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**C**hange cookbooks are the corporate world's best-sellers. Every week there is a new biography of a business leader or an account of a corporate transformation with an appealing recipe for leading change.

These success stories have value, but two problems arise: the prescriptions for success are based on a research sample of one organisation; and different authors give conflicting advice. Should leaders be directive or consultative? Should they communicate a 'burning platform' or can change succeed without a crisis?

It helps if leaders can separate the myths of change from the realities.

### MYTH 1: Change needs a strong, charismatic leader.

Jerry Porras and Jim Collins, from Stanford University, busted this myth in their book *Good to Great* (2001), the companion volume to their acclaimed *Built to Last*. In *Good to Great*, a study of the top-performing companies over a 30-year period, they found that their leaders had a 'Level 5 leadership style'.

Level 5 leadership is a combination of seeming opposites: modest and wilful, humble and fearless. These CEOs are so low-profile, most people have never heard of them. For example, Colan Mockler of Gillette, Darwin Smith of Kimberley-Clarke or George Cain of Abbott Laboratories.

This doesn't mean leaders can be poor communicators of change. The evidence shows that their role as sponsors is critical for success.

### MYTH 2: The Lone Ranger of change

This is the myth that a single powerful leader, usually the CEO, can overcome opposition and make change happen. It's probably the most common derailment of success.

Successful change is a team sport with no spectators. Leaders from the CEO to first line supervisors need to work together to align goals, remove barriers and communicate consistently. It's step two of John Kotter's well-known change model: build a guiding coalition.

Prosci Research busted this myth in its 2005 Best Practices in Change Management report. The study of more than 400 companies found the greatest contributor to success in change was the executive sponsor's active, visible sponsorship. A key role for the executive sponsor is building a coalition of sponsorship with peers and managers at all levels.

Employees who resist change often do so

# BUSTING THE MYTHS

Some of the big assumptions organisations tend to make about leading change simply don't stack up against the realities.

By Catherine Smithson



Don't buy into myths about good leadership.

because their managers are neutral or opposed to the change. Managers can unwittingly send negative messages because they set goals that conflict with the change, forcing employees to choose where to spend their time and resources. In this situation, most employees choose to support business as usual, not the change.

Therefore, before tackling resistant employees, you need to get their managers on board. Treat the managers as a separate audience and identify the reasons for their resistance.

### MYTH 3: Employees (especially middle managers) resist change, so act early on the resisters.

This is both true and false. It is true because resistance to change is a natural human response. Prosci's 2005 research found that resistance is the single biggest barrier to successful change, and managers and employees resist for different reasons, which means the solutions are different.

The top three reasons why managers resist change: loss of power and control; they are overloaded with current responsibilities; and lack of awareness of the need for change.

The top three reasons why employees resist change: they are unaware of the need for change; job losses are expected; and they are unsure if they have the skills to succeed in the future.

Understanding the need for change includes understanding the reasons for change, the risks of not changing and the "What's in it for me?" factor.

It helps if you develop all-purpose messages about the case for change, then add customised messages for different management levels, functional teams or geographic locations.

The false part of this statement is that leaders should act on resisters early in the change. Resisters may be frustrating, but they are giving you useful feedback that you have missed a step in the people side of change.

Resisters often have valid reasons. They may not communicate them constructively, but if you give them time, show them respect, and listen and probe, you may tap into barriers to change you didn't know about. Ask: "Given that we need to make this change work, what would you suggest we do to make it successful?"

Acting on resisters early in the change by shutting down their objections, labelling or isolating them can create a climate of compliance or fear. Leaders need to act on resistance in a planned and thoughtful way. Continued resistance, especially by managers, can put the success of change at risk and needs to be dealt with as a performance management issue. However, for reasons of power and politics, senior leaders are often too slow to deal with resistant managers, giving them the opportunity to convince others by their deeds or words not to support the change.

"There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to institute a new order of things," said Machiavelli about 700 years ago.

The first step to avoiding the difficulties, doubts and dangers of corporate change is separating the myths from the realities. ❏

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