

Leading Change

Leigh Tabrett has worked in education and the arts as a teacher, university administrator, senior public servant and policy advisor to both state and commonwealth governments. Leigh drew on her experience in education and the arts, particularly her contribution to the comprehensive review and renewal of Arts Queensland, to explore the links between leadership and change within organisations and the processes that can assist leaders through change processes.

As living organisms, we are constantly changing – have a look at your primary school photos and you will see what I mean, even if the mirror doesn't remind you every day! We are also part of multiple sets of complex living systems which are also changing every instant – the dynamic physical world, our partnerships, families, friendships and social groups and networks, our workplaces – the list is endless.

Perhaps it's no surprise that we seek stability in the face of this truth, and indeed we may fear and resist change – especially change which we don't initiate ourselves, but which arrives unexpectedly or which challenges our sense of comfort. Remember the cows in the movie *Babe*? Their response to Babe's attempts to change his role was "The way things are, is the way things are". We can be very like those cows when the stability of our known world is challenged.

Yet at one level we know that life-altering changes can arrive in the blink of an eye – we can fall in love, be hit by a cyclone, lose a loved one, become responsible for the care of an injured child or partner, or have our employer taken-over, change direction, or fail. We consciously prepare ourselves for much of our lives but when it comes to being "fit for change", how ready are we? And how can we achieve both the stability we need to feel and function well, and the capability for change and growth we need?

For leaders of teams and organisations, there are very well established and tested "recipes" for taking a work-group or a whole organisation on a change journey. I love John Kotter's little fable "My Iceberg is Melting" (1) and have used it as a set of principles for effecting big organisational changes in my work. His eight steps for organisational change (*with my comments in italics*) are:

- Create a sense of urgency
Why do we need to change, and why now?
- Form a coalition of change leaders
Teams are better at problem solving than individuals!
- Develop the vision
Where do we want to get to?
- Communicate the vision to everyone - internal and external stakeholders
This keeps you honest and focussed!
- Get everyone working on the change
Find ways in which everyone from board members to volunteers and clerical staff can be involved in carrying forward the new agenda.
- Focus on an early win and celebrate it together
The power of positive feedback confirms the value of the change agenda.
- Never let up – keep pushing the change vision into all the working parts of the organisation.
Once the first rush of change is over, the desire for comfort re-emerges. But if you want to be "fit for change", you have to exercise your change muscles continuously!

- Embed change in the culture of the organisation

Depending on your circumstances, you may in fact want to pay attention to this from the beginning. For example, if your agenda is about shifting from a regulatory to a client service orientation, this will be part of the vision, and you will need to start on it up front.

That all sounds pretty clear, doesn't it? So why, when so much thought, research and attention has been paid to the challenge of achieving change in organisations, does leadership matter? And what is the actual task of a leader of change? Here are some observations built on my own experience and reading: I have no-one else to blame for them.

Successful leaders help people to manage their own change.

For me, it was a HUGE lesson to discover that, if you want to change a relationship or pattern of interactions, you need to know and act on this fundamental truth: *you can't change another person, but you can change how you interact with them.*

I will illustrate this with a personal story. When my daughter was about four years old, she developed what I can only describe as a "sock fetish". We would be rushing to get ready for school and kindy, with bags for ballet, sport, school, swimming, homework, my work, laptop, dry-cleaning – the whole routine – and she would suddenly sit down on the floor and throw a small tantrum because her socks "had lumps in them". I would lose it, we would yell at each other, and I would end up at work needing a half-hour sit down and a strong coffee to regain my equilibrium. I dread to think what her first half hour at school was like!

At about that time, I chose to go to a one-day course on dealing with difficult people in the workplace, where I heard those magic words: "You can't change someone else, but you can change how you interact with them". The next time we had a sock tantrum, instead of behaving like a child myself, I sat down on the floor with my daughter, and gave her a big cuddle, and said things like: "Oh darling, you are quite right. Modern socks are a complete disaster. Sit here quietly with blue bunny for a moment and I will find some better ones!" I think we only had two more sock tantrums, and of course, I realised that it wasn't about socks, but her anxiety about the rush to get ready and go to school – readily, and only, addressed by some proper attention.

