

Leading and Managing Change and Transformation as a Strategic Imperative

John Kotter on the subject of change said *“The rate of change is exponential, not only do we have political uncertainties, but technology keeps spiraling, and globalization creates interesting ties between countries. That means that something that affects one is felt by others a long ways away”* The acceleration of change presents a challenge and an opportunity at the same time. Change is a given and organizations and individuals will continue to go through change. This suggests that for businesses and organizations to be successful now and in the future it is imperative to develop the capability of changing quickly and successfully and not just responding to the waves of change; have the ability to shape and lead change with strategic intent and excellence; develop leading and management change and transformation as a core competence within the organization and not left to a few change and transformation apostles. It is also important that organizations, businesses, and individuals are prepared and able to anticipate change, be ready for change, embrace change and navigate change and transformation successfully.

The 70% failure rate of change and transformation initiatives continue plague organizations to this very day. It is interesting to note that in spite of all the books written on change management, change leadership, leading transformation, the publication of lessons learnt, the development of numerous change and transformation models, the availability of change and transformation tools and templates, the socialization of best practices on change management, leading change and transformation, the needle has not significantly shifted in favor of program or project success.

Why is it that with all that we know about human behavior, employee engagement, psychology, organizational effectiveness, organizational development, talent management and all the good stuff, organizations have failed to lead change and transformation faster and successfully? All the local and international consulting firms are cashing in on the need for helping and facilitating organizational change and transformation and yet the results have not shifted much in a positive direction? Is leading people through change and transformation an elusive and far-fetched idea? Why do we spend millions on new change and transformation programs and projects

with little to show for it? What are we not doing right? Is human nature so unpredictable and so complex that we have failed for so many years to figure out how people will react during times of change and transformation?

The focus for leading change and transformation should centre on people to ensure that people in the organization are ready, able and willing to accept and implement change as a strategic imperative and as an ongoing pre-requisite to achieve business and organizational success. Leading and managing change and transformation should be focused on managing the human response to change and transformation and being cognizant of the fact that **people don't like to feel that change and transformation is being done to them as rather than being done with them.** There are predictable reasons why change and transformation programs and projects fail to achieve their objectives. One of the reasons is that announcing the change or transformation from the executive bench is not equal to implementing the change.

Announcing the change and transformation program and thinking that announcement is equal to implementation is a fallacy of hasty generalization. I see this behavior with leadership over and over again. Recently, I was working with a client on a multi-year multi-million dollar transformation program. The Senior Vice President announced the program, made a compelling case for the change, announced the consultants who will help with the transformation and viola expected his Vice Presidents and entire staff establishment to jump on the program and implement it. What the Senior Vice president forgot was that in a knowledge economy you have to bring people along and paint a vivid picture of what success looks like and how the organization will be positively different when the transformation is fully implemented. Millions of dollars already spent on the external consultants but the results are not anywhere near what was expected. You don't announce a change and transformation program or project and expect people to get on board just because you are the Senior VP and that you call the shot. You need to give people a reason why they should come along with you. When you don't do that you can kiss the success of your change and transformation program good-bye!

Here are few questions for reflection as you embark on your change and transformation program?

- Why are you embarking on the change and transformation program and are the reasons clear to the senior leadership? Are the leaders aligned regarding why you are undertaking the transformation?
- Have you addressed your employee's concerns with the change and transformation and what mechanisms have you put in place to gather this feedback?
- How are you going to involve those asked to change in the planning of the change and transformation?
- What are your plans in effectively communicating the business case and the vision for the change and transformation?
- How compelling is your vision for change and transformation? Can your people clearly see and feel how different the future will look like with the implementation of the change and transformation? Remember when the why is clear, the how will fall in place!
- What is your interpretation of employee resistance? Do you take resistance as a negative or a positive? In my world resistance is a great asset for refinement of your program and resistance is saying this change is so important to me that I need you to involve me.
- Can you quantify and qualify the Return on Investment and Return on Capital Employed with the successful implementation of the program or project – Remember that results is the name of the game!

In leading and managing change and transformation, leaders should endeavor to address the impact of change and transformation before they occur by initiating a series of strategic and tactical activities to guide in effectively leading and supporting positive change and transformation within respective areas of the business. It is critical to inform and prepare employees on how to deal with the new changes; facilitate the letting go of ingrained practices and moving towards new and efficient ways of doing business; and create a climate of change agility. Ensure that the senior leadership is fully aligned and the middle managers are on board in implementing the change and transformation and fully understand their roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities during change, transformation and sustainment.

Following are a few suggestions in leading and managing change and transformation as a strategic imperative:

- Ensure adequate planning and articulate the change and transformation rationale to the leadership team and to your entire employee establishment
- Manage resistance to change and transformation and address employee concerns and anxiety
- Manage rumors or misinformation about the upcoming changes and transformation
- Address fears around layoffs, new roles, responsibilities, accountabilities and training associated with the change and transformation
- Help employees to go through the change and transformation while continuing to perform their current jobs
- Create a climate where change and transformation is seen as positive for the organization and its employees; by effectively engaging and communicating with employees and stakeholders
- Ensure that the dissemination of information to employees is just-in-time, relevant and transparent
- Link the impact of successful change and transformation to business or organizational outcomes and growth strategies
- Ensure active and visible executive sponsorship of change and transformation and effectively communicating the impacts of change and transformation to employees in a meaningful and honest manner.

Leading and managing change and transformation should be positioned as a strategic imperative if your business or organization is going to reap the full benefit of the changes. The following questions should help begin the process of framing and positioning leading and managing change and transformation as a strategic imperative.

- How can we take advantage of the opportunities change and transformation brings?
- How can we prepare ourselves and others to embrace and be resilient through the process?
- How can we recruit a volunteer army of employees or apostles to champion the process?
- How can middle managers become advocates for change and transformation initiated from the executive bench?

- How do we introduce change and transformation in the organization already experiencing “initiative overload” change fatigue and a range of on-going corporate projects?

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