Leading Change in the Age of Acceleration

BY DR. KEVIN NOURSE

C onsider the case of Susan, a government affairs director in a small professional association who nearly experienced leader derailment.

She was recently hired to replace the former director who worked in his role for nearly 25 years. The CEO was enthusiastic about bringing her on-board because of her compelling vision for transforming a member services department that was struggling. After a brief honeymoon period, problems began emerging as Susan started to implement her vision and faced stiff resistance from all of her staff and several peers. Team members approached her boss to complain about her abrasive style and inability to provide input on decisions about the future of the department. The CEO approached Susan and explained she needed to soften her approach with staff. Susan was at a loss for how such a promising new role and opportunity to

transform her department could derail so quickly.

As an executive coach, I've worked with several association executives who functioned well as managers but struggled when faced with leading change efforts. In many cases, the resistance emerged because of the leader's style and approach, not the components of the change vision. Inevitably, the question becomes how high potential leaders like Susan can prevent near derailment and excel in their attempts to implement change.

Navigating the Age of Acceleration

The association environment is increasingly fraught with unpredictability, rapid change, and unprecedented competition for the time, attention, and loyalty of our members. Thomas Friedman, author of *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations*, focused on the exponential advancements in technology and our collective struggle to keep up. Combined with dramatic demographic shifts with the aging workforce, many associations struggle with implementing the right technology to attract and sustain engagement with younger members.

Jay Younger, President and CEO of McKinley Advisors notes, "Although the fundamental purpose of associations – to help people connect, learn and advance as professionals – will always be essential, the changes we will have to navigate in the years ahead will test even the most seasoned leader. Over the next decade, we will continue to see pronounced shifts in demographics, mobile consumerism, and the expectations our members have relative to our missions. Associations that thrive in this environment will do so because their leaders are capable of thinking and acting in new ways."

Nature of Organizational Change

What is it about organizational change that causes some leaders to derail?

The age of acceleration often triggers a need for profoundly transformative organizational change as associations seek to remain relevant to their current and future members. These types of changes are increasingly complex, ambiguous, and long-term with numerous opportunities for setbacks. Leadership researchers Bill Joiner and Stephen Josephs, authors of *Leadership Agility*, argued that an agility gap exists because many organizations have not developed leaders with the ability to thrive in these increasingly complex environments. Joiner and Josephs estimated that only 5 percent of managers are capable of functioning at the levels needed to navigate the types of complex and ambiguous change increasingly facing organizations.

At its core, change is an inherently emotional process that evokes strong emotions in leaders as well as followers and other stakeholders. In his book *Managing Transitions*, William Bridges argues transformation begins with an ending. Something familiar in the organization – a process, a service, an identity – is no longer relevant. Frequently sacred cows have to be slain for innovative new services and practices to emerge and allow an association to thrive. Stakeholders and leaders

often experience emotional reactions and fight-or-flight behavior as a result of feeling unprepared for transformative change.

When triggered emotionally, leaders often overuse traditional methods for managing change that are based on individual efforts, control, and overuse of formal power to evoke compliance. Such was the case of Susan identified earlier in this article. Unfortunately, this approach to change, while appropriate for more straightforward change efforts, is less useful for transformative change.

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Moving Beyond Change Management

Successfully navigating complex and transformative change calls for skills in both change management and change leadership. Change leadership is characterized by an internal orientation that begins with modeling behavior for stakeholders, effecting change through influence power, and aligning change efforts with organizational values and vision. Effective change leaders often focus on creating resilient and adaptive organizational cultures that readily embrace change.

In contrast, change management draws upon more traditional managerial mindsets and skills, including formal authority, compliance orientation, and measurable goals and tactics. These skills can be useful when focused on discrete change projects that are relatively unambiguous and short in duration.

Conventional approaches to change management fail to recognize that one of the most significant aspects of resistance to change has less to do with the envisioned outcomes and more to do with you, the change owner. The case study of Susan at the beginning of this article illustrates this.

In his book Beyond the *Wall of Resistance*, writer Rick Mauer argues that there are three primary sources of resistance to change:

- The stakeholder does not understand the vision or rationale for the change

- The stakeholder understands the vision but does not want to change

- The stakeholder experiences strong feelings of resistance to the change leader

The first two sources are relatively easy to address through communication and engagement techniques. However, the third factor is by far the most difficult to treat and calls forth a new set of skills beyond change management techniques.

Arlene Pietranton, CEO of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, notes, "The many challenges and opportunities associated with the age of acceleration often necessitate large-scale and transformational change. To be successful in this environment, association executives must be proactive and visionary change leaders who are agile, persistent, and resilient."

The Heart of Leading Change

The core competencies associated with successful change leaders include:

- Strategic and technical skills including innovation, creativity, and strategic thinking

- Social skills such as communications, trust-building, empathy, approachability, and engagement

- Execution skills, such as coaching, influence, problem-solving, decisionmaking, and building accountability.

Character, grit, and resilience represent three additional attributes specifically focused on the person leading a change.

Character

Character is a leadership attribute that is difficult to define, and yet we know it when a leader does not demonstrate it. Researchers have attempted to quantify the building blocks of character in terms of traits, values, and virtues. Integrity is a particularly important virtue in building and sustaining trust and collaboration with others. As a change leader, if stakeholders believe you lack integrity, they are far less willing to accept and support change.

