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Leading Change

You need to bust five common myths.



by Catherine Smithson

CHANGE 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 containing an appealing recipe for leading change.

These success stories have value, but there they also have two problems: the prescriptions for success are based on a research sample size 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?

Five Change Myths

Myth 1. Change needs a strong charismatic leader. Jerry Porras and Jim Collins from Stanford University busted this myth in their excellent 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, the leaders of those companies 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: such as, Colan Mockler, CEO of Gillette; Darwin Smith of Kimberley Clarke; and George Cain of Abbott Laboratories.

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

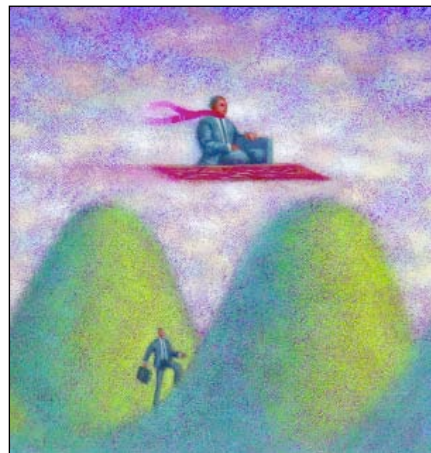
Myth 2. This is the myth that a single powerful leader—the Lone Ranger of change, usually the CEO—can overcome opposition and make change happen. It's probably the most common derailer of success that I see.

Prosci Research busted this myth in its 2005 Best Practices in Change Management Report. The study of over 400 companies found the greatest contributor to success in change was the active and visible sponsorship by the executive sponsor. A key

role of the executive sponsor is building a coalition of sponsorship with peers and managers at all levels.

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 2 of John Kotter's well-known change model, 'build a guiding coalition'.

Myth 3. Employees who resist change are malicious. In point of fact, they are often doing so 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 situa-



tion, most employees choose to support business as usual, not the change.

So before you tackle 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 4. Employees (especially middle managers) always resist change, so act on the resistors early. This myth is partly true. Resistance to change is a natural human response. Prosci's 2005 research found that resistance is the single biggest barrier to successful change. The research also found managers and employees resist for different reasons, which means that the solutions are different.

The top three reasons why managers resist change were:

- loss of power and control;

- overload of current responsibilities;
- lack of awareness of the need for change.

The top three reasons why employees resist change were:

- lack of awareness of the need for change;
- job losses were expected as part of the change; and
- unsure of having the skills to succeed in the future.

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

Myth 5. Develop all-purpose messages about the case for change. You need to add customised messages for different management levels, functional teams or geographic locations.

Don't bother acting on resistors early in the change. Resistors may be frustrating, but they are giving you useful feedback that you have missed a step in the people aside of change.

Resistors often resist for valid reasons. They may not communicate their reasons constructively, but if you show them respect, listen and probe, you may tap into hidden barriers to change that you were not be aware of. Ask them: 'Given that we need to make this change work, what would you suggest we do make it successful?'

Acting on resistors early in the change, by shutting down their objections, labelling or isolating them, can also engender a climate of compliance or fear that may damage your change.

Continued resistance, especially by managers, can put the success of the change at risk and needs to be dealt with as a performance management issue. Yet 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.

Nothing More Difficult

'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, around 700 years ago.

Let's increase the success rate of change by working with the realities, rather than the myths. LE

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ACTION: Boast your success rate.