

# Mastering the art of change

**Ken Blanchard offers some strategies for successfully leading change**

**I**t takes a whole team of people to create a great company but just one lousy leader to take the whole business down the pan.

Too many leaders' egos are far too big; they want to make their mark by making changes – maybe change is desperately needed – but, because they try to force results, the only outcomes are lower productivity, time and money wasted, and higher employee turnover.

If people can't see the need for change, they don't want it, won't stand for it and will go out of their way to avoid, if not sabotage, it.

Research carried out



by my colleagues Pat Zigarmi and Judd Hoekstra at The Ken Blanchard Companies last year revealed the shocking fact that up to 70 per cent of all change initiatives fail; a figure so high it means that most change initiatives are doomed to failure from the start.

## Up to 70 per cent of all change initiatives fail

So, the question becomes why bother trying to change? Wouldn't it be better to stick with the *status quo*? After all, if the current situation isn't working, a disruptive, unpredictable and stressful change effort that ultimately falls flat on its face is only going to make things much worse.

The outlook for change is even gloomier when you consider another surprising figure uncovered during our research: 29 per cent of change initiatives are launched without any formal structure whatsoever. That's 29 per cent of leaders with blind faith in the power of prayer to Saint Jude, the patron saint of desperate cases and lost causes.

These figures are doubly worrying given the current financial climate, when most changes that organisations are having to initiate aren't even ones they want to make.

Companies already facing tough times are compounding their chances of collapse. Yes, they might need to cut back on product or service offerings; yes, they might have to downsize; yes, they might have to adapt their business models, but poorly-executed change can only deliver a whole new set of far-reaching and significant consequences in the short- and longer-term – consequences that are disruptive at best, disastrous at worst.

There has never been a more important time to ensure change efforts intended to maintain growth, expansion and morale are properly managed. Almost every company I talk to is facing some kind of change implementation because of competitive pressures, economic challenges, skill shortages, a necessity to grow and expand, or the need for a culture change. This is how I believe change should be done.

### Change fails for predictable reasons

There are always a few people who are up and raring to go with change, but most are skeptical to neutral at the start. People are human; few of us like any kind of change and our natural default position when faced with it is to stick our heads in the sand and hope it will go away.

In the context of business, everyone involved needs to understand the business case for

change or they will focus only on what they have to lose, not what they have to gain. The first step on the road to successful change is for leaders to recognise this; just because you see the need for change, don't assume your people will too.

Second, remember people resist being controlled more than they resist change. Don't confuse announcing the change with implementing it. Too many change efforts start with all the managers getting together behind closed doors and deciding what should be done. They never think of telling their people what is going to happen and why, let alone canvassing their opinions, ideas or suggestions because they are the people closest to the front line and who just might be able to see what ultimate impact the change could have on the customer.

This kind of top-down change 'implementation' is bound to fail because of a lack of buy-in due to low involvement on the part of each individual involved. Good leaders need to credit their people with some intelligence (why else did you hire them in the first place?) and involve them at every stage.

This move is crucial to the successful, long-term outcome of any change process. If you don't get buy-in from all your people, they might comply with change at the beginning but will revert back to old behaviours when the pressure to change is off. Change will be seen as a time-specific 'one-off' rather than a lasting and positive programme for development.

### The six stages of concern

Getting buy-in from your people means addressing their predictable six stages of concern.

First, people want information; not a pushy sales talk about the change, just information and answers to questions about what the change will involve, why it

## Twenty nine per cent of change initiatives are launched without any formal structure whatsoever

is needed, how fast the change needs to be and why things can't stay as they are.

Next, things get personal. What will happen to me personally, because of this change? What's in it for me – or not? Will I have the time to implement the change and will I need to learn any new skills? These personal concerns are the most crucial ones for change leaders to address, individually, right from the start. People need clear answers to these information and personal change concerns well before the change is started.

Once the change process is in motion, implementation concerns arise: questions such as what do I need to do, and when? What help will I get? How long will it take? How will our structure and systems change? Is what we are experiencing typical?

Fourthly come impact concerns: is this making a difference? Is it worth it? Are we getting anywhere? People want to know whether their efforts are paying off. If leaders have done a good job on the first three concerns, they will find people are more likely to value, and see, the benefits of the change themselves.

