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Leading change in disruptive times – four lessons that you can put into practice

The context

In November 2008 the heads of the major US car makers flew into Washington DC in their corporate jets to ask for a public bail-out. It quickly descended into a PR disaster as lawmakers tore into them about the inappropriateness of using corporate jets to come and ask for public money.

View <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMJ2BU0CDT0> to see how badly this can be for leaders. Not only did they get publicly roasted but they didn't get their money. Next time they came back they drove the 530 miles from Detroit to Washington. It took about eight and half hours to drive. But they would have done anything rather than go through that again. In their defence the type of massive disruption they faced can play havoc with anyone's decision-making.

READING TIP – for more about how even the most experienced leaders can become disrupted and led by their emotions read William Cohan's book about the fall of Bear Stearns – 'House of Cards'

This and many other events of the last eighteen months have illustrated many of the lessons we need to learn about leadership during disruptive change. There have been some very poor examples by both our business and political leaders but there have also been some cases where leaders have really stepped up to the plate and shown great leadership. I am sure you can think of examples of both.



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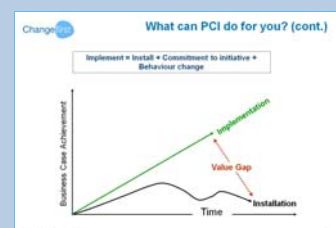
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(* held in South East, UK)

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So what can we learn from all of this in terms of making sure our projects and initiatives are well led?

Four lessons that you can put into practice

Lesson 1: Ask leaders to focus more on 'doing' and rather less on 'saying.'

In organisations, we spend a lot of time worrying about the content of messages. This is important but not as important as having key sponsors demonstrating their commitment. People who are being asked to change generally look to their leaders for tangible demonstrations that they are changing as well.

A simple and contrasting example came up with two executive teams both trying to implement a Six Sigma programme. In one company the executives attended the training with other employees and used a number of the tools in their everyday work. In another company the executives said that they didn't need to be trained. They weren't going to use the tools. They just needed to give 'executive oversight' as the teams on the ground will drive the programme forward. Which implementation got the most traction the fastest? I'll let you guess!

For change agents, you should firstly build your sponsors motivation to play a more visible role and secondly you should recognise that sponsors sometimes don't know how to model the change. Help them work out what they need to do, so employees see them visibly committed to the change.

Lesson 2: Pay attention to informal leaders

Much has been written about this recently. Largely sparked by an interest in social networking and earlier it had been well documented in Malcolm Gladwell's book 'Tipping Point'. The point is that change will stand a much higher chance of being adopted if informal opinion makers in the organisation support it. As change agents at the beginning of any change, you should identify the key influencers in your organisation. Look out for:

- **Advocates** – people who will persuade others that the change is a good idea
- **Connectors** – people who can help you network with other people who you may not know or don't have a trusting relationship with
- **Controllers** – people who control access to information or key people
- **Experts** – people who have technical expertise in the area your change impacts

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Group IT Operations

Upcoming webinar dates and times

Introduction to PCI

29.07.09 @15:00
11.08.09 @10:00
26.08.09 @15:00

Sponsoring Change

28.07.09 @10.00 & 15.00

PCI Online

25.08.09 @15:00

Click to register
for a webinar

or contact Clare Hayward by email on (clare.hayward@changefirst.com) with the webinar name, date and time of your choice.*

*²(all times are GMT+1 -London, UK (BST).

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7 - 8th October, 2009
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As change agents, try and meet with key influencers as early as possible preferably before they have had a chance to form a view about the potential change. You could involve them in key task groups or you could put your case together and obtain their input. However you do it, you want to get these people 'batting on your team'.

Lesson 3: help sponsors keep the pressure up for change

It's really important for your sponsors to be expressing their dissatisfaction with way things are now and - at the same time - giving a clear articulate vision for the future. However these things need to be in balance. Ronald Heifetz, of the John F. Kennedy School of Government, describes this balance like a pressure cooker. If you turn the heat down too much nothing cooks if you turn it up too much you risk blowing the cooker up.

It's the same in change if the pressure for change is too low nothing happens. If it becomes too intense then you risk immobilising people and causing more disruption than people can cope with. As change agents, our experience suggests that change agents need to look out for leaders wanting to turn down the heat. Good change agents can act as a sounding board for them and keep reminding them why the change was - and remains - so important.

Lesson 4: enable sponsors to track and reinforce change

This sounds more mundane but our surveys of sponsor behaviour regularly show that change agents find this an activity that sponsors tend to avoid. This seems strange given that most line managers would normally pride themselves on setting targets and following up. Change agents should help sponsors put into place regular review sessions to monitor change and take actions to rectify any missed milestones or activities. They can help by creating high-level dashboards for both the technical and the people components of the change. Our PCI® business application is a huge help in this.

Summary

The current business climate has thrown up massive threats and huge opportunities. If we go back to our starting point with the US carmakers it's *fascinating to see that some leaders have left the field bloodied, but new leaders like Fritz Henderson at GM and Fiat CEO Sergio Marchionne have stepped up to the plate ready to lead their organisations through massive change.*

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If you know someone who may be interested in receiving this newsletter then please do forward it onto them.

But for us as change agents, the skills they will need are very similar to those our sponsors will need. Change sponsorship is strong when leaders are visible, informal influence networks are harnessed, leaders keep the pressure for change up regardless of opposition and when they track and particularly reinforce change when they see it. The change agent role is tough. You have to help and coach your sponsors to take these actions.

Good luck!

Agents of Change – Martin Nabel



This is the seventh in the series that will feature change executives sharing their experience with you.
Martin Nabel – Insurance Company

What are the 3-5 most important pieces of advice you would give other change agents for them to be successful?

- Trust yourself, your experience and your knowledge
- Be patient, listen, plan and act carefully, use the best approach for any communication
- Think positive, overcome fear of failure, reduce change resistance, avoid boredom and stagnation
- Keep it short and simple, foster your stakeholder

What are the key issues you will be working on in 2009?

- Increase organizational change capability and capacity at all levels to ensure successful change implementation in any area
- Assure usage of strategic project portfolio management to choose and keep the “right” projects alive
- Reduce gaps between Business and IT to meet expectations, to increase core capabilities and to provide excellent result

The Life of Martin Nabel:

Current job – Programme Manager and Change Agent at a global insurance company, actually relaxing and looking for a new challenge

Status – Married, two children; a 13 year old girl and an 8 year old boy

Lives – Zürich, Switzerland

University – Masters Degree in Electrical Engineering at Braunschweig

First job – Project Manager at Continental AG

Favourite Business Book – Good to Great by Jim Collins, The Inner Game of Work by W. Timothy Gallway

Favourite Business Gadget – Mobile phones, a piece of paper and a pencil

Obtain discounted rates to attend the Corporate Resource Forum Conference

Changefirst is pleased to be sponsoring the [Corporate Resource Forum](#)

[conference](#) in Barcelona this year. The conference which takes place on the 7th and 8th of October in Barcelona is entitled ““Leading the way in Talent, Change and Performance – an integrated approach.”

As sponsor Changefirst is able to provide a discounted delegate rate. For more information please contact Jane Mellor on +44 (0)1444 450777 or by email jane.mellor@changefirst.com