

**Leading through change: Sow the seeds for success**

**Paul Teevan argues that many organisations do not approach transformation in the right way. Too often, the focus is on *activities* to effect change - with insufficient investment in HOW successful transformation will be achieved. Developing a clear change model and creating impetus are the initial key steps.**

Leaders can and should spend most of their time trying to change things for the better. The piece of advice I have probably given most to CEOs is ‘Prepare the ground for change - generate impetus’. Most leaders attempting transformation do not do this well enough. Or sometimes not at all.

There are reasons. Time pressure - the need to improve business performance or deliver the next quarter’s earnings creates the drive to make a fast start - but if this results in a hasty rush into an ill-designed initiative, the outcome can be disastrous. Businesses often spend too much time looking at the WHATs (activity required to change the business) - but insufficient time on the HOWs (how are we going to generate the impetus for change and also make improvement stick and endure?) Consider how many job adverts for ‘change leaders’ now actually want IT specialists - operators. First and foremost, leaders need a change model - a route map that clarifies how they will effect change. I do not mean WHAT they need to do, but HOW they are going to do it. Consider some critical early steps that help steer a business towards a successful result.

**First, create impetus for change** Intransigence is rife in most organisations. You’ve heard comments like “People don’t like change”. Sadly, that’s often quite true. So how do you persuade your people of the urgency for change? Customer feedback is one great catalyst. If your customers are telling you, in depth and specifically, that you need to change, most employees realise they had better listen. Do you speak strategically and sufficiently with your key customers and prospects and *do you use that feedback to effect change*? Most businesses don’t talk anything like enough to their customers, on the right issues. Or, you can spell out an impending crisis. Or even engineer a crisis. Flag a massive missed opportunity. Do what you have to do to drive out complacency. Recently, I was involved with the Board of a UK logistics company on a change initiative and halfway through the meeting a member of staff burst in with the news that their biggest customer, a huge international company, had just taken all their work back in-house, which was 33% of annual profit and 20% of turnover. Bad news - but it sure did focus the Board’s attention on the urgency for change and the sceptics quickly became active supporters.

**Enlist a cadre of influential supporters** You don’t need everyone to agree the solution….but you do need sufficient influential people on your side, especially when the going gets tough. Even if you are the powerful CEO, odds are you cannot achieve far-reaching change on your own. Ask yourself: Who is (really) with me? The most influential people in organisations are often not the best paid - winning over a long serving, well respected HQ office manager who knew everyone, was the key tipping point in my first major change project. Winning over the head of a large trade union was the tipping point in my next project.

**Paint a compelling future** Most people will contribute and follow if they see a better future. Nearly always this should include describing benefits for customers and service. Avoid business jargon at all costs - and if it takes more than about ten seconds to articulate your vision, you are not clear enough in your own mind. This can be difficult to do well, but is worth the effort, because you can return to the picture you have painted time and time again to remind people of the compelling case for change.

These are just three steps in sowing the seeds for success. Three-quarters of transformational initiatives fail, because they never reach a tipping point where leaders have created the impetus for change, supported by enough influential people who are constantly clarifying what is needed in the future. Transformation is complex and I have touched on just a few initial factors. I have not mapped out at all the challenges in successful *execution* of change. Leading through change is the most important role of a leader - and if you do not prepare the ground, do not be surprised if the harvest fails.

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