

THE CHANGE LEADER

This article provides the reader with a basic introduction to personal and organisational means that create successful changes - and successful change leaders. The article can be used as a sort of checklist for everyone who would like to work with change professionally. A number of considerations will be presented, which are useful to have in mind when a change is to be planned or when one has to evaluate and learn from his experiences.

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THE LEADER'S MOST IMPORTANT MEANS IS HIMSELF

The leader plays a crucial role in relation to changes. Those who are able to lead in practice are those who are able to get others into the change process. Most stakeholders (employees, customers etc.) are positive towards changes and towards other persons who can inspire for change. In other words, people like to be seduced and thus we like them who are able and willing to take the seducer's role. This statement will challenge some of the traditional, critical approach to power, where people claim that those in power get the people to do something that they would otherwise not do.

The article takes a cognitive perspective on the subject and thus leads one to think that most people can develop himself into an excellent leader by finding his own personal solution to the problems presented in this article, given that the leader possesses a certain minimum amount of intelligence, knowledge, network and personal will power.

As leadership primarily consists of working with changes, everything else can be left to an administrator or a photogenic figure-head – thus this article is a sketch for an interactive basis course in leadership, where the criteria of optimal benefit is that the reader tries out the thoughts in his own practice.

THE VISION IS SERIOUS

The efficient leader takes visions seriously. A vision should include both a fearful scenario ("What happens if we do not do anything?") and a positive scenario ("What happens if we can cope with the situation?"). It is important that

the leader can formulate a vision in everyday language that is in a language that is appropriate for the target group. Many potentially strong changes lose their power because the leader applies an inside language and concepts that do not appeal to others than to the management and the board of directors. For example it is not necessarily interesting for many employees whether the company's market share is 11 or 20 per cent. On the other hand it can be interesting if the possibility of more interesting assignments or increasing own income arises. Therefore, there is a huge strength in having a good sense of the rhetoric. 2

Thus the excellent leader is often a good storyteller and language innovator, who can affect his surroundings in order to think in new ways. A remarkable example of this kind of leader was Martin Luther King, who was able to get his own supporters and many opponents to rethink the relations of race in the USA – and in large parts in the rest of the world. He could build a bridge between the individual's experiences in everyday life – characterized by fear and ill-will towards "others" – and the social visions of a country, where the individual would be respected for his capabilities and contributions without having an eye to the color of the skin.

The ability of telling stories in a vivid and motivating way gives crucial advantages when energy and support have to be created for big changes!

HOW IS THE EFFECTIVE STORY CREATED?

Start for example with considering:

- Why is the change necessary?
- What is the exciting new thing about the considered change?

- What new values and attitudes are leading?
- What does it mean for those who have to change?
- What does it mean for me?

SUPPORT FROM MANAGEMENT

Every leader must thoroughly consider with himself and his surroundings whether the change means so much to him/her that he/she is willing to pay a “personal price” to carry it out. The personal price includes things such as work, conflicts and pressure of various kinds. A considerable pressure can typically come from manager and leader colleagues, who are often interested in influencing the change initiative. The leader must therefore manage these pressures, which means using all elements of the political toolbox.

If the leader does not succeed in getting support from his manager and leader colleagues, the change will fall to the ground as soon as involvement is needed from other parts of the organization that are not directly visible and/or are not included in the leader’s area of responsibility. A survey carried out by the Wall Street Journal among 400 European companies showed among other things that lack of support in management was one of the most frequent reasons for changes failing to succeed. It is just one example that companies and organizations decide on changes that senior management actually is against.

Each leader must therefore consider from the beginning how the other managers and leaders should be involved in the initiative. These considerations involve an analysis of whose support the leader and the change depend on. These persons should be won for the cause, which is of course done by giving them influence on the initiative. This can mean that other persons than the leader must effect the change. This can also mean that replacements have to take place in the management group. Those leaders who are not in the “dominating coalition” and who do not support the change whole-heartedly can suddenly experience to be pushed out of influential power.

USE THE EMPLOYEES’ THOUGHTS AND IDEAS

While one often has to think politically in relation to managers and leaders, one need to think in a psychological and pedagogical way especially in relation to employees and other target groups that are affected directly by the change. Most employees are interested in their jobs, the con-

tent of their jobs, the relations to their colleagues, opportunities for personal development etc. The leader’s idea of change has to be analysed in relation to the factors that are of highest importance to the target groups in question. If possible, the target group - or representatives of the target group – needs to be involved in the specific working out of practical solutions.

