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by Kerry A. Bunker and Michael Wakefield

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Leading in Times of Change

by Kerry A. Bunker and Michael Wakefield

THE REALITY OF ONGOING CHANGE is not news for most leaders. Even so, few are prepared to lead in the context of significant, unrelenting change. Often change sets up in leaders a struggle between managing the business and addressing the needs of the people. Typically, it is the people side that loses out. But if leaders don't establish an effective balance between business and people priorities, they can destabilize the organizational culture and erode trust, generating fear and skepticism among employees at a time when a loyal, productive, and enthusiastic workforce is essential for success.

How do leaders address the people side of change without jeopardizing the business side of change? How can a leader make the tough decisions without losing sight of the emotions and concerns of employees? At the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), we've found that the answer lies in being authentic and building trust.

When leaders focus on establishing trust, they are better able to deal with both the structural and the human elements of change. Instead of taking a one-sided approach, leaders find they can be both tough and empathetic, committed to the plan and understanding of the pain. They become agile and resilient, and able to do what it takes to lead through change and transition.

The dozen do's of change leadership

To create and sustain an environment of trust during change, leaders must be comfortable with the tension of opposites. Imagine a wheel that has trust as its hub. Radiating out from that hub are the spokes, which represent 12 competencies for dealing with change and transition (see the figure "The Transition Leadership Wheel"). During times of change, leaders need to be adept at all 12 competencies, even when they appear contradictory:

Catalyze change: Champion an initiative or a significant change, consistently promote the cause, and encourage others to get on board.

Cope with transition: Recognize and address the personal and emotional elements of change.

Show a sense of urgency: Take action, move fast, and accelerate the pace of change for everyone.

Demonstrate realistic patience: Know when and how to slow down the pace so that people can cope and adapt.

Be tough: Make difficult decisions with little hesitation or second-guessing.

Be empathetic: Take others' perspectives into account; understand the impact of your actions and decisions.

Show optimism: See the positive potential of any challenge, and convey that optimism to others.

Be realistic and open: Don't shy away from difficulties, speak candidly about the true situation, and admit personal mistakes.

Be self-reliant: Be confident in your ability to handle new challenges.

Trust others: Be comfortable with others doing their part; stay open to others' input and support.

Capitalize on strengths: Know your individual and organizational strengths and attributes; confidently apply them to tackle new situations and circumstances.

Go against the grain: Show willingness to learn and try new things—even when the process is difficult or painful.

The challenge of holding opposing characteristics in balance is learning how to apply the right amount of each. A leader who neglects or overplays any one element strains the trust that is needed to lead effectively during times of transition.

Balance #1: Catalyze change/Cope with transition.

Catalyzing change involves the ability to manage an initiative or change, generate buy-in, and see things through. Coping with transition involves the ability to



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recognize and address the personal and emotional elements of transition. Leaders who are adept at both competencies create a climate and culture for working through difficult times. They understand the rationale for a shift in direction and can communicate the vision with enthusiasm and energy. Even so, they give themselves and others permission to experience and express loss. Trust and commitment are maintained at a higher level, and, ultimately, the transition gains momentum as people work through the process.

One of the best CEOs we've worked with runs an enormous, sprawling organization with a long history and an entrenched bureaucracy. Yet he is challenging the organization to be a different and more competitive business, championing new ideas, new strategies, and new ways of working. But alongside his push for change, the CEO respects the organization's roots and is committed to helping his people cope with the fallout of change. Always honest and direct, he recognizes and overtly addresses the emotional and practical difficulties employees face under the pressure to change.

Balance #2: Show a sense of urgency/ Demonstrate realistic patience.

One of the most critical tasks in times of transition is maintaining energy, momentum, and productivity. Having a sense of urgency is an important element of the revitalization process and for moving toward the desired

outcomes.

Patience, however, is just as important. Realistic patience involves knowing when and how to slow the pace down so people can cope and adapt. Failure to be patient with people can actually slow down their ability to adapt and frustrate the change process for a long time. Balanced leaders don't panic, overreact, or make everything equally important. They recognize when to slow down in order to realize the benefits of speed later.

To strike the right balance, leaders should make a conscious effort to provide extra support and guidance when appropriate. To do this, they must recognize that people adapt to change in different ways. Some may require additional training or time to meet new expectations. Others may need a forum to air their gripes, concerns, and fears. Extra support during change also means giving consistent, honest feedback. People need to know whether they are doing well and what they can do differently.

Balance #3: Be tough/Be empathetic.

Leaders must be tough enough to make difficult, bottom-line decisions that serve the overall needs of the organization. But such decisions must also be made with sensitivity to their impact on others because lack of empathy can corrode morale and motivation.

Being tough involves facing challenges head on, being decisive, and taking a stand in the face of resistance. Being empathetic involves taking others' perspective into account when making decisions and taking action. Empathetic leaders are able to put themselves in other people's shoes, consider individual limitations, set aside preconceived notions, and value people as much as results.

These competencies are among the most difficult for many leaders to balance. Often leaders have been taught to shut down their emotional responses in order to make difficult decisions. They worry that letting their "soft side" show will be viewed as weakness or as lack of commitment to the decisions. However, connecting emotionally typically creates the opposite effect in times of significant change and crisis. People want to know that their leaders can be tough, committed, and decisive, but they want them to be human, too.

