

DON'T LET YOUR BUSINESS TRANSFORMATION FAIL

BY

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"There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead on the introduction of a new order of things." Niccolo Machiavelli

The turbulence in human systems today can be deeply disconcerting—particularly to those responsible for transforming their organizations. Whether it's a commercial enterprise fighting to remain vital after disruption, a government trying to be more effective—probably with less (aka "modernizing"), a start-up, or any number of prosaic evolutions, the "change is a constant" catechism strikes fear throughout the organization.

To the rescue comes change management: theorists and academic gurus providing paint-by-numbers frames for any leader to apply. Conveniently, change is a but process to follow. Legions of change management "professionals" brandish the dubious credentials of their cottage industry; disciples of a given framework. Frequently these sherpas of organizational adjustment are either *communications* or *human resources* tradespeople, who have themselves transformed by appropriating those respective features of a change management model. (A disquieting matriculation.) Irrespective, their change management wisdom has the following common thread:

- Have a purposeful vision
- Inspire and get everyone on board/aligned/bought in/etc.
- Achieve small wins and build
- Communicate, communicate, communicate

The rest is variations on a theme.

There is nothing wrong with any of this. It makes sense, and is supported by loads of case study and even real proof.

Still, with so much professional guidance and clear direction, why do so many transformations go wrong?

There are as many answers to that question as grains of sand on a beach. First off and most importantly, success of any given transformative action is as dependent on chance as it is on good planning, execution, and *change management*. That being true (but usually concealed), there are still other truths generally unacknowledged or actively denied because they are impolitic, run contrary to trade practice, and defy *de rigueur* beliefs.

Here's a hint about what follows: successful leaders of transformation acknowledge, profess, then disregard many prevailing beliefs. The beliefs that hold others back. They tend not to indulge the guidance of academics, consultants, and change management tradespeople that would hostage them to a comfortably mediocre belief system.

This is not to say successful transformational leaders are rude, abrasive sociopaths—though that seems common. It is possible, though with success increasingly difficult to be reasonable and respectful yet unswerving. Look to history. Transformational leaders, nice or not, believe a few things clearly and constantly.

1. They are on an inspired mission that they are uniquely endowed to fulfill. This endowment must include self-confidence, special skill, and the charisma to acquire and use human and other resources.
2. They have a clear vision of their goal, whether world domination or settling a score. That vision is boundless—expanding, making the transformational leader ambitious. Another essential trait.
3. (Sometimes without overt bragging,) they make it clear they are the “great man” of the story. The transformational leader is, however, smart enough to know (s)he is nothing without the possibly smarter and equally driven implementers of those ambitions. This leader encourages and accepts the great ideas of others—abundantly willing to appropriate them as his/her own. (This is less obvious during a leader’s climb to the top.)
4. There are leaders and there are the led; transformational leaders know the difference. Such a leader is, first and foremost, the ONLY leader—with or without a strong team of others. (S)He may be glad to indulge the led (see #3), but will never allow the mistaken impression that anyone else is actually leading (see #1). That would be a recipe for confusion, diffusion, and failure. All of which are intolerable.
5. They will be judged for their actions by history. They aren’t especially concerned about the judgment of those around them—except benefactors and bosses—during change. They intuit that most of the led (and other “leaders”) will prefer some methods and behaviours better than others. So they don’t try to please. They know when they are successful even those who actively resisted (passively-aggressively, of course) will become believers. If they’re not successful, it hardly matters anyway. Transformational leaders use change management/communications tradespeople to weave the velvet gloves inside which they slide their iron fists.

Rudeness and cruelty are unnecessary and the few fundamentals of leading change are a given. What separates the successful transformational leader and successful transformations from the many who try hard at failing efforts is simple. Though the notion is sadly debased in this sharing and collaborating, touchy-feely, *Kumbaya*-singing, self-expressing, “we’re all leaders,” bubble-up-from-below, neo-kibbutzim laissez-faire leadership and change tradecraft, it’s about commanding the organization to change as a natural and even desirable action because the leader resolutely guides it there. The organization must believe in the change; then it must have faith in a leader. The leaders outward style is merely the style of the velvet glove. The rest is filling time.

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