

Preparing the Soft Stuff . . . Building Commitment For Change

by **Merlin Switzer**

"It's the soft stuff that is the hard stuff, but it's the soft stuff that makes the difference," says Chief Operating Officer Tom Malone of the Milliken Company, Spartanburg, South Carolina, which has been a recipient of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

What's the soft stuff? The soft stuff is the people in our organizations. Unless people are willing to follow and willing to change, leaders face a daunting challenge in implementing change.

So, how do public sector leaders get the commitment of people . . . the soft stuff? First, leaders look inward at their leadership style. Second, leaders look outward at the vision for change. Third, leaders develop a commitment plan to build the critical mass necessary to get the change off the ground successfully. Employing these ideas will help leaders be more effective in building commitment for change.

As you read the sections here, ask yourself this question: Is there relevance in this section for me? Personal reflection will help you determine what you may be doing right as well as identify potential areas for personal growth.

LEADERSHIP STYLE

Building commitment for change starts with you as a leader. Consider these questions:

- Are you willing to change?
- Do you support the change or are you willing to be an executive sponsor?
- Are you willing to empower others?
- Are you willing to communicate multiple times using various methods of communication?

The answer to these questions should be “Yes.” Here’s why:

- As Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, in the *Leadership Challenge*, found successful leaders were willing to “model the way.”
- Executive sponsorship is the top contributor to successful change, according to a survey conducted by Prosci of more than 400 organizations. People want to know change is supported at the top.
- Involving others in the change process is critical; people support what they help to create. Enabling others to act has been another trait of successful leaders, according to Kouzes and Posner.
- Communication is critical. John Kotter in his book, *Leading Change*, identifies the failure to adequately communicate as one of the most common errors leaders make when implementing change. They under-communicate by a factor of 10 or more. Further, two-way communication—dialogue—is important for building leader-follower alignment. As leaders and followers engage each other in meaningful dialogue about the organization and its future, assumptions often change, and this results in greater alignment between leaders and followers. Higher levels of alignment are related to stronger commitment for change.

Whether a leader is willing to take these steps to build commitment says a lot about that person’s leadership style.

Transactional leaders, for example, expect others to do what they say: “After all, that’s what employees get paid to do.” Transactional leaders don’t think it is important to involve employees in crafting the vision or to engage them in the decision-making process; instead, this input is often limited to those in power. Transactional leaders use rewards and pun-

ishment to accomplish what they feel needs to be done.

Though still a common form of leadership, transactional leadership tends to work best when an employee’s lower-level needs have not been met or are at risk. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, lower-level needs include basic physiological needs, support, and belonging. Transactional leaders appeal to these needs when they cite improving one’s standard of living or being part of a winning team.

At the other end of the leadership

When people are confronted with change, they usually react in one of four ways:

- **Make it happen.**
- **Help it happen.**
- **Let it happen.**
- **Resist it happening.**

continuum is the transformational leader. The transformational leader works hard to create a compelling vision and may involve others in the process of crafting that vision. The transformational leader truly believes in the change and leads by example while pursuing the goal. Transformational leaders are usually out front and visible.

The transformational leader works hard to sell the vision and help followers see how the vision can benefit them. These benefits may appeal to higher-level needs on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, such as esteem and self-actualization. Examples include appeals that would contribute to raising the quality of life for the poor in other parts of the world or improve the environment through actions being taken by the organization.

Leadership style is an important

consideration for building commitment for change. Depending on the followers, some styles may result in building greater levels of commitment. The use of rewards and punishment can be compelling in some instances, but where lower-level needs are already met, participation, collaboration, and a compelling altruistic vision may resonate with workers and generate greater levels of commitment.

After the leader has focused on personal change readiness, it is important for that leader to think about the vision for the change. The focus of the next section is on developing the vision so that commitment for change is enhanced.

VISION FOR CHANGE

Vision is important. Vision creates a unique image of the future. Vision acts to both attract and unite people toward a common goal. One of the characteristics of high-performing teams is vision in the form of goal orientation.

Leaders can build commitment with a vision that unites people, gives them a purpose, addresses a perceived threat, creates a sense of urgency, makes organizational life better, meets client needs, and connects people to a purpose that serves a greater good. A compelling vision attracts people to it, and it builds commitment.

Another consideration is the origin of the vision. Did you—the leader—craft the vision, or did others have input? In the *Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner found that successful leaders inspire a shared vision. The vision is shared because others see themselves in it, it uses their language, and they have been involved in dialogue about the vision.

William Werther in his article, “Strategic Change and Leader-Follower Alignment,”¹ says, “The pathway to greater leader-follower alignment must be created through continuous dialogue inside the organization about the ever-changing external environment . . . with a closer alignment . . . strategic changes

can be introduced with greater acceptance and speed.” Meaningful dialogue can provide a vehicle for understanding the need for change and provide clarity about the best direction, resulting in higher levels of commitment to change.

