



FINDING SUCCESS AS A CHANGE LEADER

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ABSTRACT

Change is a constant for all organizations looking to grow or even survive in today's fast-paced and constantly transforming marketplace. Leadership focused on implementing successful organizational change must constantly prepare both themselves and their organizations. A successful change leader has many leadership characteristics that help define who they are and prepare them to lead an organization through change. To find success as a change leader, it is important to embrace these leadership characteristics and to practice them throughout the organizational change process.

Keywords: organizational change, leadership, character

INTRODUCTION

Knowing when and how to implement organizational change is paramount for a leader desiring long-lasting success for their organization. “The challenge of the future is to help people learn to ride the waves of transformation and change in real-time and as events unfold”.¹ Not all leaders within an organization can make it as an organizational change leader. A successful change leader works on both a strategic organizational direction level and on a tactical individual person level to implement successful change. They recognize that organizational change often begins with themselves, continues through a well-crafted organizational change preparation process usually involving the entire team, and through implementing the change itself. The following discusses change as the constant state of an organization, the importance of getting change right, the role of the change leader, the leadership characteristics of successful change leaders, and preparing an organization for change. Five interviews of successful change leaders were conducted along with academic research to support the concepts and ideas presented.

THE CONSTANT STATE OF AN ORGANIZATION

Organizational change is a constant within any organization.² “Change is a departure from the status quo. It implies movement towards a goal, an idealized state, or a vision of what should be, and movement away from present conditions, beliefs or attitudes”.³ Healthy organizations change. Struggling organizations change. Small organizations change. Large organizations change. Simply put, all organizations change.

Organizational change should not be viewed as a negative. “Real change, for the right reasons, is always good and always costly”.⁴ Organizational change should occur when “the overall good of the organization, its stakeholders or society requires it”.⁵ During normal organizational planning, it is important for change to be a “major topic” regardless of the size of the organization.⁶ A lack of alignment even within organizations that appear to be successful can drive the need for organizational change.⁷ Regardless of the reason, “change is a way of life for

any organization and becoming more important as the speed of technology, knowledge, and life in general accelerates”.⁸

With change being normal for an organization, leaders learn to lead during preparation for change and throughout the organizational change process. This entails training leaders from the beginning within the organization to learn to embrace change. It also challenges organizations to find trusted leaders outside of the organization to assist from time to time to conduct major organizational change that requires specialized expertise, experience or independent advice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GETTING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE RIGHT

Organizational change is, in a way, inevitable; therefore, it is important to get it right.⁹ “When an organization encounters a need for change, variations within its membership provide multiple ways to understand and respond”.¹⁰ This diversity of thought can lead to many different ideas on how to change an organization. It is important to conduct an organizational change process that ensures the best ideas can rise to the top. This requires that an organization looking to change truly seeks change for the right reasons. Organizational change for the wrong reasons can be very detrimental to an organization.¹¹ Changes that lead to an organizational failure may result in layoffs and difficult times for the organization. This destroys trust and generates negative feelings amongst the remaining employees.¹² The view of employees of the organizational change process will be initially defined by how well the last major organizational change was conducted or not. Getting organizational change right provides a strong trust between leaders and employees. It communicates competence to clients, business partners, suppliers, and the general community. Well done organizational change conducted over and over throughout the life of an organization is the sign of a healthy, stable and growing organization. Getting the organization change process right is fundamental.

THE ROLE OF THE CHANGE LEADER

Since organizations are in a constant state of change, a leader's main role is as a change agent.¹³ How they handle change or how change handles them will determine their status and success as a leader. There is really no way a successful leader of an organization can operate without looking to improve, breakdown, build-up or change some part of their organization at any given time. A leader's life in an organization is change. Therefore, a successful change leader has the innate ability to communicate purpose, a "vision" and to "make things happen".¹⁴ The change leader spends most of their time preparing an organization for change. They should never seek organizational change for the sake of change itself but look to the change process as a way to improve and grow an organization.

Leaders need to attack underlying problems within their organization related to a lack of trust, "selfish interests", political silos, miscommunication, and poor organizational alignment.¹⁵ Building trust among individuals in an organization occurs on a daily basis over a period of time. This trust will lead to the commitment of employees to an organization. Trust with an organization amongst employees does not necessarily translate to the commitment to a change process within an organization, but it is a start.

