

CHANGE MASTER SERIES

Getting people on board

Three lessons in humility

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Getting people on board

In a media interview, the former Divisional C.E.O. of a Fortune 50 company complained about the resistance he had encountered while attempting to transform the corporate culture at this large organization.

By his own account, he had spent countless hours yelling at people without succeeding in altering their behaviours. Unable to get his people on board, he couldn't execute his otherwise brilliant strategy. In the end, he had to resign to "pursue other ventures".

Contrast the approach of this executive with the perspective of Lou Gerstner, IBM's former Chairman & C.E.O. In his memoir – Who says elephants can't dance? Inside IBM's historic turnaround – Mr. Gerstner wrote: "Changing the attitude and behaviour of thousands of people is very, very hard to accomplish. You can't mandate it, can't engineer it. What you can do is create the conditions for transformation."

Getting people on board is a challenge that requires a great deal of humility on the part of the leaders. Lou Gerstner recognized this while the Fortune 50 Divisional C.E.O. didn't.

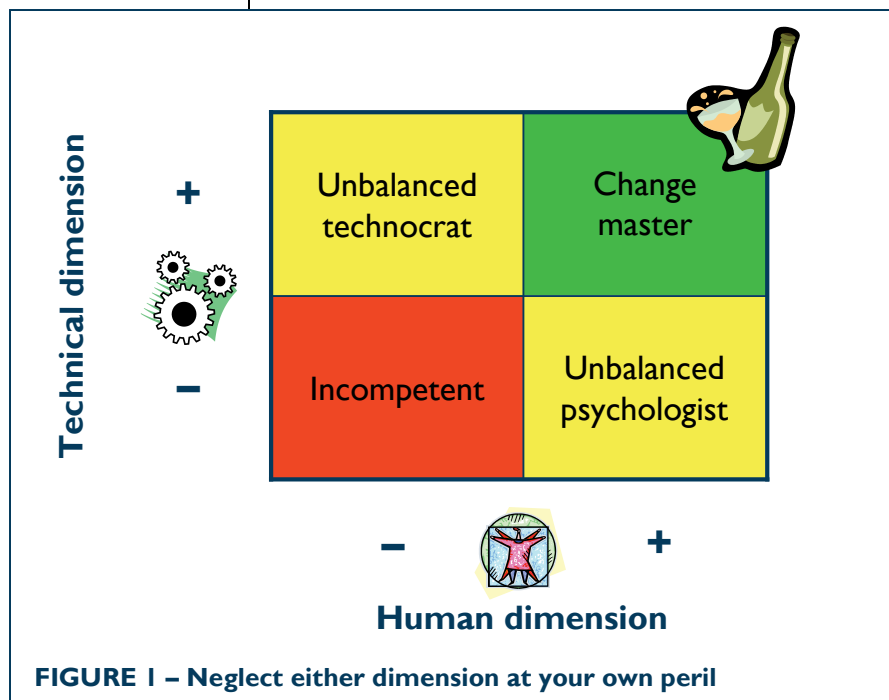
Leaders cannot create change

Here lies the paradox of organizational change: in order to execute their strategy and improve performance, leaders must implement various changes throughout their organizations, yet they cannot create change per se.

Organizational change is about people adopting new behaviours, fresh attitudes and different ways of working. Therefore, change really takes place at the individual level.

In our democratic societies, individuals have a liberty of choice. The leaders might try to force their decision by saying something like "Listen, either you change or you take the door". However, the decision whether or not to behave in a different way ultimately rests in the hands of the individuals.

They might become fully engaged. They might resist passively, or sabotage actively the



initiative. They might also comply grudgingly while looking for a better environment.

Note: with the strengthening of the employment market, managers will find out whether their best employees have adopted the latter strategy in recent years...

The decision to change belongs to the employees, and it is futile to attempt to "engineer" change. Leaders are limited to finding ways to encourage a critical mass of individuals throughout the organization to commit to change.

This constitutes the first lesson in humility, and yet another blow to the myth of the charismatic leader.

The big cheese is (almost) powerless

In addition to their liberty of choice, individuals are unique.

Paul and Meg in accounting, Julie in sales, Peter in operations... John in Toronto, Susan in Vancouver, Bénédicte in Paris... Each will react to change in a very personal, unique way. Their response will be based on their own experience, situation, passions, values and principles.

So the question for the leader becomes: how can I create the right conditions if I don't know all these employees? The answer is straightforward: it's virtually impossible; unless you work through the local leaders and influencers who actually know these employees.

Change is a game of proximity. Distant leaders cannot play the game effectively – whether you measure distance in term of geography or hierarchical levels.

This is the second lesson in humility.

Neglect either dimension at your own peril

We can draw a useful parallel between hosting a dinner party and leading change, as both activities require managing in an integrated way two dimensions – technical & human.

The technical aspects of a dinner party include: sending the invitation in advance, deciding the menu, buying the groceries, preparing the meal, serving the drinks, assembling and presenting each course, etc.

The human aspects include: ensuring your guests are compatible, introducing people to each other as they arrive, stimulating the discussions, helping the shy folks fit in, calming things down if a debate gets out of control, etc.

If the host focuses primarily on the technical aspects, you might end up with a great meal but

a boring atmosphere. Conversely, if the host is a people person who doesn't care enough about the technical stuff, you will have great discussions around a disappointing dinner. Either way, the dinner party won't be a success.

A very similar dynamics happen with organizational change. To succeed, managers must lead change as they would host a dinner party. That is they need to address in a coherent way both the human and technical sides, throughout the initiative.

The technical issues relate to strategy, product line, organizational design, business processes, compensation structure, management systems, information technology, etc.

The soft side deals with emotions, resistance, two-way communications, stakeholder engagement, sponsorship, influence networks, organizational culture, etc.

As with a dinner party, an unbalanced approach that favours one dimension at the expense of the other is a great recipe for failure – no matter how good you are in your particular field.

This represents the third lesson in humility.

Developing your impact as a business leader

The pace of change in the economy keeps accelerating. As a result, the ability to introduce change has become a major determinant of career success for all managers, and a strategic imperative for any organizations. To increase your impact and advance your management career, you should further develop your ability to lead in a coherent, integrated manner across the two dimensions of change.

If your comfort zone is with the soft issues, stretch yourself to the technical side, as people interventions are counterproductive when their timing or "technical resonance" is off.

Conversely, if your forte is on the technical aspects of your business, recognize how crucial the human dynamics is, develop your understanding of it, and keep practicing.

In either case, when it comes to change, leave your ego in the locker room as the game requires a great deal of humility.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Edmond Mellina is president of ORCHANGO – a provider of innovative and proven learning programs especially developed for organizations in transition. With its flagship Change Master Program, ORCHANGO is known for world-class change management training.

Edmond is internationally recognized as an expert in the field of change and transition management. He is the creator of the ORCHANGO Change Management System™ and the ORCHANGO Learn-and-Execute System™.

Edmond's articles have appeared in leading business publications around the globe; the media regularly interview him as an expert source.

As a speaker, Edmond addresses audiences on change management, leadership development, multicultural teamwork and the art of influence.

Edmond holds a Master of Engineering from the prestigious “Grandes Écoles” of France, and is a graduate of the Ivey Executive Program. He is fluent in both English and French.

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