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In Search of the Extraordinary Executive

Mastering the 5 continuums of change:

How to successfully drive change in your organisation

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Mercuri Urval

It's All About People

As change is now a constant, the ability to drive change has become one of the most critical factors of modern leadership. But instead of searching for the one best style, change leadership should rather be seen as a continuum of seemingly opposing behaviours. As a leader, you need to be able to act along the full spectrum of available change leadership behaviours – and choose the most effective one in every situation. So how do you do it?

50 YEARS

Change is a constant and demanding companion for executives today. While finding out what to change is a strategic issue that entails strong rational and analytical skills, driving change throughout the organisation is sometimes a more challenging and urgent task that requires skills and traits of a different nature. Our aim with this article is to provide practical tools for effective day-to-day leadership in a rapidly changing world. Drawing on our deep experience in assessing, coaching and developing thousands of executives every year, we will discuss the continuums of change and elaborate on the importance of demonstrating situational judgement. We will present each continuum of leadership behaviour that will help you drive change, and a framework for analysing which behaviour to use in a specific situation.

The dichotomy of change

Organisational change always has to start inside the minds of your people. Once you get people to change the way they think, they'll start doing things differently and your business strategy comes to life. However, as frequently highlighted, human beings are typically resistant to change by nature. As a leader, you must be able to navigate in the inevitable uncertainty that encompasses change, and ensure that your people are not only able but also willing to buy in on your vision. Therefore, driving change is to a large extent about emotions. If you don't possess the ability and techniques to influence and motivate your people, you will fail.

While executives are often strong when it comes to rationally identifying and explaining the need for change, many state that the ability

to connect emotionally and influence others is a key area for individual development. However, driving change is neither about being rational or emotional. It's about the ability to be both at the same time. For example, you need to be tough and caring, conflicting and inclusive. You might need to make demands and put pressure, but you might also need to coach and guide. It all depends on the situation.

Successful leaders understand how their behaviour influences people; they possess a broad palette of diverse leadership behaviours and they understand which behaviour to use in a specific situation.

How to master the 5 continuums of change

Drawing on research and our practical experience in coaching change leaders all over the world, we have developed the concept of the 5 Continuums of Change to describe behaviours to effectively influence and motivate people in different situations when setting strategy, leading activities, leading people, demonstrating interpersonal leadership and achieving impact.

In the following section we will present the concept of each continuum of change behaviour and how you can use them in your daily work to drive change.

The Leadership Continuum of Change



1. Setting strategy: Being Disruptive and Realistic

Successful change leaders are willing to challenge the status quo and seek new windows of opportunities when required. In certain situations they challenge the current perceptions, rules and procedures in order to deliberately create uncertainty and re-set the norms. However, change leaders also need to be realistic and call for caution when the organisation is under severe pressure. They understand the practical limits on the amount of change which can be achieved using logic, facts and data to find rational and solid solutions.

2. Leading activities: Being Action-oriented and Reflective

Driving change is often about being action-oriented, persistent and willing to put in more effort when setbacks are encountered. Successful leaders move others into action in a way they can readily accept, by proactively suggesting concrete steps for others to be taken in order to achieve the expected organisational results. However, to drive change, leaders also need to be forward-looking and introduce new and innovative ways of working by envisioning how current structures and processes can be further improved.

3. Leading people: Being Directive and Inclusive

Successful change leaders are willing to set the purpose and direction for the work of others, and clearly identify objectives, roles, responsibilities and deadlines. They don't shy away from using forceful speech and setting high demands whenever required, even if it means being tough and assertive, putting people under pressure. But in order to drive change, leaders must also be open and inclusive and ask others for alternative ideas to secure their active involvement. By empowering others and stimulating personal and professional growth, successful leaders also act as talent magnets, ensuring an efficient leadership pipeline in the organisation.

4. Interpersonal leadership: Influencing *and* Connecting

By bringing forward convincing and conclusive arguments, successful change leaders act as strong role models and encourage others to follow. They push the agenda forward by actively defending agreed principles and given mandates, and persuade others to follow by being directive and credible. However, successful change leaders also have the ability to foster alliances and build efficient networks in order to increase others' commitment. They manage to bring people together, build consensus and create win-win situations.

5. Leadership impact: Goal-oriented *and* Process-oriented

Successful change leaders are strongly driven and eager to meet and even exceed expectations. They have the determination, resilience and discipline needed to deliver the best possible organisational results given the circumstances, and always deliver the necessary quality on time – even when meeting opposition. However, successful change leaders also recognise that they can achieve more in collaboration with others, being fully aligned with organisational visions and missions.

Various studies have shown that very different behaviours influence others in different situations (e.g. Cialdini, 2008; Yukl, 2002). The challenge for you as a leader is to understand which behaviour will be most effective in driving change in a specific situation. To do it successfully, you need to holistically assess the situation of your organisation and the people you want to influence. In the following section, we will present a framework for how to do this successfully.