Balance #4: Show optimism/Be realistic and open.

Leaders play a key role in maintaining hope and commitment in the face of transition. When people are stressed by a crisis or major



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upheaval, they look to their leaders for positive energy and confidence. Optimism is the ability to see the positive potential of any challenge and convey that vision to others. Optimistic leaders are genuinely committed to the change, strategy, or initiative.

But optimism must not be blind or ungrounded. It should be balanced with and validated by realism and openness. Leaders who are realistic are clear and honest about a situation and prospects for the future. They speak the truth, don't sugarcoat the facts, and are willing to admit mistakes.

Balanced leaders won't shy away from reality. One leader we know has an amazing ability to clearly read a situation for what it is. This grounded realism has enabled her to bring a steady, predictable encouragement to the company during a major strategic shift. She is completely behind the new direction. Even so, she asks hard questions, presses for information (both good and bad), and draws attention to challenges and struggles. Her balance of optimism and realism has generated confidence and trust among her colleagues and direct reports.

Balance #5: Be self-reliant/Trust others.

Today's organizations demand a challenging combination of individual talent and collective ability and effort. Leaders must develop the right level of self-sufficiency along with appropriate trust and reliance on others.

Leaders who are self-reliant have a great deal of confidence in their own skills and abilities. They are willing to tackle most new challenges as they arise. Trusting others involves being comfortable allowing others do their part of a task or project without interference. The greater the complexity of a situation, the more important it is to place trust in others and allow them to bring their own perspectives and expertise to bear.

This pair of leadership competencies is extremely difficult to balance. We tend to cling to the myth of the heroic leader who remains strong, courageous, and self-reliant in the face of extraordinary challenges. In truth, however, leaders rise to new heights when they confront complexity with a team of strong and committed allies. Whether the challenge is an R&D team developing a new drug therapy or two recently merged organizations taking on the market leader, a collaborative approach yields insight, innovation, and action that even the most talented individual could not generate alone.

Leaders rise to new heights when they confront complexity with a team of strong and committed allies.

When a consistent pattern of trust has been established, the balanced leader can judiciously step in and advise, adjust, and, if needed, override without undermining relationships.

Balance #6: Capitalize on strengths/Go against the grain.

In times of crisis, people have a tendency to draw on the traits and abilities that forged their success in the past. Leaders who know how to capitalize on strengths trust these traits and abilities. But overrelying on them can cement leaders into behavior patterns that no longer work, and failing to recognize conditions that demand different capacities and new learning can be disastrous. On an individual level, failure to adapt is the main reason leaders derail—stall out at a particular level or get demoted or even fired. Organizationally, a leader's overreliance on strengths can lead to poor strategic and operational decisions, missed opportunities, and complacency.

Leaders must have the ability to leave their comfort zone, challenge preferred patterns, and try new things—to go against the grain.

By finding the appropriate balance between capitalizing on strengths and going against the grain, leaders foster openness to new ideas while preserving a respect for past experience and expertise.

To balance current strengths and new skills, leaders must first gain an accurate assessment of their strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and default behaviors. In CCL programs, this is done through a combination of 360-degree assessments, observation, feedback, and coaching. Direct and honest feedback from bosses, colleagues, and direct reports can also provide leaders with a clear picture of their own performance and behavior. Such awareness allows leaders to discern genuine strengths, work to mitigate weaknesses, and practice different behaviors. With an accurate sense of themselves, leaders can intentionally leverage the diverse talents, experiences, opinions, and perspectives of others, which in turn helps prevent tunnel vision and groupthink.

The paradox of leadership

Uncertainty can trigger all kinds of reactions from leaders and the people who are affected by the decisions of leadership. Confronted by change, people go through a time of transition that is rarely easy.

Leading During Change *(continued)*

Many managers have mastered the structural side of leading change—creating a vision, reorganizing, restructuring, and so on. They are rewarded for, evaluated on, and educated to deal with these structural issues and therefore have more experience with them. However, the pressures generated by structural or operational change compel leaders to pay attention to what's happening on the people side. Leading transition is about seeing people through a process of grieving, letting go, building hope, and learning. If either the structural side or the people side is overplayed, leaders damage trust. The result is insufficient buy-in from employees, which undermines progress toward new goals—and ultimately leads to the stalling or failure of perfectly good strategies and change initiatives.

Leading change is largely about managing paradox and making sense of competing views. It is about developing a style that builds trust through authenticity and careful balance. Of course, given the tensions that are continually in play, there will be circumstances that require more emphasis on one of the competing competencies than on the other. It's not possible to be perfectly in balance all the time. But it's an ideal worth striving for. ♦

Kerry A. Bunker is a senior enterprise associate and manager of the Awareness Program for Executive Excellence (APEX) at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), in Greensboro, N.C. Michael Wakefield is a senior enterprise associate at CCL, where he designs and trains in a variety of programs. This article is adapted from their book Leading with Authenticity in Times of Transition, published in 2005 by CCL Press. They can be reached at MUOpinion@hbsp.harvard.edu.