The good lesson from this is that, as a leader of change, one thing you can really affect is how you interact with people. You can create an environment in which people can express their fears and anxieties safely, where attention is paid to those concerns and what lies beneath them, and where there is some clarity (if not certainty) about the parameters of the change agenda and what it means for them. Calling on learnings from neuroscience, you can stimulate people to engage and deepen their own thinking and problem-solving capacities (2), you can give them metaphors and stories which help them find new pathways for thinking and acting, and you can praise and reinforce successful change.

Successful leaders live the vision.

Nothing shapes an organisation's culture and behaviour more than the behaviour of the person at the top. If you want to build an organisation which values the contributions of all its staff, for example, then you will need to demonstrate this in your own behaviour. If you want to reduce the sense of hierarchy, and get everyone to share responsibility for the success of the organisation, you will need to be willing to clear meeting rooms, make coffee, collate and staple, and empty bins - whatever the so-called "low level" chores are. This has other benefits: you will be amazed at how much you can learn about your own organisation while you are stuffing envelopes or stacking the dishwasher with team members!

Successful leaders know that the heart is the key change muscle.

One of the hardest things to do is to get people to part with their hard-earned cash for a project or a cause. Yet annually, Australians give huge sums of money to a range of causes and projects designed to make life better for

others, including people in remote countries which they may never visit, and whose citizens they may never meet. What triggers this behaviour? It is the heart – the recognition of our common humanity, the possibility that it could be us, gratitude for our own good fortune, the desire to make a difference. These are powerful motivators of human action, and successful leaders find ways to reveal something of their own hearts, to give meaning to work and desired outcomes and to speak to values and aspirations, as a way of engaging the best energies of their staff.

This takes both a willingness to be yourself and the courage to engage. The pay-offs are big. By focussing on values and aspirations, you are creating the building blocks for stability and survival: systems which share values and communicate effectively are able to withstand a battering from external change. Think about then Premier Anna Bligh's speech during the floods in 2011.

Successful leaders focus on strengths

We are highly tuned to judge and assess, and much of our education system is focussed on the development of what are called "critical thinking" skills. Applied to people – to clients and staff (and to family and friends, for that matter) these highly developed skills can derail us from precisely the outcomes we are seeking to achieve.

We know that the more attention we give something the more it prospers - because the relevant pathways in the brain are being strengthened. This is how we learn and it is why it so difficult to change a habit. The more you focus on giving up chocolate, the more you are likely to crave it! If we "pay attention to the problem or the negative qualities of a situation or person, that is what will become hardwired". (3)

What does this mean for how we manage our relationships with people? If what we focus on is failure we are hard-wiring failure and we risk invoking a whole raft of emotions – fear, pessimism, self-defensiveness - that turn off the capacity to learn. This is not an argument for not paying attention to performance: that is always a key part of a leader's role. But it is an argument for using your "critical thinking" skills differently: for reinforcing strengths and encouraging people to act from those strengths – their achievements will amaze you.

Of course, not all of us lead teams or organisations but we are nearly all called upon to lead, sometimes. We may need to help our family deal with an unexpected challenge; sometimes, we need to get someone on the other side of a counter or at the end of a phone, to change their response or thinking. These life tasks can require some of our best leadership skills. It is our capacity to be aware of how we are interacting with people, to engage their hearts and minds, and to speak to their strengths which will help us to inspire others to "dream more, learn more, do more and become more"(4) – to be successful leaders.

For further interesting reading on this topic, Leigh has recommended the following:

1. John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber *My Iceberg is Melting* Macmillan 2006
2. David Rock *Quiet Leadership – Six Steps to Transforming Performance at Work* Collins 2007
3. David Rock and Lynda Page *Coaching with the Brain in Mind* John Wiley and Sons 2009, p 181
4. John Quincy Adams – Adams was not held to be a great American president, but he was a great orator, and he was right about this!