Choosing the right leadership behaviour

Although many leaders are able to switch between different behaviours, not everyone succeeds in effectively driving change. When analysing the outcome of Mercuri Urval's many leadership development engagements, in essence, what sets successful change leaders apart from other leaders is their high level of situational judgement. Different leadership behaviours need to be applied in different situations, and by properly analysing the changing needs of the organisation and its people, successful leaders are able to choose and adopt their behaviour according to changing circumstances. So how do you develop your own situational judgement?

While some executives rely on their gut feeling, most leaders benefit from defining a simple yet comprehensive framework for analysing different situations. During our years of experience we have identified five situational factors that significantly influence the effectiveness of different leadership behaviours.

Scope of change

In order to influence your people and spur motivation, you need to analyse and understand how the scope and reason for your change shape the situation. If the change is comprehensive and drastically affects the work of your people (i.e. being Disruptive), they will most likely demonstrate higher resistance and lower self-confidence than if the scope was narrower (i.e. being Realistic). Expect the same result if the reason for changing is negative, for example because margins and profits are rapidly declining. In such situations, you might choose to boost self-confidence by acting as a role model (Influencing), or by increasing motivation to the inevitable change by adopting the envisioning behaviour (Reflective).

Urgency of change

Typically, people see change as something urgent with tight deadlines. It often is, but change can also be the opposite. As a leader you must assess the level of urgency and adapt your approach to the available time frame. If the organisation is in crisis and the need for change is urgent, you won't have enough time to be reflective, inclusive and connecting. In such situations, your people often want you to be goal-oriented and take control, communicate effectively, provide orders (Directive) and act as a role model (Influencing).

Having enough time to drive change significantly increases the chances of success. However, if you identify the need for change before it is evident to others, it might become more difficult to motivate your people. In such situations you might need to present the reason for change by using logic and facts (Realistic), or devote your time to being inclusive, develop a shared vision of the future and secure buy in (Inclusive, Connecting, Process-oriented).

Capabilities of the people you want to influence

A prerequisite for driving change is that your people are able to perform the activities needed to reach your desired results. As a leader, you need to understand how an individual's capabilities and experience influence the effectiveness of different leadership behaviours.

If your people don't have the required capabilities or lack critical experience, they will rely on guidance, coaching and training to develop. Under such conditions, rationally using facts or making demands are more likely to escalate resistance and slash motivation than driving change. Instead, demonstrating how to work (Influencing) or making people change their activities in smaller steps (Action-oriented) would be more fruitful behaviours to change the way they think and act.

Level of motivation among the people you want to influence

Lack of motivation is one of the most common reasons why change projects fail. In order to find the

behaviour most effective in reinstalling motivation, you must analyse the underlying reason why the group or individual is not motivated.

Do they understand the need for change? How do they *think* that they will be affected, and how *will* they be affected in reality? If your people are afraid of losing authority, money or even their job, they will never be able to commit and execute your change. In such situations you will need to involve people and secure their buy in (Inclusive, Connecting). If an individual truly will lose from the change, you might need to further explain why this is necessary (Realistic) while also developing a trustful personal relationship.

Personalities of the people you want to influence

As a leader, you need to be able to adopt different behaviours for different individuals. Everyone in your organisation has their own personality, and you need to understand how their core values influence their reactions and needs. What drives your people? What are they afraid of? And what makes them excited?

When you present your change strategy to an experienced board, you can focus on facts and data (i.e. being Realistic). However, the people within an organisation are often not typically homogenous. To gain respect and commitment from a conflict driven individual you might need to be tough and assertive (Directive). However, if you would adopt the same behaviour towards a conflict-averse individual you would slash his/her motivation and lose the engagement for good.

In essence, you need to be able to analyse different personalities and core values, and adapt your behaviours accordingly.

Conclusion and key takeaways

There are no definitive answers or certainties in leadership of change. In fact, that uncertainty is a prerequisite of modern change leadership.

Instead of searching for the one best style, change leadership should rather be seen as a continuum of seemingly opposing behaviours. As a leader, you must possess a broad palette

of leadership behaviours – spanning from highly rational to highly emotional – and be able to swiftly switch between the different approaches depending on the situation. You can analyse the situation by assessing the scope and urgency of your change, and the capabilities, motivations and

personalities of the people you want to influence. By properly understanding how these contextual factors shape a specific situation, you will be able to identify the leadership behaviour most effective to drive change.



Key takeaways

5 Continuums of Change Leadership

1. **Setting strategy: Being Disruptive *and* Realistic**
2. **Leading activities: Being Action-oriented *and* Reflective**
3. **Leading people: Being Directive *and* Inclusive**
4. **Interpersonal leadership: Influencing *and* Connecting**
5. **Leadership impact: Goal-oriented *and* Process-oriented**

Finally, for a broader perspective into the behaviours required of effective leaders, please read our team's article [10 Statements on Leadership](#). This article explores the full range of leaders' capabilities as they pursue the attainment of results.

Writers

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