

Effective leaders know how to manage change

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Resistance is at the heart of change because it's the natural response for most. When change challenges stability, comfort zones and the state of automatic pilot, any "extreme" action will serve only to increase stress levels. Yet realistically, business situations can require extreme action to be acted upon decisively.

The very essence of the word "extreme" exceeds the bounds of moderation. An example of this type of change may be evident in the hospitality industry when a hotel company takes over management responsibility of a hotel on the advice of a disgruntled owner at midnight, with very short notice.

This is sometimes referred to as a hostile takeover. This "extreme" response could involve a change-over of the IT systems, revisions of all PR material, stationery, guest information and relisting in reservation systems, among many others. All need to be done as soon as possible, with minimal impact on the guest experience.

In this case, there may not always be time for the preparation of a strategy, yet there will always be the need for non-negotiable, essential elements of change initiatives to be done quickly, which will unavoidably create a stressful environment.

Change activity could be described as moderate when change has time on its side or the phases support the vision. Examples of this may be with the implementation of a quality management system, phase by phase. In this example, there will be time for the preparation of a strategy and all the resources as well as a clearly defined execution plan, resulting in no extreme reaction and minimal stress.

To choose between "extreme" or "moderate" approaches is a choice not always in a leader's hands. Given the nature of the business world, it would be safe to say that neither choice is right or wrong, yet will definitely produce different consequences. With change, the best consequences are those that will help and not hinder the people who need to work differently, representing a new brand or working to quality standards.

When change does require an extreme business approach or action, it should not be an excuse for leaders to exhibit extreme behaviour behind the actions. Executive leadership should avoid demonstrating the following behaviour during periods of change:

Railroading others: change can indeed be achieved by either force or influence, yet it will only ever be sustained through influence. Influence is the art of having others want to accept the change because it means something positive to them.

False communication: inaccurate facts, untruths or corporate assumptions will inevitably be exposed. Once that happens, trust will be gone, and we only need to look at the case of Lance Armstrong to see once trust is broken, how hard, if not impossible, it is to get back.

Lack of transparency: there is often a conscious decision not to provide all information. It could be for many reasons, intentional or otherwise, yet the bottom line is that once again the trust will be shattered.

Say one thing and do another: actions can speak so much louder than words. Saying one thing and doing another will always be identified, tagged and shared by team members. This behaviour will draw the wrath of a team and can serve only to build a greater chasm of separation between a changer and the changees.

Ignoring resistance: this is another form of railroading. Resistance will always exist and the trick is to anticipate it early if possible or identify when it strikes and give it what it wants. It wants only attention and understanding. Ignoring resistance will turn it into a septic cesspool, a nasty element to deal with during change.

Favouritism: why should one have to work within a new law and others not? Why should the process apply to some and not to others? Such behaviour will be perceived as extreme purely for the sake of tearing people apart, rather than binding them together. A leader's job during change is to build support and unity, not separation between parties with differing focuses.

No clear reason for change: if no reason exists, or if there is no sense in the existing business case for change, change will be challenged. Challenged change is not a pleasant scenario to experience and will present only a losing battle. Credibility is earned through clarity and meaning, and changing for change's sake will be viewed as extreme, not plausible and not worthy of one's own efforts.

"Extremism" implies one has power over another. The very nature of change cannot discount extremism, as it most certainly exists during times of change, with the new having power over the old. Effective change leaders, practitioners and business partners, however, mitigate the negative impact of this by engaging with every opportunity to align the vision, organisation and people with each other. Every likely gap or difference is anticipated and addressed and every resistor is nurtured accordingly. Nobody, even an extremist, can say that change is easy.

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