

Leadership and Change

A Reflective Piece

Is there a paradox in the concept of leadership and change? One side may be characterized by the famous quote, “don’t throw the baby out with the bath water” while the other side may be described by the quote, “if you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you always got.” Can a leader really plan and implement change without destroying the very elements of the organization that made it what it is? Well, based on my study and experiences in this area, I can say yes. I believe leaders can be innovative and plan for change while still holding on to the values and ideals that created the organization’s character.

In his work *On Becoming a Leader*, Dr. Warren Bennis states, “managers are people who do things right, while leaders are people who do the right thing.” David Lodge is quoted as saying “to prevent from becoming stranded on the mudflats of an obsolete ideology, you must become a champion of change.” In today’s educational arena we see a highly competitive market. This is especially important for educational leaders in parochial institutions where I have served for my entire career. There used to be a time when it was assumed that parents of the denomination would automatically send their children to the organization’s educational institutions. This is something that is no longer assumed. Parents have been looking at all of their options, including other parochial/private institutions as well as public ones. If our educational institutions fail to implement positive change then they will lose even more of their already limited market share. As an educational leader, I must meet the needs of the customers and make rapid changes in order to meet those needs.

Change is inevitable. Another way to characterize this concept is to say “change, ready or

not.” We cannot escape from the fact that change will occur. After all, this is a natural phenomenon in any organization. Every organization goes through different developmental stages, just like human development. Organizations must make change as they progress from their formative period to their growing period, to their maturing period and through decline. Also, outside forces can mandate that change takes place. Failing to make changes through these different periods can mean death to an organization. For some it is quick, for others it is long and painful. Such is becoming the fate of the educational institution where I first began my career. It has failed to make the necessary changes to keep it viable in the competitive educational market.

The Japanese have a term called “kaizen” which I understand means continual improvement. It is my responsibility to lead the organization in its journey to do better than it has done in the past. I guess it is sort of like sanctification. It is a life-long journey for which there is no end in this present life. We can always improve. As a leader I must affect positive change so my organization can continue to grow. Daryle Conner in *Managing at the Speed of Change: Resistance to Change Model* identifies five avoidance steps people in the organization go through when it comes to change: 1) denial - cannot foresee any major changes; 2) anger - at those people who are causing change to take place; 3) bargaining - attempting to work things out so everyone remains pleased; 4) depression - wondering if change is worth it, casting doubt on the change process, in need of great support; and 5) acceptance - reality has set in. Change is taking place. It is my role as a leader to change the mind-set in my organization from avoidance to acceptance.

A leader must set the agenda for affecting positive change, realizing the avoidance factor is there. He must turn it from an avoidance factor into an acceptance factor. He can help in the change process by helping shape the attitudes of his people. He can turn their avoidance questions into

acceptance questions. Big Dog's (a leader within the Starbucks organization) web page offers advice from Conner, Roethlisberger, Pritchett, and Lewin. Rather than asking "why" he can turn the question into "what new opportunities do we have?" Rather than asking "how will this effect me" he can turn the question to "what problems will this solve." Rather than stating "we don't do it that way" he can turn it into "what would it look like if." Workers can learn to stop asking "when will this change be over so we can get back to work" and start asking "what can I do to help?" And rather than asking "who is doing this to us," a worker can ask, "who can help us?"

Feelings can become contagious. It was Martin Luther King, Jr. who said, "I have a dream." In other words he proposed a measure of change. And look what that dream did for the nation. Of course, the dream has not yet been fully realized for all Americans, but we have come a long way since 1963 in making America more equal. As a leader if I want to promote positive change in my organization, I must be able to articulate the "dream" or vision and strive to reach it passionately. Doing it this way will have a contagious effect on others and they too can catch the vision and promote change for the good of the organization.

Before change can take place there has to be a willingness to toss out the old in order to replace it with the new. This is where the baby with the bath water comes into play. As the bath water is being changed the leader has to be there to nurture the workers along the way. He has to serve as a coach or as a cheerleader as old habits are being broken and new ones are being put in place. Then, once these new plans have implemented they have to be practiced over and over again until they become natural outputs of the organization. It was the famous Vince Lombardy, coach of the Greenbay Packers who said, "Practice does not make perfect, only perfect practice makes perfect." As a leader I must provide numerous opportunities for new habits to be practiced if the change is going

to lasting and effective. Finally, as a leader I must guard against these new habits turning into old habits that cause the organization to stop growing. I must understand that change is continual and that message must be presented to the entire organization. This three step process to change was identified by Kurt Lewin in *Field Theory in Social Science*.

Boston College has a graduate level program entitled “Leadership for Change.” The program trains leaders to become effective change agents. The program begins by having the participant focus on his personal development, realizing an organization is only effective as the individuals who work in them. When a leader can learn how to learn and lead then he can be a change agent. The program next focuses on group effectiveness. Team leadership is vitally important and must be fostered. Leaders must know how to function in such an environment. The program then moves on to leading constructive change effectively. By this BC means infusing organizations with positive visions and values that enable others to enroll in achieving the organization’s purpose. From their the program looks at the amount of risk-taking that is necessary when implementing change. Reading about the major ideals of this program has reinforced what I have learned and experienced about planning and implementing change. It might be something worth going through some day!

All in all, change is going to happen whether we are ready for it or not. As a leader I need to recognize it, embrace it, nurture it, bring my fellow team members along, and use it as an advantage for my organization. By doing this, I can help ensure the future success for the organization in which I have invested.