Experience shows that it is possible to arouse most people’s enthusiasm if they can understand the idea of the change and they have the possibility to influence the practical work. It is typically in such way that the practical men can correct many of the flaws that the leader failed to see in his vision. Thus there are many good reasons for taking the employees’ contribution. They are a gift for the change.

However, the leader must take it into consideration that in the beginning there is much resistance towards the change. This is natural. The leader himself shows resistance too when others present solutions to him that he did not himself hit upon. In order to succeed in involving the employees in a meaningful way, opportunities have to be created initially for ventilating the resistance openly. When the employees have given vent to the resistance – and have received good answers that show that the leader is attentive to their opinions – many will be ready to constructively involve themselves in the further steps of the working out and adjusting of practical solutions.

AN ELEPHANT HAS TO BE EATEN IN SMALL PORTIONS

When changes are planned it is important to be both ambitious and realistic regarding what is possible to reach. The leader has to first of all think of who should be involved in the planning of the change, what objectives and milestones have to be reached etc. Furthermore, as an example, he has to think of the value of the small visible results compared to the value of the energy used for more thorough analyses. Often it is useful to document one’s considerations for example in the form of a project description, which can also be applied as a communication tool on the way. This gives an overview, which is necessary for all important actors. At the same time an ongoing updating of the project and its partial results are meant to be as a checklist for the leader so that he keeps focus on the change.

When a management group decides to carry out a large change, at the same time it opts out of

many alternative opportunities of action. The consequence of this is that many leaders' natural tendency to start new initiatives must be bridled – gradually as one gets inspired or become tempted by new experiences. Important changes are a long and hard pull and by documenting progress and backlash one can take precautions against the syndrome that is called *“declaring victory too soon”*.

PAMPER YOUR FAVOURITES

A manager is someone who gets others started working. A leader is someone who is able to get others going on working. In connection with changes one often draws heavily on key employees – those who are project managers or who somehow contribute with analyses, training etc. Such employees have to be rewarded. Sometimes it is sufficient with attention, praise etc, but other forms of rewards should be considered as well. It is because at some point all participants think of the question: *“What’s in it for me?”*

A balance has to be between the perceived effort and the perceived personal gain. Thus it is recommended to keep contact with the committed contributors and examine what personal goals they are working at reaching. If the relations are managed appropriately, the leader will not only gain an invaluable help for the change but a basis of a network is created as well, which can in future also go into action regarding new initiatives.

START WITH YOURSELF

The basis of this article is what the leader needs to do in order to affect others. However, good change management in reality presupposes that the leader constantly works with changing himself. No matter how many tendencies are towards flat structures, network organisations, self-governing teams etc., leaders are essential for organisations – for the employees and stakeholders who are attached to the organisation.

Some people may have the belief that change leaders are people who have a very “soft” personality. Perhaps one visualises a number of nice people who cannot even hurt a cat. If this is the case, the image should be absolutely modified.

It is characteristic of change leaders that they are “workaholics” and that they like to be occupied with people. They have usually a kind attitude, but at the same time the attitude is typically business orientated. The leader invests primarily in relationships with other people because it is an

efficient way to achieve results. Contrary to the “soft” image, the new image may seem cynical. Perhaps one thinks now that change leaders apparently perceive people as manipulable tools. However, this image is not correct either. The fact is that good change leaders do not hide their goals. These goals are therefore apparent for their surroundings and the goals are first of all objectives of the company’s development. Cynicism is about getting others to work for the sake of the leader’s personal gain – perhaps without them realising it.

It is characteristic of excellent change leaders that they are interested in the company – or another great cause – and that nobody will get very far by suspecting them of striving for the personal gain.

A LEARNING PROCESS

If you wish to be a leader – and not just a manager – over a long time, it is necessary for most people to adapt oneself to a continuous learning process. The learning process can begin with asking yourself: *“How does my vision look like?”* or *“Do I pamper my favorites?”*... Or in reality it does not matter where you start. The subjects cohere and the work with changing others in the organisation and yourself can start whenever you decide to do so.

