Six Characteristics of Highly Effective Change Leaders

Posted on August 20, 2010 by Brett Clay

How do you cultivate a culture of learning, adapting, and leading in your organization?

In today’s rapidly changing business environment, quickly identifying new opportunities and taking action to capture them is no longer the private domain of industry leaders—it is a matter of survival for every business and for every employee. As Pulitzer prize-winning author Thomas Friedman noted in his book, The World is Flat, not just every company, but every individual is competing today in a global economy.

Today’s landscape is a Darwinian world. The winners and losers of this global competition are determined by one factor: change. Today’s competitors are moving so fast, that products and jobs get quickly commoditized or even eliminated. Those individuals and companies that identify new opportunities and take the necessary actions to capture them will survive. Those who learn to do it over and over will thrive. In other words, companies and individuals need to learn how to change and treat change leadership as a mission-critical discipline.

It is worth noting that learning how to learn, learning how to innovate, and learning how to change are all closely related. The notion of “change” is arguably the most powerful because it focuses on results and implies proactive movement from one place to another. For example, if you ask your employee, “What did you learn today?” it begs the question, “What
did you do differently afterward?”, which begs the next question, “And what was the result?”. Contrast that with asking your employee, “What did you change today?” The question implies continuous improvement. It manifests the notion that doing what you did yesterday, being as good as you were yesterday, is not acceptable. Imagine if each of your employees changed one thing every day. That’s approximately 240 improvements per employee per year. What would that do for your business?

While being a change leader may not be easy, the first step is knowing what it requires. People who are effective leaders of change have six characteristics. As a supervisor and leader, knowing these six characteristics helps you in several ways. First, you want to cultivate these qualities in yourself. Second, you can factor these characteristics into your hiring decisions. Third, you will want to cultivate these characteristics in your team culture by taking steps to reinforce them and avoiding steps that contradict them. Here are the six characteristics of change leaders:

1) Low Level of Anxiety

Anxieties are emotions and beliefs that prevent us from coping effectively with our current circumstances. Anxieties stem mostly from past negative experiences that continue to generate strong negative emotions. For example, many children who grew up in poverty during the Great Depression continued to live in fear of poverty, literally saving pennies in glass jars, despite achieving economic success in adulthood. But, current circumstances can also be the source of fear, uncertainty, and doubt. For example, employee reward systems that pit colleagues against one another in gladiator-like competitions that reward winners and penalize losers may cause employees to constantly look over their shoulder to see who is going to stab them in the back next.

Anxieties wield enormous influence on our behavior, usually resulting in one of two responses. People usually either a) erect strong defenses, figuratively digging fox holes to protect themselves, or b) go on the attack, making sure to harm and disable the perceived threat, before it can hurt them. These are destructive behaviors that not only prevent people from responding effectively to change, but can also harm others around them. To perform at the highest level and to drive innovation and change, people must have a sense of security and be unencumbered by anxieties.

 Supervisor’s Tip: Hire people with low levels of anxiety and create an environment where people feel secure, rather than threatened.
2) Emotional Stability

To learn well and perform at a high level, people must be in a good mood. One of the definitions of the word mood is, “a frame of mind disposed or receptive, as to some activity or thing.” Large swings from levels of depression to elation and back to depression do not put people in a mental state that is receptive and ready for constructive action. One landmine to avoid is “breaking” an employee’s attitude and belief that s/he can succeed in the job. Once an employee crosses a certain line toward depression, they become locked in a vicious cycle where their performance suffers, which causes further depression, which further reduces their performance, and so on. At that point, you’ve lost the employee.

Supervisor’s Tip: Hire people whose emotional wiring is permanently connected to “happy” and take daily action to maintain a high level of enthusiasm among your team.

3) Action Orientation

Adapting to and leading change requires action. Being receptive to learning is not sufficient. The purpose of learning is to then take action and achieve the goal. People who have low levels of energy and are inclined to sit and watch will be the last to learn and adapt to change. Effective leaders are inclined to step up and participate in the action. They feel energized and exhilarated by the action and the progress.

Supervisor’s Tip: Hire people with high energy levels and have events and activities that stimulate action and energy. Note: This requires that you allow time for these activities. Don’t tell people there is a 3pm team volleyball game and also give them a 4pm deadline for a project.

4) Confidence

By definition, learning, innovating, and changing require exploration of the unknown. It is natural to feel anxious about stepping into unknown territory. Exploration is not without risks. Scurvy, cannibals, poisonous snakes, avalanches, new suppliers that fail to deliver—the hazards that have befallen explorers are innumerable. But, new opportunities can only be identified by exploring the unknown. Therefore, people must hold the belief that, despite the unknown risks, the unknown outcomes will be positive. In other words, they must be confident in their ability to succeed.

