

LEADERSHIP

The Balance Needed to Lead Change

by [Christina Bielaszka-DuVernay](#)

September 16, 2008

by Kerry A. Bunker and Michael Wakefield

One reason leading change is so difficult is the tension it sets up between managing business issues (creating a vision, aligning resources, restructuring the organization) and managing people issues (the legitimate concerns and feelings of those who must carry out the change and deal with its ramifications day-to-day).

Most managers are adept at the business side of leading change. They are trained to deal with structural and operational issues, and they are evaluated on and rewarded for their ability to innovate and to deliver business results.

But the pressures generated by major structural or operational change compel leaders to pay particular attention to what's happening on the human side of the organization. And it is here that many leaders fall short. The result? A destabilized organizational culture, an erosion of trust, insufficient buy-in, and fear and skepticism among employees at a time when a loyal, productive, and enthusiastic workforce is essential for success.

So how do leaders address the people side of change without jeopardizing the business side? How can they make tough decisions without losing sight of the emotions and concerns of employees at all levels of the organization? At the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), we've found that the answer lies in building trust through authenticity.

When leaders focus on establishing trust, they are better able to deal with both the business and the human elements of change. They find they can be both tough decision makers and empathetic people managers—committed to the plan, yet understanding of the discomfort it might cause. They become agile and resilient, able to rise to the challenges of innovation and change.

Striking the right balance

To create and sustain an environment of trust during change, leaders must strike a balance between these six pairs of opposites:

Balance #1: Catalyze change/Cope with transition.

Catalyzing change involves the ability to manage an initiative, generate buy-in, and maintain momentum. Coping with transition means recognizing and addressing people's feelings and opinions about the change and its possible fallout. Leaders who are adept at both create a climate in which people can work together, even in difficult times. They embrace the vision of change and can communicate that vision with enthusiasm and energy.

At the same time, they give themselves and others permission to express doubt or anxiety. Trust and commitment reach a higher level, and the change initiative gains momentum as people work through the process.

Balance #2: Show a sense of urgency/Demonstrate realistic patience.

One of the most critical tasks for leaders of change is communicating a sense of urgency. A sense of urgency keeps positive energy flowing and increases productivity.

Patience, however, is just as important. Realistic patience involves knowing when and how to slow the pace so that people can adapt. A lack of patience with people can undermine their commitment and impede the change process. Balanced leaders don't panic, overreact, or make everything equally important. They make a conscious effort to provide support and guidance when it's needed. They recognize that people adapt to change in different ways. Some may require additional training or time to meet new expectations;

others may need a forum to air their gripes. Realistic patience also means giving consistent, honest feedback. People need to know what they're doing well and what they can do differently.

Balance #3: Be tough/Be empathetic.

Being tough involves facing challenges head on, being decisive, and taking a firm stand in the face of resistance. Being empathetic means understanding and being sensitive to the feelings and experiences of others.

Empathetic leaders are able to put themselves in other people's shoes, consider individual limitations, and value people as much as results. They know that a lack of empathy can corrode morale and motivation.

These two competencies are among the most difficult for leaders to balance. Many leaders have been taught to shut down their emotional responses in order to make difficult decisions. They worry that letting their "soft side" show will communicate weakness or lack of commitment. But connecting emotionally actually creates the opposite effect in times of significant change or crisis. People want to know that their leaders can be tough and decisive, but they want them to be human, too.

Balance #4: Show optimism/Be realistic and open.

Leaders play a crucial role in maintaining optimism about major change. They need to see its positive effects and convey that vision to others. When people are stressed by change, they look to their leaders for energy and confidence. Optimistic leaders are genuinely committed to the change at hand, and their optimism is contagious.

But balanced leaders are not blindly optimistic. Their optimism is balanced with realism and openness. They can clearly read a situation for what it is. They don't sugarcoat the facts, and they can admit their mistakes. Balanced leaders ask the hard questions, deliver the news (both good and bad), and draw attention to challenges and struggles. A balance of optimism and realism generates trust.