Individual change readiness requires commitment. "Despite creating readiness, leaders should also be able to encourage employees to commit to the change efforts".¹⁶ Obtaining commitment of the employees built off of trust is the primary role of the change leader.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL CHANGE LEADER

As discussed, successful organizational change is highly dependent on the change leader themselves to orchestrate and conduct. Characteristics of these change leaders vary, but many consider the following to be key for the leader to possess in implementing successful organizational change. These characteristics were gathered by interviewing five successful consultants regularly involved in organizational change and through academic study. A

successful change leader may possess most but does not necessarily have to possess all of these characteristics. (Note: Order of characteristics shown below based on feedback from interviews.)

- **“Humility.”**¹⁷ This one is the hardest characteristics for a successful change leader to possess and to sustain. It is especially hard for leaders to maintain over the course of a lifetime when they achieved early success. Failure often has a humbling effect on a leader. However, a successful leader will use that failure to learn from and to remind themselves to practice humility specifically when dealing with organizational change that has the potential to impact both themselves and many people within their organization.
- **“Servant attitude.”**¹⁸ Often leaders are not thought of as servants. However, the best change leaders look at their role differently. They strive to serve those that follow them and to implement organizational changes that will benefit both clients, suppliers and employees.
- **“Smart.”**¹⁹ It does not mean that a change leader needs to be the smartest person in an organization to be effective. Rather, they are smart enough to know who to engage and rely on throughout an organizational change process. They rely on their wit and smarts to identify what needs to change and how to change.
- **“Competitive.”**²⁰ Organizational change is hard. Change for change’s sake is not worth the effort. However, marketplace competition can help provide the motivation a leader needs to embrace the organizational change process for both the survival and growth of their organization.

- **“Accepting responsibility for failure.”**²¹ A confident and capable change leader will be ready to admit when they have failed and accept blame for an organizational change gone wrong.
- **“Giving credit for success.”**²² Throughout the organizational change process, successful change leaders will look to give credit to others rather than themselves. Success should be shared as much as possible. This will motivate others to jump in and embrace the organizational change process.
- **“Willingness to imagine a different outcome.”**²³ The best change leaders can pivot during the organizational change process and possibly embrace a different outcome than was envisioned at the beginning.
- **“Open to new ideas.”**²⁴ Ideas can come from a variety of sources and some of the best will not be generated by the change leader.
- **“Embrace risk.”**²⁵ Change leaders work hard to identify risk when it occurs and seek to mitigate it throughout the organizational change process.
- **“Good listeners.”**²⁶ The change leader actively chooses to listen to advisors, employees, and clients as they navigate the organizational change process.
- **“Steadfast.”**²⁷ Change leaders should be resolute when it comes to their values and uncompromising when it comes to serving others through the organizational change process.
- **“Open to criticism.”**²⁸ Pride will put up a barrier to critical feedback that a change leader can use to improve both themselves and the organizational change process.

- **“Seeks wisdom and knowledge.”**²⁹ These two together are similar to being smart but differ in that wisdom draws from experience and knowledge often comes from listening to others.
- **“Embraces ideas from young people.”**³⁰ By giving space for younger employees to be engaged in the organizational change process, new and radical ideas may rise that are exactly what an organization needs to do. It also invests in the future of an organization and gives them a voice that will motivate them to embrace the organizational change process.
- **“Effective communicator.”**³¹ Successful change leaders are excellent communicators and know how to deliver a message.
- **“Integrity.”**³² A change leader that lacks integrity will find it extremely hard to find support within their organization for the change process.
- **“Being able to coach.”**³³ Teaching, training, and caring for employees allows the change leader to develop strong relationships that will benefit them during the organizational change process.
- **“Clarity of values.”**³⁴ A change leader needs to have clear values that are shown to their team. These values are lived every day and are usually on full display.
- **“Clarity of purpose.”**³⁵ Confusion especially shown by the change leader will cause an organizational change process to lose momentum and possibly fail. Organizational purpose should change very little over time as a strong purpose should be one of the founding tenants of any enduring organization.

