

CHANGE: The Beauty or the Beast?

How to Leverage Change to Rise to the Top

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***“It is not the strongest of the species that survive,
nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”***

– Charles Darwin

Let’s reflect.

Thomas Paine once said, **“These are the times that try men’s souls.”** So I want to begin with a few questions...

- Are you a leader of an organization, department, or team, where people look to you for direction, guidance, and support?
- In the face of this, have you experienced some rapid, unexpected, disruptive, continuous changes?
- Did you choose these changes or did they just happen to you?
- Do you feel “stuck,” frustrated, and stressed because you don’t know what to do or you have tried some things and keep getting the same results?

With accelerated change, overwhelming complexities, and tremendous competition, both domestically and globally, the odds are that you could answer “yes” to at least one of these questions.

Now, let’s project.

- If you could wave a magic wand and get the results you’re looking for, what would they be?
- What impact would this have on your life and the lives of those who look to you for your leadership?

Many are called, but few are chosen.

--Ancient Proverb

If you are in a position of leadership or aspire to be, if you are the person people look to, it is more than likely that you did not choose leadership, leadership chose you. Now more than ever, these are the times that are calling for transformative, epic leadership. Now is the time for “chosen” leaders to rise to the top and be the catalysts for producing outstanding results in themselves and others.

Could it be that you are one of them? What does it take to be chosen?

Let's explore this. It does not require you to have an impressive title or be at the highest ranks in a company or organization. All that it requires is for you to accept the "call" and adhere to its conditions. Will you?

As a consultant, coach, and inspirational speaker for thousands of leaders over the past three decades, I have empowered them to be skillful in many core competencies that have, over the years, fulfilled the requirements to be an effective leader. However, in these times of massive, unprecedented change, I have found that is not enough. For those leaders who want to be set apart and rise to the top, there is one fundamental principle they must follow and two major characteristics they must also possess.

THE PRINCIPLE: You must change the way you (and others) think about change.

Change is paradoxical.

A paradox is something with contradictory qualities or phases. In nature, paradox doesn't exist because everything moves naturally from stage to stage. The paradox is created by the way human beings conceptualize, analyze and perceive change. We often see change as a "double bind" in which we are caught in an illusion of alternatives. We will instinctively try to make meaning of the change or to create some sense of understanding or familiarity, i.e. it's either good or bad, positive or negative, to be embraced or resisted. Such "double-binds" result in friction, frustration, and conflict because neither view of change is a viable solution and actually perpetuates a problem because one or the other viewpoint will dominate depending on the environment or context.

One common example: Organizations have a tendency to develop and institutionalize their own pattern of thinking regarding ways to approach problems. This is often called "group think." When this pattern of thinking no longer serves the organization, by becoming repetitive and unproductive, it becomes necessary to think "outside" the established patterns.

Another example: When we, as individuals, cannot make meaning of the change, we become reactive and create our own "story" – "first this happened, now this will happen," or "that means (or leads to) this..." And the result looks like this:

RESULTS = No Results + A Good Story

Change is what you make it – the beauty or the beast.

Rewrite your story. Instead of locking into one viewpoint, shift to a higher logical level of thinking which lifts the situation out of the double bind placing it in a different frame that expands the range of possibilities. Reflect on the ways change has made you stronger, better, wiser, more focused. What opportunities did it present? What lessons did you learn? Change your thinking, and you change your world.

"When you rule out the impossible, everything can be believed, thereby making available a limitless and infinite array of new possibilities."

--Albert Einstein

Once when conducting a workshop with a group of newly promoted senior leaders, I asked the usual question of “what do you expect to get from this program?” One woman raised her hand and gave the most poignant answer to that question I had ever encountered. Through her answer, I knew she was well on her way to becoming a transformative leader. She answered, “I want to know why anyone would willingly follow me.”

This leads me to share with you the two characteristics of an epic, transformative leader.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

This term, popularized by Daniel Goleman, is defined as the ability to:

- **Recognize, understand and manage our own emotions**
- **Recognize, understand and influence the emotions and well-being of others**

In practical terms, this means being self-aware. As a leader, it means being aware that emotions can drive your behavior and impact people (positively and negatively). It means learning how to manage these emotions—both your own and others—especially when you are under pressure.

Examples of high-pressure situations that must be effectively dealt with—now more than ever—to be a transformative leader include:

- Making tough decisions
- Dealing with change and life transitions
- Dealing with setbacks, failure, and burnout
- Dealing with challenging relationships
- Dealing with conflict and highly charged, difficult conversations

For example, it is not the same to resolve a conflict based on mere facts vs. solving a conflict based on facts that have been influenced by an unawareness of one’s and others’ emotions and misunderstandings. I have found the former approach to be futile and the latter approach transformative. The emotional balance of a person in a position of power is critical to the well-being of the organization, department, or team.

INSPIRED GREATNESS

Practice what you preach. It’s not what you say; it’s what you do that’s important. People are inspired by what they see, not just what they hear about. It’s your practice of your policies (what people see and experience), not just your discussion of them that inspires people. Additionally, transformational leadership requires changing not only the way you **think** and **act**, but also the way you show your **authenticity** – the innermost core of who you are. This is a game-changer.

Inspire greatness, one team at a time. Build strong, resilient teams and incite them to do something great in the direction the organization wants to go. Find and speak to their strengths, not their weaknesses. Engage rather than criticize. Instill hope where there is fear, and power where there is pain. Encourage and facilitate constructive conflict and disagreements rather than avoid it.

I have had the pleasure of empowering many leaders to do this and witnessing their transformation.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The last word on this important subject takes us back to our initial thought by Charles Darwin (some research suggests it was Leon C. Megginson). ***“It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive (or adaptable) to change.”***

What is meant by this? People can be unstoppable when they’re in their comfort zone, dealing with the familiar, but when something significant changes and the leader or organization can’t adapt fast enough, they will fail no matter how strong or intelligent they are. When something big happens, everyone has to adapt to survive.

This is an illustration of what the real imperative is for a leader today. But like most things in business and life, rapid change is a two-edged sword—a threat but also an opportunity, the beast but also the beauty.

Adapt. Turn change into an opportunity. *When you look in the mirror, what do **you** see? Can you see only what you’ve done so far, or the issues and challenges you face, or your failures? Or do you see all the endless possibilities before you? Do you see hope and a brighter future for you and the ones you lead? When you think this way, it sets the tone for the rest of the organization, the department, or the team. When you are committed to your own growth, you’ll get followers that are committed to their growth.*

So embrace change! Be the leader people look to! Rise to the top! And may the Force be with you.

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