Balance #5: Be self-reliant/Trust others.

Leaders who are self-reliant have confidence in their own skills and abilities. They are accustomed to working independently and often pride themselves on “going it alone.” Trusting others means allowing them to do their part of a task or project without interference or overmanagement. In situations of complex change, it is critical for leaders to trust others to bring their own perspectives and expertise to the table.

Many leaders find this pair of competencies very hard to balance. The myth of the heroic leader who remains strong, courageous, and self-reliant in the face of extraordinary challenges is a deeply ingrained one. In reality, leaders are more likely to rise to new heights when they confront complexity with a strong team of allies. Whatever the challenge, a collaborative approach yields insight, innovation, and action that even the most talented individual cannot generate alone.

Balance #6: Capitalize on strengths/Go against the grain.

In times of crisis, leaders have a tendency to draw on the traits and abilities that led to their success in the past. But overreliance on past behaviors can cement leaders into strategies that no longer work, and the failure to recognize conditions that demand a new approach can be disastrous. On an individual level, failure to adapt is the main reason leaders derail. Leaders must have the ability to leave their comfort zone and challenge preferred patterns—in essence, to go against the grain.

To balance their innate strengths with new skills, leaders must first assess their strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and default behaviors. In CCL programs, they do this through a combination of 360-degree assessments, feedback, and coaching. Direct and honest feedback from bosses, colleagues, and direct reports can also provide leaders with a clear picture of their own performance and behavior.

Such awareness allows leaders to identify their strengths, shore up their weaknesses, and practice different behaviors. Self-awareness also allows leaders to leverage the diverse talents, experiences, and opinions of others, eliminating tunnel vision and groupthink.

The paradox of leadership

Leading change requires managing the constant tension between business-driven and people-focused priorities. Circumstances will sometimes demand that leaders play harder on the business side. But when they have built a strong foundation of trust, those who follow are more likely to do so in a spirit of cooperation and teamwork.

It's not possible to be perfectly in balance all the time. But wise leaders recognize that it's an ideal worth striving for.

* * * *

THE SIX TENSIONS OF LEADING CHANGE

I.

Catalyze change

Champion an initiative or a significant change, consistently promote it, and encourage others to get on board.

vs.

Cope with transition

Recognize and address the personal and emotional aspects of change.

II.

Show a sense of urgency

Demonstrate the need to take action; accelerate the pace of change.

vs.

Demonstrate realistic patience

Know when and how to slow the pace so that people can cope and adapt.

III.

Be tough

Make difficult decisions without hesitation or second-guessing.

vs.

Be empathetic

Take others' perspectives into account; understand the impact of your actions and decisions.

IV.

Show optimism

See the positive side of any challenge; convey that optimism to others.

vs.

Be realistic and open

Speak candidly about the situation, and don't shy away from difficulties; admit personal mistakes.

V.

Be self-reliant

Be confident in your ability to handle new challenges.

vs.

Trust others

Be open to others' input and support; allow them to do their part.

VI.

Capitalize on strengths

Know your personal and organizational strengths; confidently apply them to new situations and circumstances.

vs.

Go against the grain

Show willingness to learn and try new things—even when the process is difficult or painful.

Kerry A. Bunker is a senior enterprise associate and manager of the Awareness Program for Executive Excellence (APEX) at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), in Greensboro, N.C. Michael Wakefield is a senior enterprise associate at CCL, where he designs and trains in a

variety of programs. This article is adapted from their book Leading with Authenticity in Times of Transition, published in 2005 by CCL Press.

This article is about LEADERSHIP

 Follow This Topic

Related Topics: [Change Management](#) | [Managing Uncertainty](#)

Comments

Leave a Comment

Post Comment

0 COMMENTS

 [Join The Conversation](#)

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.