You can also use the checklist below to do a small exercise in self-knowledge. The list gives a number of characteristics that are typical for competent change leaders. Each of these characteristics is shortly described; however, these are of course only cues. When you read them you are asked to reflect on your own strengths and weaknesses.

The exercise is simply about prioritising the main characteristics on the list on a scale from 1-9. You should give 1 to the characteristic that describes you most. You should give 2 to the characteristic that you are second best at, etc. 9 represents obviously the characteristic that is least you at present. The grades 8 and 9 indicate that these are attitudes and behavior that you possibly need to work on if you have ambitions about becoming an excellent change leader.

WHAT ARE YOUR PERSONAL STRENGTHS?

Where can you improve your competencies as a change leader?

1. You are interested in other people

- You seek contact with others

- You know most people in your workplace
- You do not categorise people
- Others/everybody want to get in contact with you

2. You have a tendency to being a workaholic

- You love your work
- You take the initiative in important discussions at work
- You work at least 50 hours a week
- Others perceive you as a work-horse

3. You are goal-oriented

- You have always at least one change project going on that has to succeed
- You know what you want to reach
- You know what you want the organisation to reach
- Others ask you for advice when they are in doubt about the direction of their own contribution

4. You are extroverted and communicating

- You are a good storyteller
- You feel comfortable in every situation where you give and receive information
- You ensure that everyone receives the information they need
- Others listen attentively to you and share willingly their knowledge with you

5. You are forthright

- You are not afraid of anyone in your company
- You familiarise yourself with the situation and then say what you feel
- If someone wants a clear answer from you, you can usually give one
- Others perceive you as a person who speaks straight out

6. You are trustworthy

- You are not a member of a certain clique at work
- Your starting point is always in the interest of the company
- You trust others and you give others the opportunity to live up to this trust
- Others see you as the epitome of the company's best values

7. You are results-oriented

- You follow up on agreements and decisions
- You commit yourself to measurable results

- You hate the wasting of resources
- Others know that when you have the responsibility actions are taken

8. You are flexible

- You vary consciously your behavior so that it supports your goals
- You are able to modify objectives, time schedules etc. if the arguments for doing so are good enough
- You have no preconceived opinions about what solutions will have to be chosen
- Others express themselves freely towards you because they know it is worth it

9. You are personal

- You are able to give praise and critics to others
- You talk gladly about subjects outside work
- You tell gladly about yourself and willingly about situations from which you got away not very luckily
- Others have a clear picture of you – there are many anecdotes about you in the company

DOES IT WORK IN PRACTICE?

In reality it is not very difficult to create a successful change. In most organisations there are many individuals who want to be involved - but when enthusiasm has fallen, one can easily lose focus on containing the ideas and results. It becomes difficult; new situations arise where the new solutions do not have the intended effect; new initiatives are brought up etc. In other words there is a great risk that the efforts were in vain.

The leader must consider what mechanism actually operates the behavior in everyday life. If the change ignores these things - it may be social norms, rewarding systems, leadership behavior, offers for training etc. – it could be a good explanation for the lack of effect. The excellent leader keeps his attention on the change for several years after its implementation. But these aspects should be investigated and understood already from the beginning. By understanding the norms the leader gets inspired how the vision should be presented so that it will impress the recipients. By seeing 7 through the rewarding systems in the beginning the leader acquires knowledge about what kind of behavior the organisation is interested in furthering or limiting in practice.

By investigating what leaders – formal as well as informal – are the leading people in the different parts of the organisation, the leader acquires knowledge of who he has to secure support from if the change is to succeed. He can also get an impression of his potential opponents' strengths. Finally, it is worth gathering information about the employees' level of knowledge and education. Partly it gives input for how one should communicate and partly it will give a good impression of how much training is necessary in connection with the change process.

In this way we can see that all the above elements cohere. It is not necessarily so that the leader should start with creating a vision, which he has to find managerial support for afterwards etc. No. The inspiration may come from just any place in the chain – the important thing is that the leader secures a connection to the other parts. Because it applies in this case too that the chain is not stronger than the weakest link!

If you feel like doing it and would like to make an effort to develop your skills as a change leader, I wish you will have a good time and I hope you get on well with your work!

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