deals with the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and emotional response triggered by the external change. External change can happen quickly and yet adaptation to the change can take much longer.

If you are an initiator of change, you have had the opportunity to think about, plan for and be part of the deployment process for any given change your organisation may have implemented. But your employees may be just the recipients of the change, and for them, embracing will likely be more difficult because it is imposed and they haven't had the time to make the internal adjustments that change requires.

So what can leaders do to successfully lead others through change?

Develop the mindset of response-ability. We can choose how we respond in any given situation. We may not choose the change that we have to deal with or the emotions that we experience when an unexpected event occurs. But we can choose our behaviour. We can blame events, other people, the weather, and the stock market. We can sit on the sideline and pay lip service like the character in the Dilbert cartoon who wears a T-shirt that says 'change is good; let it happen to someone else'. Or we get all worked up, get stressed out, make ourselves miserable and create an emotional, boiling stew.



In order to positively influence anyone else you have to embody that message yourself. As Socrates says, "Let him who would move the world, first move himself." This is becoming response-able, not being responsible for something. When we take ownership of our emotions and of our ability to choose, we can inspire others to do the same. It takes awareness to pause before instinctive impulses take over and we do something that we later regret. When we are aware and conscious, we can remember that short-term impulses need to be aligned with long-term interests; and long-term interests are most often directly related to our values.

Put your values into action. The culture of any group, organisation, or team is created by the leadership behaviours, the symbols of what is important, and the systems that the organisation has put into place. Values, what people say is important to them, are demonstrated through behaviours. If you want to make change in an organisation, all three dimensions require significant work. However, of the three, what has the biggest impact on the culture of an organisation is the behaviour of the leaders. Change that and you change a lot. And in times of change (stress), the way leaders behave is even more important because espoused values and values-in-action become even clearer. When decisions are made under pressure, there is typically more at stake and values-in-action are highly visible and can send a strong message about what is important and what is valued.



For example: How an organisation handles a down-sizing is a significant opportunity to reinforce the values of the organisation, or not. If the overall mission of the organisation is front and center and decisions are made to further that mission and keep the organisation vibrant, how people are laid off is critical not only for those leaving, but for those staying. This is prime time for leaders to understand that their values will be tested. So skilful truth-telling and being direct, honest and respectful will be critical.



Demonstrate discipline. During periods of significant change, the people around you may be experiencing the process of transition from what they thought would be happening to what is now happening and what that might mean in the future. In a sense they have lost their balance and are looking for stability. An effective leader will take action, communicate transparently the reasons and rationale for the action, make precise requests, honour his or her commitments and be visible, present and available to those needing assistance. A recent survey in USA Today asked employees if their leaders have communicated about how the current economy might affect the organisation. Seventy percent of the respondents said they have not. So, visible, wise action is important and serves not only to engage and inform others, but also engenders confidence in the leaders of the organisation.



Champion learning and growth. Significant change highlights the reality of life that can be forgotten in the routine of daily living: Life really is a journey, not a destination, and to live fully, requires constant learning. We all have our daily routines that can easily disguise the fact that change is actually always occurring. On a daily basis, it is not something we focus on. We sometimes hear someone respond when we ask how they are: 'Same old, same old'. There is something missing when that attitude permeates your entire life. What is it? The mindset of curiosity, of learning, of enthusiastically embracing what is. Change offers distinct opportunities for us to make choices and to grow. It allows us the chance to expand, stretch and discover just a little bit more about who we really are.

We admire character and greatness in the heroes of our culture, and every single one of those heroes, when faced with a crisis or a challenge, chose to respond in a manner that pushed them out of their comfort zones and enabled them to learn and grow in ways that perhaps they never imagined were possible. Think about Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Franklin Roosevelt, or Abraham Lincoln. They were each faced with significant challenges, went through deep periods of personal crisis, and each found ways to successfully adapt, learn and grow in their ability to overcome obstacles in their paths.

Be a compassionate warrior. Most of the time people don't choose significant change. It just happens. The emotional roller coaster ride begins and people respond according to their own awareness and abilities. Increasing awareness increases the choices available, which can lead to more productive behaviour.

If a leader of change gains self-awareness and understands his or her response to change and is open to learning and growth, then that leader can be an effective resource to others. Why is this? Because real change begins with an internal shift, an acceptance. And if someone is stuck 'sitting on the tracks', they need two things from you: understanding and inner strength: the compassionate warrior.



This is where the skills of effective communication come into play: the ability to deeply listen to and empathise with someone else's story; the ability to help them own their part in the story; the ability to compassionately challenge them to stretch, to grow, to accept. The successful leader can accept the human struggle and accompanying emotions and help their colleagues make choices that will move them forward on the learning journey.

"Man is not fully conditioned and determined; he determines himself whether to give in to conditions or to stand up to them. In other words, man is ultimately self determining. Man does not simply exist, but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment." – Victor Frankl

About the author



Don Johnson
US Sales Director at Insights

Don has more than twenty years of experience in business management, leadership, sales, executive coaching and consulting in the performance improvement industry. He has coached executives and leaders at Google, Microsoft, The Boston Consulting Group, Yahoo!, AXA Equitable, Crowe Horwath, YouTube and other organisations throughout the world.