

Management Insights

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A Push-Pull Strategy for Change

By Babak Armajani

Leadership is about winning followers.

Do you sometimes encounter people who just don't get the need for change? Or who fail to see the benefits? Jim Chrisinger, who managed numerous reforms in Iowa state government, observes, "The right argues for less government; the left for more government. Who's demanding better government?"



These were among the questions I raised in my May column, in which I asserted that managing change cannot be reduced to mechanical steps. I suggested that if you are a leader who wants to make change, you should develop a strategy. Further, I recommended a formula developed by the Center for Creative Leadership that others have found useful as a template for developing a change strategy:

D (demand) x V (vision) x K (knowledge of next steps) x B (belief) > R (resistance)

Smart leaders cultivate each of the elements of this formula, thereby making change inevitable. This month, I would like to focus on the first two elements of the formula.

Mobilizing Demand for Change

Before change can happen, a critical mass of people has to reach a level of discontent with the status quo that compels them to try something different. Forming that critical mass is usually easier than you might think. Yet this aspect of change making is often completely neglected.

If you sense a need for change, chances are others do as well. Leadership is about winning followers. One basic way to do so is to articulate demand for change and put people in touch with their own discontent about the status quo. Combined with a compelling vision of a better future (see below), these two forces are an engine that can create enough power to overcome inertia.

Try these tactics to mobilize demand for change:

- **Build a close link between your people and their customers.** Sometimes people are more motivated to make their customers happy than they are to make you happy. How could you help your people get direct feedback from those whom they serve?

- **Use money to create demand.** The cement that holds the status quo together in most public organizations is the budget. Most government budgets are based on last year's allocation. If you choose to spend your money as you did last year, neither the budget office nor elected officials are likely to challenge you. How could you invite people in your organization to fundamentally rethink how resources are allocated?

- **Make sure those who need to change feel the discontent with the status quo.** As managers we often see ourselves as "buffers," sheltering our people from political, fiscal and other external pressures. This has useful purposes, but it also makes people less inclined to go through the pain of change. How can you help your people and your stakeholders experience their discontent with the status quo?

Creating a Vision for a Better Future

Mobilizing discontent with the status quo is only constructive when closely coupled with a compelling vision for a better future. Creating a "vision statement" is often part of an organization's strategic planning process. Yet, more often than not, I see these tools weakly employed. Use these principles to create a compelling vision:

- **Make sure the vision is directly tied to the discontent people experience.** Unless the vision is married to something people want changed, it will become merely platitude.

- **Focus the vision where it matters most.** Too often, leaders try to get everyone on board with an important change. Accept that some important people or groups are going to be opposed to the change you want to make. Listen to them, manage their resistance, but don't try to sell them lest you end up watering down the impact of the change you want to make. Instead, focus your vision relentlessly on meeting the needs of those you are there to serve.

- **Make your vision specific and concrete.** Eyes glaze over when people hear clichés. Make your vision tangible for people.

- **Make the vision aspirational.** The best visions lift people up. They give something unexpected, even something people may believe is unachievable. Bureaucratic cultures are hostile to aspiration. Rather, they encourage pragmatism, practicality and incremental approaches. So expect good staff people to protect you by resisting your urges to aspire.

Demand for change and a vision for a better future are like two sides of the same coin. Demand pushes people to want to find a better way, while vision pulls them toward a better future. This push-pull dynamic is the engine that fuels change. Revving up that engine is the job of any leader who seeks to make things better. The secret is to link these two forces closely together.

Next time, we will examine two more elements of the formula: creating belief that the vision can be realized and articulating the next steps.

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