LEADING CHANGE

Change can be difficult. Individuals, teams, and organisations often find the status quo difficult to break. Why is change so hard, and how can you ensure the critical change programs you implement in your organisation succeed?

By Phil Owens

Change in business is not an option. Nothing ever remains the same—for example, our customers, the competitors, the context (market and environment), consumption patterns, and even our own capabilities, are evolving all the time. As leaders, we have the choice of proactively evolving, reactively changing, or doing nothing and simply becoming obsolete.

Deciding what change to make and how to lead it is therefore a critical function of leadership. One of the great paradoxes of leadership is that even though people can know why change is important, they can still find it hard to do. As leaders, we need to deeply understand change and how to help individuals, teams, and organisations to change so that we can evolve what we do to higher levels of performance.

Why is change so hard?

Change implies uncertainty. We know what we are doing now, but we don't know how things will really be after we change. This triggers a sense of potential risk and impending danger. In these circumstances, driven by deeper and more primitive brain structures, individuals take on a 'defensive' mindset that works to help them protect themselves from things that may happen.

Defensive mindsets lead to 'execution' processes rather than 'exploration' ones. We stick to our old strategies and are too focused on 'surviving' to notice what is different, or how we can do better. We execute our old plans, often regardless of whether they have any chance of being successful in the circumstances we now find ourselves in. However, for successful change, we need an exploration mindset—where we feel safe to innovate, try new things, look more broadly, and experiment with the context of what we are doing.

If everyone adopted an exploration mindset, change would be easy. However, it is natural in uncertainty to go the other way and be automatically triggered into a defensive mindset. Part of driving successful change is overcoming the status quo of current practice, and dealing with the inherent need for people to feel 'safe'. The more leaders can encourage an exploration mindset (by making appropriate risk-taking culturally acceptable and valued), the better their change programs will perform.

Change is not always the answer

Even when there is no compelling reason to change, some leaders cannot handle the discomfort of high uncertainty that comes as change happens around them. Often the response to this discomfort is to initiate a series of change projects that are often reactionary and not purpose driven. Instead of moving the organisation forward, they simply agitate everyone for no discernible benefit, except giving

the leaders comfort that they are 'doing something'.

The role of the leader

Leaders, as the most visible and prominent members of the organisation, play a critical role in making change programs successful. Leaders have to help their people, teams, and organisations break out of the current status quo and minimise defensive responses to change, and to show them a clear path to the new way that things should be done. Once it has been decided that a change is required, it is time for the leader to step up and get to work making the change process a success.

To do this, leaders should:

Identify the nature of the change. Too often, change is expressed in non-specific, global terms, often couched in buzz words. For example: "We need to be more customer-centric" is not accurate enough. Leaders need to define the current state, the problem, or opportunity (the mandate to change) as well as provide a clear idea of what it will look like when the change has been achieved.

Define what needs to change. Rather than simply adopting a 'tear down and rebuild' approach, a leader can ask, "What is missing? What are we already doing well?" (appreciative inquiry); and "What do we have to start/stop/modify to allow change to occur?" From this, the true nature of what needs to be in the change program will become apparent.

Destabilise the status quo. Make it impossible for people to keep doing things the 'old way'. Shift resources, organisational focus, and energy away from the current practice as fast as possible to support the desired end state—and the people will follow.

Empower the people. Ensure the people are highly engaged in the

change program. Make sure people feel that what is happening is fair, that they have support, that they have agency in some of their choices, and that they are adequately rewarded; all are critical to keep people engaged in the change. Disengaged employees are more likely to resist, and even work against, the change.

Ensure that the people have the skills. Regardless of how motivated people are, they cannot deliver outcomes without acquiring the new skills that will make it possible. Training and coaching can be important to help grow skills.

Activate the change. Walk the talk. Be relentless in holding yourself and others accountable for how they should be in the end state. Consciously build a culture to ensure a 'new status quo' develops, and persists, around how things should be. Leaders should also commit absolutely to the change in word and deed, demonstrating this by how they prioritise it, communicate continuously about it, and create opportunities for the staff to participate in the change process.

Leaders play a crucial role in change. Understanding the nature of change, and what a leader can do to drive change, can be critical in making your next initiative a success. As you consider the evolution your business must undertake, what can you do differently in the way you lead change to ensure it can be a success? ✺

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About Phil Owens
Phil Owens of The Bigger Game works with organisations through consulting, coaching, facilitating, and training, focusing on the culture, processes, and practices of high performance in business. For more information, visit *thebiggergame.com.au*.