The 4 Steps to Manage Constant Change

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Author: Daniel Stewart

As I sit down for an executive coaching session or to talk with a CEO about his/her senior team, one of the most frequently cited challenges is how to effectively lead in rapidly changing environments.

Organizations and teams are expected to manage a large, continual flow of current and new demands. Some leaders thrive in this situation while others just get swamped, failing to stay above water.

How do leaders effectively create a sense of confidence and accomplishment amid such change? The reality of more frequent workplace change is undeniable. Leaders that find focus instead of confusion within constant change, learn to ride the waves and not fight them. They use an approach that encourages choice and accountability, versus allowing the multitude of changes to overwhelm and stifle them.

4 Step Process

Using a four step prioritization process, successful change leaders can carve out a sense of control instead of a feeling of doom. Armed with the right training, tools and mindset, leaders can more easily be taught to welcome new changes and avoid reaching for a life preserver, just to stay afloat.

Here are the four steps leaders can use to manage constant change. Each step also identifies how to avoid the change traps along the way. Some of these points below have been inspired by Bill Pasmore's latest book, *Leading Continuous Change*.

Step #1
Compare Importance (Do not Assume Importance)

Too often the first misguided step in responding to something new is to assume the change is automatically important and must be done.

It usually sounds like this: *"How can I do this with everything else going on? I'm already overloaded!"*

However, there is a different way to respond and it sounds like this: *"This new idea is interesting and looks like we may need to pay attention to it. I want to compare this with other things that we have going on. We can then decide how much time and effort we should put into it."*

It is key to evaluate the true importance and impact the change will have before reaching possibly exaggerated or misinformed conclusions.

Smart leaders step back and have a process for evaluating the first sighting of the change. They hold up the change against everything else that is going on and then decide next steps.

Step #2
Gather Data (Do not Deny Choices)

The second step involves exploring additional information from internal and external sources. It is gathering helpful knowledge from those who have experience and education with the potential change. This is in contrast to the trap of concluding that the existing level of information is already sufficient.

Be cautious when one starts hearing statements like: *"We are too far down the path to change now!* or *"That would upset our business too much."* This thinking may deny an opportunity to learn, prevent important course corrections, and to lead to myopic decisions.

Accepting your present direction without investigating the possible changes that emerge later on can deny important choices, positioning you to fight change instead of embracing it.

Step #3
Create a Team (Do Not Go It Alone)

The third step is to assign people to investigate the change. This is in stark contrast to another typical trap of seeking to be the hero and solving the problem on one's own. Too often, a potential change comes along and leaders may view it as their opportunity to show the world how smart they are or they may feel duty bound to fix it themselves.

A leader in this case may think: *"I'll just have to work harder and figure it out."* This approach of going it alone may work sometimes, but in today's networked economy it is closing off valuable resources and potential insights. **The smarter approach is to dedicate a small team to investigate, discuss, and recommend how to look at the change.** This team can be responsible for contingency planning, communication, and can quickly become subject matter experts to inform future direction and prioritization.

Step #4
Prototype Options (Do not Use Hope as a Strategy)

As the team seeks information and experiences from those internal and external to the organization and recommends next steps, they can then begin creating a prototype of the changes—applying the change in real life. This does not mean creating a whole new business unit and investing millions.

This means assigning a small amount of capital and resources to enable a test case, an experiment to fail or succeed fast. Trying something out quickly, especially based on informed and prioritized analysis, is a powerful way to truly learn the potential of something new.

This is in contrast to a situation that some organizations succumb to: using hope as their strategy. Hope as a strategy sounds like this: *"I'm sure we can make it work somehow."* **Having hope in the future is a beautiful thing, but it is not sufficient to provide confidence in changing times to senior leaders, employees, shareholders, and customers.** Creating rapid prototyping quickly transforms strategic hope into a plan with clear contingencies and risk management tactics.

Conclusion

Leading change is a key competency for every leader today. Changes in the workplace are increasing in frequency and intensity. Successful leaders follow a pattern to help them prioritize and make sense of these daily bombardments; helping them become better because of the change! Follow this four step approach and see your organization ride the waves of change without getting taken out by the undertow!