



Change: the 11 big lessons

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Learning Leading Changing

Leading Change – The Big Lessons

Over the past 15 years, valuable research and learning has been undertaken in trying to get a sense of why change fails and in particular what the big lessons are for the future. The following lessons are a combination of input from some of the world's experts on managing change, and the 'hands-on' experience of Kaizen Training working with clients over the past fifteen years.

The big lessons include:

1. The Leader is Critical to Success

People in leadership positions can achieve by themselves – but businesses rarely succeed with sustainable transformation initiatives unless they are led from the top. From our experience, the following attributes are essential in great leaders of change:

- ❑ Vision, courage and courage – individuals that really do mean business about transforming.
- ❑ Ability to take risks both at a personal and a business level, modelling the way, this convinces people that the leader is committed to change not simply demanding it of others
- ❑ Focus on people as well as process. It's a combination of people and process change that brings great results. Balancing a supportive, involving and participative style with the ability to force the tough decisions when appropriate is essential
- ❑ Positive approach – many leaders we have coached have days when they 'feel wobbly'. The great leaders work through it by reinforcing their own energy and stamina by re-accessing their vision clearly and powerfully, they also have the ability of sharing stories that describe positive examples of change in action

2. Top Team Commitment is a Priority

Whether it's the board of a complete organisation or department heads, managers paying lip service to change is one of the swiftest ways to undermine transformation. This group must act as a 'Guiding Coalition'. Building such a team is an essential part of the early stages of any effort to restructure, re-design, retool or improve.

But it is not all plain sailing – nor could it be! Real change can be particularly threatening to managers. After all, they got to management positions by doing things in a certain way. At a fundamental level, senior people have to review their roles, responsibilities, attitudes, behaviours, personal leadership styles and their relationships with each other.

Some of this can be uncomfortable. Experience shows that a true 'Coalition' will learn how to work its way through conflict to get a shared view as to the best way forward.

3. Creating a Powerful Vision is Vital

"A Vision refers to a picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create that future" – J. Kotter

Developing a clear vision is important in making the culture change a reality: with an inspiring Vision people can see the



exciting possibilities that the future holds and can begin to act in accordance with them.

Keeping the Vision in the forefront of an organisation's thinking will ensure that energy and focus are sustained and that a single consistent message is received by the organisation.

4. Get help

Teams or individuals who hold the irrational belief of 'I must have all the answers' or 'using others for help is a sign of a shortcoming' will be limited by their own thinking. Often it's the coaching from an external input, someone outside of the organisation that can help businesses break free from 'stuck' thinking.

5. Set your Sights on Measurable Objectives and Celebrate Success

People need to have the vision broken down into what it means for them in their job.

Make sure that objectives are SMART, i.e. Stretching, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic and Time-bound.

If your company does not already have a culture of measurement, people will need to be trained in these skills, including process mapping and measurement, objective setting, continuous improvement tools and so on. And there's a balance to be struck here too; with no measurement, an organisation will not have confidence that it change is really happening; with a burdensome measurement mechanism in place, some may get turned off at the prospect of measuring their improvements.

Publish performance data and transform the surrounding to a 'Visual Workplace' where it's easy for teams to see when they're doing well.



6. Get Middle Managers on Board Early

Directors have a key role to play in leading from the top, but the attitudes and behaviours of middle managers are also vitally important. During the initial stages of a change programme, there can be a great deal of excitement and activity. Keeping middle managers fully informed can ensure there is not a feeling of being marginalized, which in turn could result in the blocking, and undermining of progress.

For example improvement action teams with good management support tend to go from strength to strength. Conversely, such teams fizzle out (and have to be rekindled) where the manager isn't interested or see the teams as a threat to their role.

The 'buzz' that comes from successful projects can die down and projects that don't quite come off can be disheartening.

A further challenge that can be faced here is the feeling amongst middle managers that they are already overwhelmed with the current challenges of day to day business functioning and so engaging them in change activities can be seen as an unwelcome burden unless clear personal and business benefits are articulated.



7. Create and Train Champions of Change

Engaging people in change activities, by its very definition, is a departure from the old hierarchical, directive style of leadership. Instead broad based action is achieved through teamwork and a key enabler of the success of the teams is through trained facilitators. The word facilitator comes from the Latin *facere* – to *make easy or simple*. Armed with powerful tools of problem solving and an ability to inject energy and enthusiasm, these individuals can act as the conscience of any change initiative.

