

What Makes a Great Change Leader?

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To quote Heraclitus “The only constant is change”. The ability to implement change successfully is contingent on how effective the leaders in the organization are at effectively leading change. Change leadership, simply put, is the process of leading individuals through a change as seamlessly as possible. It involves careful guidance since the goal is to transition those who will be impacted by the change from their current comfort zone to a new uncharted territory.

Change Leadership therefore, is defined as a dynamic process, that leverages strategic “two-way” communications and engagement activities to first, create awareness of the Change through information sharing and compelling facts, and in turn, inspire interest and quell concerns; second, ensure readiness through the skills training and the provision of necessary tools, and third, instill confidence through empowerment and participation to achieve the desired future state.

So what makes a great change leader? There have been many articles and research done on this topic, but in my opinion, it really boils down to five key areas:

Effective Communication

First, a great change leader must be able to communicate the change initiative effectively.

This involves clearly stating what the purpose of the change is, what is changing and what will remain the same to employees. Many times, the vision of the change will be developed at the executive level. The frontline leader will need to cascade the change messages from their business leader to other management staff and their employees. These messages need to be communicated repeatedly; at least seven times using different modes to employees. According to research, “Managers who communicate change effectively can improve their reports’ performance by as much as 29.2% (Corporate Leadership Council, 2009). That is also why it is equally important to correct misinformation that may be circulating about the change as soon as possible.

Coach Employees

Secondly, an effective change leader must coach their staff by working with each employee to address their individual questions and concerns and explain how the change impacts and benefits each individual. Be honest about what you do and don’t know. Clarify your expectations of job performance during the change (i.e., what is realistically possible; what are the challenges). Acknowledge desired behaviours through recognition and reward appropriately. This

will help to build confidence by ensuring that employees are ready for change.

Manage Resistance

Thirdly, a great change leader will manage resistance amongst their team. Anticipate that team members will react differently to change and you will need to adapt your approach accordingly. Temporarily allow people to complain and grieve. Listen to the objections of team members and clarify any misunderstandings they may have about the change. By soliciting team members' active involvement in the change plan will also help to reduce resistance and increase engagement.

You also need to deal with your own reactions to change and manage your own resistance. Leading change in others is difficult, especially if you don't embrace change yourself. Recent research found that leaders who don't embrace change increase their employees' resistance to it, and that those who focus on creating a positive vision lower their employees' resistance to it. Try to understand the source of your own resistance and work with your boss to overcome your personal objections.

Walk the Talk

If employees don't see you as an advocate for the change, it will be hard for them to get on board. The fourth characteristic an effective leader must demonstrate is the ability to walk the talk. A leader's actions inspire emotion and action in others and will influence their decision whether or not to embrace the change. Before introducing the change to your team, make a personal choice to support and participate in the change. Then visibly demonstrate your support and enthusiasm for the change. If you are unsure, seek out information to better understand 'why' the change is occurring and how the change will impact you and your group.

Reinforce the Change

Lastly, a great change leader will reinforce the change initiative by publicly recognizing individuals and their team for their contributions, achievements and support of the change. Change leaders will put measurement and performance management in place that is aligned with the change so that employees' progress is measurable and observable. It is also important to hold employees accountable for compliance with the change and their performance in achieving the objectives of the change. However, the real key to reinforcing the change starts by holding yourself accountable for the adoption and sustainment of the change.

Ultimately, the difference between good and great change leadership is when leaders can establish trust, actively endorse the change and visibly participate in all stages of the transition themselves. A change leader's skills in communication, listening and coaching will be pivotal in identifying how to support their staff, both as individuals and as a group. These skills are foundational in helping move individuals through the phases as quickly and effectively as possible.



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