- **“Trustworthy.”**³⁶ Employees need to know that they can trust their change leader when they undergo an organizational change process. Trust is the foundational element for any successful and well-connected team. Additionally, it is important for the change leader to build trust and a common ground with individuals within an organization prior to implementing any change.³⁷
- **“Confident.”**³⁸ Displaying confidence to an organization as it undergoes an organizational change process is critical for a successful change leader. Confidence is not arrogance. Confidence inspires others to be the same as they undertake chances and risks to benefit the organization.
- **“Competent.”**³⁹ This is fundamental. If a change leader lacks competence within an organization then those undergoing an organizational change process under their leadership will not respect nor listen to them. When this occurs, organizational changes may not be adhered to and the entire process could fail.
- **“High personal drive.”**⁴⁰ Successful change leaders are highly motivated with an inner personal drive that will give them the energy to keep pushing hard for organizational change when others may quit.
- **“Awareness and understanding of organizational history.”**⁴¹ It is important for change leaders to know the history of past organizational changes so that they can understand how they succeeded and where they may have failed. Situational awareness of the organization will greatly assist the change leader in combating resistance and supporting those that will make the process a success.

PREPARING AN ORGANIZATION FOR CHANGE

Properly preparing an organization for change greatly determines whether or not the change itself will be successful.⁴² Organizations are ready for change when each critical team member has the confidence to implement their part of the change.⁴³

Organizations need to enter a change process with a “humility mindset”.⁴⁴ Throughout the organizational change process, putting others first is critical to achieving results that will last. Having a “servant mindset” puts the focus of the organization not on itself, but on its “customers, family, friends, and business associates”.⁴⁵

Communication throughout the preparation process is key. Holding individuals accountable for preparing themselves by communicating expectations is instrumental as an organization prepares for change.⁴⁶ It is important to inform your team as to the “why” behind the organizational change.⁴⁷ The larger the organization, the harder it will be to communicate the “why”.⁴⁸ It is an important that an organization communicate the reasons to make change, the process that will be undertaken, and the performance metrics that success or failure will be measured by.⁴⁹

An organization prepares for change through “attentive strategic planning with a bit of paranoia”.⁵⁰ Being in a constant state of preparation should be a “daily part of the organization’s ethos”.⁵¹ Organizations that are currently successful may not see the need to prepare for change.⁵² Preparations for organizational change though should be made especially when times are good.⁵³

Fear or resistance to change because of the unknown often hampers an organization through the change preparation process.⁵⁴ Political resisters who have silos and turf to protect need to be dealt with prior to an organizational change being implemented least they completely undermine the efforts of the change leader.⁵⁵ When these two are combined, a change leader needs to recognize this threat and immediately seek a solution that addresses valid concerns and be prepared to act boldly.

An organization filled with individuals that believe and “buy-in” to an organization’s core reason for being are more apt to engage and embrace the preparation required for making an organizational change.⁵⁶ They seek feedback during the preparation process from “contrarians” that are outside of their line of work⁵⁷. As they prepare an organization for change, it is important that they seek counsel from those inside and outside the organization. Gather a team of ten or less to gain their perspectives from “the trenches” during the preparation process.⁵⁸

Finally, complexity can kill an organizational change process. The key to preparation is to think complex, but to act simply and straightforward.⁵⁹ Keep things simple when it comes to the marketplace. It is important for a change leader to understand the potential impact of their organizational changes as it relates to the marketplace and to take bold and decisive steps.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

The constant state of a normal and thriving organization is change. Understanding when, how, and what type of organizational changes to implement is fundamental for a change leader to grasp to be successful. The primary role of a change leader is to earn trust, cast a vision, prepare an organization for change, and lead the team through the changes. Change leaders need to possess a wide range of leadership characteristics such as being humble, trustworthy, confident, having clarity of values, competent, open to new ideas and strong communicators. A failed organizational change can usually be traced back to a failure of proper preparation of the organization by the change leader or a lacking of character within the change leader themselves. A successful organizational change is often the result of a strong leader with the personal preparation of character matched with a well-done organizational change preparation process. Finding success as a change leader begins with strong leadership characteristics applied to the success and well-being of an organization.

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