

Leading Change = Tough + Tender

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LEADING CHANGE = TOUGH + TENDER

Written by Larry Johnson – 11/19/18

Leading Change can be tricky. The president of a small college complained to me that he was having trouble getting his management team moving toward action on some much needed changes. Priding himself on being a true believer in participative management, he asked the team to identify the specific changes needed, prioritize their value, and work out plans for implementation.

After eight months, however, the team had not acted. In meeting after meeting, they discussed and debated the pros and cons of different strategies, but never arrived at a consensus.

The president was quite distressed. "Why," he asked, "was nothing getting done?"

This falls under the category of "Welcome to the real world." It's always difficult for people to change, even when they have a hand in developing the direction of the change, and can see the benefits of it. The unknown is scarier than the known. As Dr. Harless Cone (one of my heroes in the world of consulting) says, "We always prefer the certainty of misery to misery of uncertainty."

I too, am a firm believer in the magic of participative management. When people can contribute to a plan, they will

usually take ownership in it and amazing things result. That's called empowerment, and it's a great management tool. But a manager needs many tools — one won't do everything in every situation. When you do all this good empowerment stuff, and there still is chronic non-action, another approach may be required.

Leading Change In A Big Company Can Be Painful But Fruitful

Take IBM for example. Considered by many to be a dying behemoth in the 1980s, it's now one of the most vibrant companies in the US economy. One big reason for the turnaround was leading change master, Lou Gerstner.

Recruited from Nabisco to be the new CEO, he was direct, brusque, and unafraid to confront conventional wisdom. Gerstner started by questioning everything that IBM was doing. His predecessor, John F. Akers, had begun dismantling IBM's mainframe business, believing that networked personal computers would be the wave of the future. By the time Gerstner arrived, that strategy had become conventional wisdom. Gerstner pushed to revitalize mainframes, taking the position that the company must once again serve as the source of business computing solutions for its customers, and mainframes should be a part of those solutions.

He also started demanding accountability for performance. According to one long time IBMer, "Meetings in the pre-Gerstner days were congenial and pleasant — whether anything was accomplished or not...meetings with Gerstner are anything but

pleasant now. He demands that excuses be replaced with results, and that if something isn't working, it's either fixed or it's scrapped immediately."

This is not to say that Gerstner attacked people personally. He was just very hard nosed when it came to accountability, even to the point of firing some key people who "just wouldn't get with the program."

For Lou Gerstner and IBM, the strategy has worked. The stock has rebounded, profits are up, morale has greatly improved, and the company is once again seen as an industry leader rather than the industry dinosaur.

Am I saying, that if you want to bring about change in your team or in your organization, you must abandon your participative style and become a Gerstner like "tough guy?" Definitely not. On the other hand, don't discount the approach all together.

My advice to my to the college president client

Add some toughness to his management style when leading change by becoming more involved in the planning discussions, by setting some hard deadlines for implementing changes, and by being tough about results, even if it means causing some pain to those who are dragging their feet.

Doing this usually requires the willingness to be honest and communicate directly, even when it's about something unpleasant. That can be challenging for many of us who were taught to be polite and nice at all times – to not express opinions

openly if there is risk of offending someone or hurting their feelings. But such honesty can be refreshing when done in the right spirit and without attacking the other person personally. I'm reminded of my eighth grade teacher, Mrs. Lever. She was known throughout the school as a taskmaster, a strict disciplinarian, and a bit of a grouch. With a glare and a stern word, Mrs. Lever would never hesitate to tell you when you did something wrong and how to correct it. On the other hand, with a smile and a brief comment, she would always let you know when you did something right and that it pleased her. No matter what, you knew that she would always tell you the truth, and you sensed that her intentions were always in your best interests.

Consequently, Mrs. Lever's students always scored highest on the annual achievement tests. Parents competed to get their children into her class. By mid-year, Mrs. Lever's students universally loved her. (It took time for some of them to warm up to her gruffness.) Mrs. Lever was a superb practitioner of absolute honesty. She told the truth when the truth needed to be told, she was clear in how she told it, and her focus was always on doing the right thing for the right reason (her students' welfare.)

I believe there needs to be more Mrs. Levers in organizational life today.

If you are having trouble getting change to happen on your team, you might ask yourself if your managerial approach

contains the right amount of “Lew Gerstner/Mrs. Lever”
toughness along with the with the right amount of “tenderness,”
to create the changes you want.

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