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Be a Change Leader, Not Just a Change Manager



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About John McGuire

John McGuire is a senior program associate at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). His diverse work history includes senior business management positions in corporate settings, including Digital Equipment Corporation and Fidelity Investments. John is current research and development practice leader for the Change Leadership team and co-author with Gary Rhodes of *Transforming Your Leadership Culture* (Jossey-Bass, forthcoming March 2009).



Whether by design or by default, everyone is dealing with change. While change is often viewed as necessary or interesting, or as a hopeful antidote to the status quo, the truth is most people are not comfortable with change.

Change means stepping into the unknown. It means giving up established ways of being and doing. Change means risk, turbulence and, often, conflict. Even sought-after, desired change puts demands on people that can be uncomfortable, scary or even a source of regret.

John McGuire and his colleagues in CCL's global organizational leadership development (GOLD) practice argue that change leadership is the missing piece in how we handle change in our organizations. "Change pushes people to think and feel differently," says McGuire. "In organizations, change pushes whole groups of people to think and feel differently — in other words, the culture is asked to transform. The problem? The people and the culture push back."

In the absence of change leadership, the current culture will undermine the ability of people and organizations to adapt.

But when change leadership is front and center in the organization, the culture responds. "Agility, speed, execution, unification, readiness — all the things that CEOs dream about — are available to leaders willing to transform their organizations through leadership," says McGuire.

Leading change versus managing change

At a practical level, McGuire advises clients to pay attention to how much time and attention they give to leading change versus managing change. "Consciously and actively recognizing the difference between management and leadership in your daily work life is the most essential quality you can foster in yourself and among your leaders," says McGuire.

Change management focuses mostly on external systems, structures and processes. Operations are changed and reengineered. New product markets may be opened. "Change management is not for the faint of heart," McGuire notes. "It requires

mental toughness along with technical and analytical skills, and it demands your making calculated decisions and moving forward based on the best information possible.”

Even in times of change, however, management is about predictable, results-oriented work. Managers are paid to target goals and take action. Managing is technical work designed to lower uncertainty and minimize risk.

“Change leadership, in contrast, deals in the currency of uncertainty: unpredictable human systems and organizational culture. The ever-shifting way forward. The promise of no guarantees.”

“Both change leadership and change management are needed to make progress in a new organizational direction,” says McGuire. “Without a change leadership

strategy to address the human and the cultural reality, any new business or operational strategy will be half-hearted and have limited success.”

Change Leadership

- Human systems
- Generative and adaptive
- Inside-out
- Leadership strategy
- Culture: beliefs and practices

Change Management

- Operations systems
- Technical solutions
- Outside-in
- Business strategy
- Systems, structure, processes

4 BAD ATTITUDES

What gets in the way of leading change? CCL’s John McGuire says four general attitudes are common reasons people shrink back from leading change and, instead, focus on managing operations.

“Just Let George Do It.” This attitude allows everyone to pass the buck to someone else. Leadership gets deferred as people wait for some transformational, powerful person to show the way, make the tough decisions and protect everyone else. Senior vice presidents defer to executive vice presidents, who defer to the chief operations officer, who defers to the chief executive. “It’s amazing to watch people give away their hard-earned power rather than stand up and lead,” says McGuire.

“Yes, But.” Another common attitude is “Yes! I will lead change — but I want to control how it turns out.” Executives often feel reluctant to give other people real space to create change or to find new ways to process and respond to the change that is around them. They worry that if they let go of control, they’re opening up a Pandora’s Box.

“Either-Or.” The challenge is too big and there’s not enough time. Executives are too busy with operational changes and making the numbers — managing change — that there isn’t time for the people side — leading change. They think they have to do just one or the other; they can’t do both at once.

“Are We There Yet?” Impatience gets in the way of leading change. Executives want to know how long their organizational change will take and frequently ask how much further they have to go. But lasting, meaningful change takes time and serious intention.