The next set of concerns that need to be tackled are around collaboration. Once employees have seen the benefits of change,



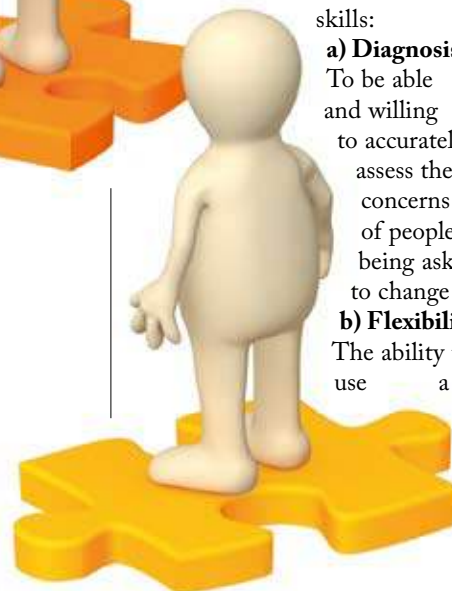
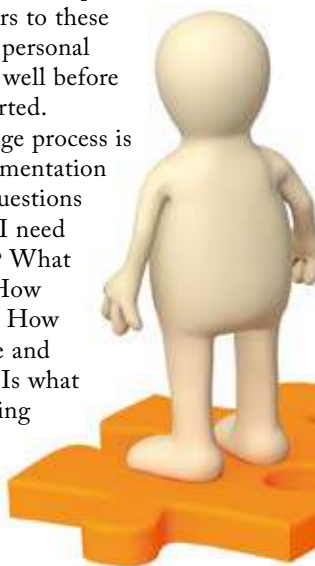
they will want to share the good news around and get any relevant others involved.

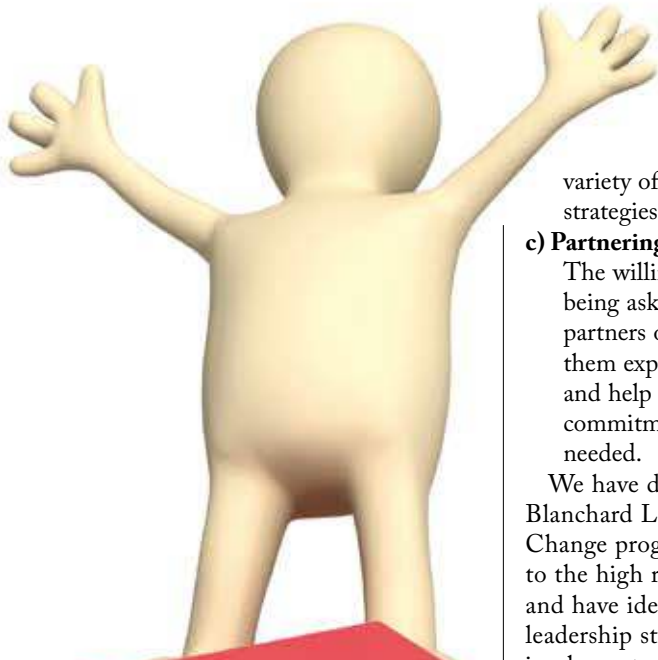
The last stage of concern revolves around refinement – making continual improvements. The leaders' role is to facilitate this process, modifying the change approach where appropriate to learn from lessons of the past. This is the point at which to ask 'what ideas do you have to make things even better?'

### Change leadership strategies

Tackling all six stages of concern requires leaders to master three critical leadership skills:

- a) Diagnosis**  
To be able and willing to accurately assess the concerns of people being asked to change
- b) Flexibility**  
The ability to use a





variety of change leadership strategies effectively

**c) Partnering for performance**

The willingness to see people being asked to change as partners on the journey, to let them express their concerns and help increase their commitment to the changes needed.

We have developed the Blanchard Leading Through Change programme in response to the high rate of change failure and have identified nine specific leadership strategies to initiate, implement, develop and sustain change:

**Strategy 1: Expand involvement and influence**

I believe the best way to help change work is to increase the amount of influence and involvement of the people being asked to change, resolving their concerns as you go.