Credible, skilled change champions can make all the difference. From our experience we would strongly recommend that change facilitators have a mixture of a handful of tools and techniques along with grounding in dealing with conflict, transparency and an ability to access a resourceful state themselves and to help others do this too. Too many facilitators, in our opinion focus excessively on a myriad of complex tools that often confuse teams aiming the bring about change.



8. Find Out What is Really Going On – Do the Research

Too many change programmes flounder on the mistaken assumptions of senior people. It is vitally important to ask customers what they really want and to check on the beliefs, attitudes and opinions of staff.

Be prepared for surprises – some positive, some challenging! When you've done the research, you know where you are, as well as where you are aiming to get to – and this puts you in a strong position to build a robust transformation process.

The key thing here is follow up. To be true to 'modelling the way' good leaders of change don't just do the research and leave it there, they take the appropriate action.

8. Have a Top Down/Bottom Up Approach

It's the combination of strong leadership to provide the vision and direction, and teams that are empowered to deliver the improvements that brings outstanding results.

Some organizations have allowed teams free reign to decide what they would like to address. This can be critical to getting people on-board; they can influence not only how things are improved, but also what is improved. This feeling of being able to make a real difference lets people 'warm' to change and shows that the organisation has faith in its people.

Conversely, some organisations have decided that in the early stages, business critical projects are selected by business leaders and sponsored from above...our preference is a 'both/and' approach rather than 'either/or'. What this does require is a carefully planned mechanism for sharing the existence and results of improvement activities.

9. Balance Impatience with Patience

If change is to happen, senior people need to be hungry for it. However, it is important to remember that patience is crucial. People will be on a learning curve, and need to be given a chance to build their confidence. Once they find their feet, they will go on to greater challenges.

An important lesson when moving from one type of culture to another is that things take time – particularly in the early stages. You may worry that things are not progressing as quickly as you'd like them to, or that the ideas are not radical enough, but it's the level of commitment that's really important. You need to win hearts and minds first.

At the same time, avoid complacency. Create an environment where people are dissatisfied with the status quo, drive people out of their comfort zones and support them in the process, create urgency and momentum, help teams choose issues that will generate quick wins. Don't just launch the change initiative and expect it to happen – people need to keep hearing the messages and they need to be acknowledged for doing things differently throughout the process. Be especially vigilant if people are delaying due to 'day-to-day work pressures' – this **is** day-to-day work.

10. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

The lesson is clear – communication takes time and effort – but the investment is worthwhile. It is critical for people not only to be reminded of the Vision but also how far they have come – this helps maintain morale and belief in the change process. It also helps in battling with the cynics with examples of positive evidence that things are changing

Communicate about ten times more frequently than what you think you need to – don't allow things to fizzle out.

In his research, John Kotter estimated that the total amount of communication going to an average employee over a three-month period is 2.3 million words or numbers. The typical communication of a change vision over a period of three months is approximately 13,400 words or numbers. So on average the Vision communication captures only 0.58% of the company communication market share.

Some guidelines that help effective communication include:

- Simplicity - remove all jargon and techno-babble
- Metaphor, analogy, example: A verbal picture is worth a thousand words
- Multiple forums and formats: big meetings, small, memos, e-mails, newspapers, formal, informal – all are effective at spreading the word
- Repetition: ideas sink in when they have been heard many times
- Emotion: Long term memory is processed by the emotional part of the brain
- Leadership by example - walk the talk
- Explanation of seeming inconsistencies – leaving inconsistencies unexplained can undermine the credibility of communication
- Make it two-way: Team listening is 10 times more powerful than team briefing!!

11. Anchor New Approaches Into the Culture

It's so easy for the huge gains made in a change process to be gradually undone such that the organisation can revert back to the 'old way' of doing things. After all, everybody will be well practiced in the old way. To ensure that change sticks requires more than just a winning hearts and minds. Changes to systems and processes also need adjusting in line with the new way of doing things. For example rewards need to fit new behaviours and attitudes, HR strategies need to be aligned including recruitment, selection, development, performance management systems and so on.

Change means more than a quality poster, T-shirt, coffee mug or half day seminar. The entire infrastructure needs to make the new behaviours more likely, easier and more rewarding than the old.