Supervisor’s Tip: Hire people who are not afraid to take risks and have experienced the sweet taste of success in the past. Also, consider measuring and rewarding the exploration process itself, rather than worshiping the “conquistadors” who have blazed new trails. True
innovation requires knocking on many doors before finding the one that opens. So, it is important to maintain an appropriate perspective.

5) Openness

To explore new ideas and learn how to apply them one must be receptive to them. We can always think of a million reasons something won’t work. But, if we open our minds to the possibilities, we can also find many ways new ideas can work. But, simply being receptive is not enough, Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer says we must be “mindful”. By mindful she means being constantly attentive and exposing our minds to many different perspectives. We are able to see more ways new ideas can work if we equip ourselves with a vast repertoire of perspectives and ideas.

*Supervisor’s Tip:* Hire people who have diverse experiences and multidimensional skills. Give employees “white space” between the normal duties in their job description and encourage them to gain different experiences and perspectives.

6) Risk Tolerance

At first glance high risk tolerance may seem synonymous with high confidence. The difference is that confidence is an attitude and a belief that is accepted on faith, while risk is a mathematical concept that can be measured and managed. All actions involve risk and uncertainty—including the “action” of staying in the same place. In fact the world is changing so fast, that staying in the current position could be the riskiest proposition of all—like standing in the middle of a highway. But, dealing with risk doesn’t mean simply rolling the dice and accepting your fate. A healthy risk tolerance means taking all possible steps to mitigate or eliminate risks, and then making a well-calculated, highly likely bet.

*Supervisor’s Tip:* Rather than penalizing your staff when they fail, encourage them to take risk. Furthermore, rather than measuring outcomes, which is a “no-brainer”, be a value-added supervisor by measuring and coaching your staff on how well they manage risk.

In conclusion, if you use the six characteristics of change leaders as hiring criteria, then build those characteristics into the culture of your organization, your team will discover and exploit new opportunities that will put you ahead of your competition.
Brett Clay is the founder and CEO of the innovative Change Leadership Group, a training and consulting firm that helps companies grow by improving their marketing, sales, and leadership capabilities. He is the author of Selling Change: 101+ Secrets for Growing Sales By Leading Change, now on the shelves at bookstores and airports.

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Brett Clay says:
August 22, 2010 at 5:31 pm

I've seen two comments about the article on Twitter, so far.

1) What about "vision"?
Vision is absolutely a critical requirement for leadership. In fact, the Kouzes-Posner model of leadership credibly has three factors: vision, competence, and trustworthiness. Vision is not included in the 6 Characteristics of Change Leadership model, because the model is a psychological temperament model derived from the Costa/McRay Five Factor Model of human personality typing. “Vision,” as we think of it in a leadership context, is addressed in the “openness” characteristic. Ellen Langer’s term is “mindful,” which she defines as being attentive to new ideas and frames of reference. So, by being “open” and “mindful,” one can formulate new visions of new desired states.

2) What about the priorities?
The order in which the characteristics are listed is not prioritized. All of the characteristics are required (a boolean “and”) for a person to be an effective change leader. Therefore, they have equal weight and impact.

It is, however, quite appropriate to prioritize which characteristic you want to work on, first. My observation is that anxieties are the most difficult to improve. However, they also typically offer the biggest opportunity for improvement, and subsequently, the biggest impact on one’s effectiveness. The characteristic that is the most actionable, controllable, and also offers huge upside reward is openness. One can “intentionally” monitor and manage one’s openness and mindfulness. … That’ll be the topic of another article.

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Todd says:
August 25, 2010 at 3:24 pm

Great insight and spurred great dialogue! I suspect it’s doing it’s purpose to spur debate and unearth preferences. I like the fact that all of these illustrate why Execution competence has been focused on in recent years.

Let me pile on by taking it up a notch–from the 6-8 characteristics listed so far, I’d submit that #5 Openness is THE ONE. It flows from a good place (integrity, listening, etc.) and enables the constructive application of the others (action, priorities, etc.). One could argue for the primacy of vision, but a vision created in a vacuum rarely moves mountains. I can tell you that if you teach a change leader openness (which creates the tangible, concrete, measurable business outcome of “transparency”), it makes filling other gaps in that leader’s repertoire much easier.

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Madan Mohan C says:
September 24, 2010 at 1:32 pm

The article is informative and taking into account the various human dimensions required for change leaders, the article could have further taken into account the various aspects of the organization and the roles of change leaders.

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