Balaji Krishnamurthy, Executive Chairman of Think Shift, suggests that integrity is not a black and white concept. Instead there are three levels of integrity:

1. Honesty or truthfulness

2. Alignment between your words and your actions, as well as taking personal accountability for disconnects between the two

3. Communicating your genuine opinion of an issue constructively, particularly in situations where doing so could cost you something

Consider the experiences of Steve, a finance director in a small trade association. Steve prided himself on acting with integrity. However, he struggled with fulfilling his deadline commitments to other directors in his association. Rather than acknowledge his delays, he brushed them off in a joking matter. Steve also tended to aggressively challenge his direct reports in meetings if they dared speak up despite his stated belief in the importance of engaging his people. Further, he would often sugarcoat performance feedback to his direct reports rather than speak his true feelings of disappointment about their performance. As a result, his stakeholders became more skeptical and resistant to his change efforts despite his assurances of the value the changes could create for the organization.

So how can improve your integrity?

- Reflect on situations where you are not honest and transparent to assess situational factors that may be impacting your about to speak truth

- Participate in a formal feedback process to receive robust feedback about your character and integrity as well as other leadership capabilities

- Build a strong network of trusted colleagues who would be willing to share feedback with you directly and ask them directly

- Clarify your deepest core values and make a concerted effort to act upon them daily

Grit

Grit is a psychological ability associated with people who can sustain forward-moving action toward their goals despite setbacks. Psychologist Angela Duckworth identified the trait in her doctoral research. She discovered that people with grit have both passion and perseverance to sustain taking action and create achievements – they do no give up. Given the nature of many change efforts, the ability to persevere despite setbacks is a critical factor that contributes to change leadership success.

Duckworth conducted numerous studies to determine the impact of grit on people

in various professional roles. For example, she researched time-share salespeople, a field with significant turnover. Her research found that grit among her research subjects predicted turnover – the higher the level of grit, the lower the level of turnover.

Based on her research, she identified four key building blocks of grit:

1. Deep passion or interest for a goal

2. A clear sense of purpose of how a goal impacts others

3. Consistent practice and feedback

4. Ability to sustain hope when facing setbacks toward the goal

My most recent experience with grit occurred in 2018 when I attempted the 545-mile AIDS ride on a bicycle from San Francisco to Los Angeles. This ride was the hardest physical challenge I had ever experienced. On multiple occasions during this sevenday experience, I was close to quitting. Several factors helped me persevere, including a commitment to act upon my core value of risk-taking, the desire to be able to speak with integrity to future clients about grit and draw upon my own lived experience and a sense of giving back to the community.

How can you build grit to sustain your capability to lead change?

- Clarify and focus on your passions, ensuring that your professional role allows you to incorporate them into your day-to-day responsibilities

- Identify the individuals or entities that will benefit from your proposed change and learn more about how it will positively impact them

- Invest in regular development of your strengths including feedback and reflection

- Clarify and link your passions to a larger purpose and your core values

- More effectively manage and navigate setbacks in working toward your vision to sustain hope and spark her perseverance

Resilience

Resilience consists of a set of skills and resources that help people cope with and navigate adversity. Gritty people are also resilient, coping effectively with setbacks to sustain hope and stay focused on their goals. The key to building resilience is to do so proactively so that you have resilience resources ready to draw upon once you hit a setback.

There are six fundamental building blocks of resilience, including:

1. Physical wellness to sustain well-being and promote physical resilience including diet, exercise, and adequate sleep

2. Support networks that have breadth and depth to function as a safety net if you stumble when attempting your goals

3. Clear purpose and vision for your life and career as a way of sustaining optimism for the future

4. Functional coping strategies to help you manage setbacks such as reframing negative situations into positives, positive self-talk, scenario planning and reaching out to your support network

5. Self-awareness as a means for monitoring your level of resilience and emotional state

6. Leveraging your strengths to feel powerful and competent despite a setback

Jan, a human resource director in a large association, was leading a long-term change project to reorganize her function to better align with the organization's needs. Jan faced resistance from some of her team members which lead to one of the vocal members of her team sharing his frustrations with her boss. She was initially angry and frustrated, but able to gracefully navigate the setback by engaging several colleagues for support, reframing this setback as a growth opportunity, and resist reacting in anger. Rather than blame the one vocal employee, she recognized that there might be others with concerns that were too afraid to raise

them. Jan hired a change facilitator to collect anonymous feedback from her team about the impending reorganization. As a result, she adapted her change vision to eliminate resistance from her team.

How can you build resilience to navigate setbacks as a change leader?

- Strengthen your physical resilience by establishing a regular wellness program that addresses diet, exercise, and sleep

- Proactively develop and maintain your support networks containing trusted colleagues you can turn to during crisis or setbacks

- Revisit your vision and purpose to sustain your sense of optimism and motivation

- Expand your coping strategies to include reframing setbacks into growth opportunities, focusing on aspects of a situation you can control or influence, and maintaining a gratitude list

- Align and focus on using your strengths as well as delegating tasks that do not represent your sweet spot to others

- Build your self-awareness about how your emotions influence your perspectives on issues with a particular focus on your hot buttons

In the age of acceleration, many of the changes facing associations are complex, long-term, and ambiguous. This context creates a mandate for association leaders to step up their game as change leaders beyond basic change management strategies. The capacity to thrive as a change leader rests upon several building blocks, the most important of which are character, grit, and resilience.

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