

Leading Change Without Authority, Part II

By Ed Oakley

How to deal with aspects of change.

How do you accomplish a major change initiative when you have authority over few, if any, of the stakeholders involved? Whether you're in materials handling, supply chain, IT consulting, product management or other roles that have more responsibility than authority, this is a real issue for you.

Let's look at a real scenario we faced as a consultant. This will be our focus of attention of this article. The 1,800 employee paper manufacturing facility was in grave danger of being closed. They were operating 24-7 and losing money. It seemed that the more paper they made, the more they lost. Plant closure would be devastating to this Wisconsin town of 9,000 citizens. Could it be turned around? We were given one shot at trying.

The first part of this three part series dealt with a simple strategy to overcome resistance to change. From our research, that is seen as one of the top three challenges of change initiatives. This second part of the series deals with making the shift from management to leadership, also seen as a key factor in effectively managing change. What is the significance of this?

Hard vs. Soft

Every organizational process has a Hard part and a Soft part. The Hard part represents the structure, processes, procedures, technology, tools, metrics, etc. The Soft part represents the people side – concerns, buy-in, resistance to change, creativity, commitment, etc. We have asked managers and executives from over 65 countries, "Which is more difficult, the Hard part or the Soft part?" Their consistent answer is not likely to surprise you – "the Soft part."

We see the Hard part as the Management side of our role and the Soft part as the Leadership side. Basically, you manage things and lead people. Both are important, with balance being the appropriate watchword. Management is about control, and good luck controlling people – especially if they don't even report to you. Bringing the best out in people requires leadership. Influence is a key aspect of that leadership. Since you cannot make someone do something, you must influence them to do that which they would not likely do on their own. How you do that is an important goal of this article.

The Ego Issue

Making the shift from management to leadership requires letting go of our ego-driven desire to control – a "management" characteristic. Many of us have technical backgrounds. I, personally, have an engineering background and consider myself a good problem-solver. That is good news and bad news. Give me a problem, and I am eager to solve it. Deep down, I want to show off my technical strengths. Unfortunately, other

stakeholders are not very likely to like my great solution nearly as much as their own. If I want their buy-in, I must let go the need to be the one with the answers. I must let go any attachment that my solution is THE right one. People want to be heard, not told. Stephen Covey said it well when he said, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." Don't be too quick to share your ideas.

The Answers Are in the Room

Can you remember yourself saying, "If I've told them once, I've told them a thousand times?" What does that say about "telling?" When we tell people what they need to do differently, there tends to be an automatic inference that they are doing something wrong now. The result is instant defensiveness and their focus on what is wrong with your solution. Telling doesn't work very well very often.

The good news is that your people have the solutions to the challenges they face. Rather than telling your own solution – a management approach, the leadership approach would be to ask the questions to elicit the solution from those who will be responsible for implementing it. In a Harvard Business Review article by Ron Heifitz and Don Laurie, the subtitle was, "Leaders don't need to have all the answers. They do need to ask the right questions."

Effective Questions

There is a certain kind of question that tends to be more effective. We call them Effective Questions, and they tend to have two characteristics. First, they tend to be open-ended instead of close-ended. Answers to open-ended questions would never be yes or no. Yes/no, close-ended questions require very little thought, and once they are answered, the thinking stops. If we begin our questions, instead, with words like "what" or "how," people will have to think about their answers. In fact, the thinking continues even after an initial response has been made. If someone asks me, "What could we do to improve this particular process?" I will give my initial thoughts, but the question will continue to process until I am complete with it. It might be a week or a month from now when I have the insight that best answers the question.

Second, Effective Questions tend to be Forward Focused™, which we discussed in the first article of this series.

Keeping the Paper Mill Open

Working with the depressed management team of the troubled plant, our consultant, Jennavieve, asked a simple Effective Question – Forward Focused and open-ended. "Although you are dealing with many problems, let's look at your successes for a few minutes. What are some things that are working?" she asked. The response was silence and some shaking of heads, as they couldn't believe what she was asking. It appeared to them that she was ignoring the problems they faced. After a few minutes of patience and encouragement by Jennavieve, they started to share some successes. One stood out as particularly interesting in that only one person in the room knew about it. Essentially, the success was that one shift of one particular paper machine was more productive than all the others.

When Jennavieve asked the almost obvious next question, "What is that team doing differently that has their productivity higher than anyone else's?" the answer was a bit shocking. They did not know! In retrospect, unless the right question is asked, you wouldn't expect the management team to know.

The bottom-line is that when they investigated the situation and discovered the reason for the higher productivity, they were able to dramatically improve the plants productivity by implementing that solution across all machines and shifts. The result was substantial profit, and the plant stayed open – saving 1,800 jobs (Send Ed Oakley an email if you would like to know the simple little change they made).

Making the Shift

Making the transition from management to leadership by shifting from telling the solution to asking the right questions can have a dramatic effect on the out come of a change initiative, especially when you are required to lead change without authority.



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