Unless this happens, life is going to be very tough for those

responsible for implementing change. This is a strategy that is best used consistently and relentlessly throughout the change process

**Outcome: Buy-in**

**Strategy 2: Explore possibilities**

If there's one thing worse than a change effort failing, it's the wrong change effort succeeding!

However pressured leaders feel they may be into rushing into a decision, not taking the time to explore alternatives could be disastrous. By involving others in this process – particularly those who are customer-facing, because that is where any change must reap benefits – information concerns are immediately lowered and better solutions identified.

**Outcome: Options**

**Strategy 3: Select and align the leadership team**

Effective change requires teamwork, not dictatorship.

Teams chosen to lead change should represent a range of people from within your organisation – advocates of change and skeptics; formal and informal leaders – all working towards a compelling, inspiring, and unified voice in favour of change.

**Outcome: One voice**

**Strategy 4: Explain the business case for change**

Don't make this too revolutionary! You don't want people to get the impression that nothing has been working to date. The attitude you want to project is one of building on the past, rather than rejecting it completely.

Explain why, and what, change is needed in

response to new market forces, regulations, advances in technology competitive pressures etc. Continue to build buy-in by seeking colleagues' views on what they see in the internal/external environment that drives the need for change.

**Outcome: Compelling case for change**

#### **Strategy 5: Envision the future**

Creating a clear vision means not only getting people on board for change, but also enabling them to see their role once the change has been implemented.

Put forward a vision of an inspiring new future for your organisation but don't forget to put individuals in the picture frame too, so they can get excited about their future role.

**Outcome: Inspiring vision**

**Strategy 6: Experiment and ensure alignment** For change to succeed, leaders must be able to break through walls separating departments, units and personalities.

From the start, figure out who is up for change and who isn't and address their concerns, courting those who are neutral.

Create a step-by-step plan for implementation and assessment; make sure you can provide the right and sufficient resources; create the necessary infrastructure for change; account for what could go wrong, and plan for 'quick wins' and implementation problems.

Remember that it is typical for performance and, potentially, profits to dip as change is introduced. A pilot programme

You can download a copy of the white paper produced following Pat Zigarmi and Judd Hoekstra's research on change – *Leadership Strategies for Making Change Stick* – at [http://www.kenblanchard.com/Business\\_Leadership/Effective\\_Leadership\\_White\\_Papers](http://www.kenblanchard.com/Business_Leadership/Effective_Leadership_White_Papers)

## The best way to help change work is to increase the amount of influence and involvement of the people being asked to change, resolving their concerns as you go

helps identify and address implementation problems.

**Outcome: Collaborative effort and infrastructure**

#### **Strategy 7: Enable and encourage**

It might be necessary to use coaches to instruct and encourage people through the change, especially regarding implementation concerns. Such coaches might be those early adopters and supporters of the plans for change, those who participated in any pilot schemes and can speak about their experiences.

Leaders must accent the positive, treating mistakes, for instance, as 'learning moments' rather than opportunities to apportion blame.

**Outcome: New skills and commitment**

#### **Strategy 8: Execute and endorse**

Hold both leaders and employees accountable for implementing change. Measure its impact and share the results. Deliver swift feedback and collect and distribute success stories.

Ask customers if they have noticed anything different; remove any obstacles to successful implementation, and ditch anything that no longer makes sense or feels too bureaucratic.

**Outcome: Accountability and early results**

**Strategy 9: Embed and extend** Our goal is sustainable change! And it's great to reach the goal! But don't stop there – kick the ball in and anchor it to the back of the net.

Share best practice; document how change works in practice (not theory); offer cross-training and mentoring opportunities; identify new challenges. Most important of all, celebrate success!

**Outcome: Reach and sustainable results**

#### **Mastering the art of change**

There is no mystery about change! The key to getting it right is to take your time in the planning process, investing in people and pilots at the front-end to test-drive change to save time and increase buy-in and performance in the longer term. Then speak with one voice about the proposed change, ensuring change is done *with* your people, not *to* them.

Collaboration, teamwork, and engagement help build up interest and excitement; a combined effort from those who will effect change, as well as those on whom it has an impact, will drive the process through.

And if leaders can address individuals' concerns, and develop strategies to resolve them throughout the process, the likelihood of initiating, implementing and sustaining successful change will be increased dramatically. ■

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