The Acceleration Of Change Requires A Special Set Of Leadership Skills

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Managing change is part and parcel of being a leader and it has always been thus. There is evidence, however, that we are seeing an acceleration in the pace of change at work, and leadership teams are struggling.

Change in business, we know, is the only constant. The rate or pace of change, however, is a variable and in 2024 leaders predict it will be pedal to the metal. In 2023, C-suite interviewed for a survey said they faced an all-time high rate of change, but a majority (88%) expected the pace to quicken this year, with technology the number one driver.

Amidst the well-documented external factors having an impact on organizations currently, artificial intelligence was a tech bombshell that dropped with high impact in 2023 and it certainly concentrated minds in board rooms. You could argue that AI is to this generation of leaders what the internet was to their predecessors at the turn of the millennium. It is a fierce and disruptive accelerant and is just one tech advancement among many at the moment, albeit the one that grabs the most headlines.

Leaders unprepared for change

There are serious concerns, however, with this tech-driven revolution in our workplaces and our preparedness for it. First, many of us are sick and tired of change. It has worn us down, according to recent surveys. Change fatigue builds over time and has had a severe effect on staff attrition and productivity. Dial up the speed of change, and in the context of our uncertain, volatile times we see an uptick in negative symptoms at work, such as mental illness and job dissatisfaction. Even where change is seen as hugely exciting and an opportunity, it often requires an organizational culture that is happy with ambiguity and high flex. Traditionally cultures have been the opposite with more comfort in stability with occasional flex.

Yet, we are also being told by those responsible for managing people functions, that our leaders are simply not equipped to handle the impact of change, and they feel exposed when the rate of transformation increases. They don't want to fail and yet the 'what this means for me' is often unclear for them as individuals. More than four in five HR professionals in [one survey](#) agreed that managers were not equipped to lead change.

Three pillars of organizational culture

The evidence squares with the conversations I am currently having with leadership teams. Change management skills are often a neglected area of professional development for leaders, let alone middle managers. Also, even if managers have the skills, they don't always have the confidence and energy to use them. Where, then, do we start?

My advice is to consider what I call 'the three pillars' of organizational culture upon which all strong and sustainable businesses are built. These are:

What you believe - in essence, this is what the organization believes and needs to believe. During change this is ensuring the reason 'why' is clear; the opportunity and constant need to evolve, test and learn. It's critical to show how change links to the overall ambition and success of the past. Ensuring your leaders and influencers believe is vital, not just at the beginning but throughout change.

How you behave - how do people need to behave to deliver and live the beliefs? How do we need them to behave differently during and after this phase or evolution (or revolution)? What will it mean for new habits, rhythms and routines? How must we, as leaders and managers, behave to lead it?

What we use - the tools, structures and systems that make the culture. Consider your managers, here. Are they equipped with a toolkit that can help them guide their teams along the new path? Are the systems and processes adapting to support them in playing their critical role?

For companies capable of managing change, especially an acceleration, these three pillars are strong and well-developed. These organizations have a clear purpose and link any new direction to it. There's a shared set of values that acts as a compass through change. They pay attention to equipping managers and individuals to keep one another engaged, focused and committed. In fact, the leaders and managers in these organizations will have high competence

and confidence in their abilities to lead change, whether it's reinvention, survival, acquisition or being acquired.

Start with yourself

Leaders need to start with themselves, making sure that they understand the 'why' or ask the question, if not. They must have the mindset and tools to manage their energy and chunk it down into phases rather than feeling it's all about long-term endurance. Change can be a long and energy-sapping process, so do they know how to tap into different energy sources?

Then they need to be the best leaders they can be with their people, being the inspirer, the coach and the navigator. It is about paying attention to how people are feeling, behaving and engaging people throughout.

The strongest cultures make sure leaders can rise to the leadership challenge and don't leave it to chance. Successful change managers will keep their people talking at the critical points during the process, and ensure all voices are heard throughout. Their team feels involved, empowered and active in making the required shift.

If 2024 is to be a year in which the pace of change accelerates, we must invest in equipping our leadership teams with a set of skills and tools that ensures their people are on board willingly for the ride.