People support what they help to create. Look for various ways to involve people in crafting the vision. When people see their fingerprints on a vision, they are more supportive and less resistant. Conversely, when people feel a vision is forced on them and they don't see how it will benefit them or the organization, resistance can be expected.

Although it may take longer to involve employees at the front end of a change initiative, including them can result in greater commitment and less resistance. The result can be a smoother, faster transition, saving considerable time later in the process.

The previous two sections, leadership style and vision for change,

focused on the role of leaders. The next section will focus on developing a commitment plan to actively engage followers.

DEVELOPING A COMMITMENT PLAN

When people are confronted with change, they usually react in one of four ways:

- Make it happen.
- Help it happen.
- Let it happen.
- Resist it happening.

A commitment plan involves assessing whose commitment is important for obtaining the critical mass necessary to get change off the ground. Picture a family going to the park. One of the structures often seen at a park is a teeter-totter. When a child is on a teeter-totter and dad sits on the other end, what happens? Up goes the child, off the ground. The

critical mass necessary for change is much the same. To get a change initiative off the ground, the right critical mass is needed.

These five steps will help you develop a commitment plan.

Step 1. Identify whose commitment is needed. Who are key people whose commitment would help bolster the chances of success? One example is a peer leader. Another might be a union shop steward. In the case of a peer leader, others will watch to see whether that person supports the change. If the peer leader is supportive, then others who value that individual's opinion are more likely to be supportive as well.

Step 2. Determine the level of commitment needed. Among those whose commitment is needed, there may be varying levels of commitment. Perhaps you need one specific person to help make the change hap-



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pen. From other people, such as the union shop steward, you may just hope that they let it happen and not fuel resistance.

Step 3. Estimate the critical mass.

Critical mass is that number of people or specific people necessary to get the change off the ground. Remember the teeter-totter at the park? Which side stays down? The side with the critical mass. Unfortunately, there is not a specific formula for figuring this out. The nature and scope of the change is a key factor in making this determination. A change that is relatively simple and uncontroversial will have a lower critical mass than one that is complex and far-reaching.

Step 4. Assess how to get the commitment of the critical mass.

It's important to assess how to get the commitment of the critical mass and develop a plan accordingly. This requires an individual assessment. After a determination is made about whether a gap in commitment level exists, what can be done to increase commitment? Here are some things that can work:

- Send employees to see similar changes in other organizations.
- Invite stakeholders to talk to employees about how the change would benefit them.
- Invite employees in other areas of the organization to share how the change was working for them.
- Ask employees what it would take to get their support for the change.

A Southern California chief of police once told me he would ask an individual what it would take to get a 75 percent commitment. After he received a response, he would know what he would need to do in order to get that individual's support.

Step 5. Status check to monitor the level of commitment.

Status refers to creating a monitoring system to identify progress toward gaining commitment. One way to do this is

to ask for volunteers to sign up to participate on a trial basis. Who signs up and how many sign up can be a good gauge for determining commitment. If you are not getting the commitment necessary to leverage the change successfully, you may want to delay implementation and determine other ways of gaining the necessary commitment.

Leadership style, a vision for change, and developing a commitment plan are important aspects of building the commitment necessary to get change off the ground.

The first letter of each of these five steps makes the acronym I-D-E-A-S. Sometimes it takes creative ideas to find ways to build commitment for change.

IT'S NOT IMPOSSIBLE

One thing seems certain: change is inevitable and the rate is accelerating. Successful public sector leaders must know how to lead change, and building commitment for change is an important part of the skill set. Unfortunately, many leaders have not developed these important skills.

Commitment is to change what prevention is to risk management. Without prevention, risk management is difficult if not impossible. Likewise, without commitment, change is difficult if not impossible.

Leadership style, a vision for change, and developing a commitment plan are important aspects of building the commitment necessary to get change off the ground. Understanding these concepts and employing them effectively can mean the difference between successful change

and a botched effort that costs the organization in a variety of ways. As you reflect on your experience, decide whether it is consistent with the suggestions offered in this article. If it isn't, use this article as a guide next time you are tasked with leading change.

The information in this article is intended to be practical and doable. As a public sector leader, I have used this information to lead change inside my organization as well as in the community in which I served. Taking time to build commitment will make your job much easier and the change process much smoother. So, while "the soft stuff is the hard stuff, it's the soft stuff that makes the difference!" **PM**

¹William B. Werther, Jr., "Strategic Change and Leader-Follower Alignment," *Organizational Dynamics* 32, no. 1 (February 2003): 32-45.

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