



LEADING PEOPLE THROUGH CHANGE®

Leadership Strategies for Making Change Stick

You've heard it a million times. The only constant is change. This is even truer in the business world where change comes at us at a blinding pace. But if change is such a prevalent part of our everyday lives, why aren't we better at implementing it?

Recent studies show that as many as 70 percent of all change initiatives fail. Why? One reason is that the issues and challenges organizations face today are more complex than ever before. A second and more fundamental reason is that leaders in most organizations do not use a high-involvement change strategy to lower resistance and generate buy-in to change.

Without strategies to engage and involve people in the process, organizations often fall short of the benefits they'd hoped to realize through their change initiatives. Even more detrimental than a failed change initiative is the fallout from the failure such as lost productivity, low morale, wasted time, and wasted money.

A study (*shown in figure 1*) conducted by The Ken Blanchard Companies® paints a telling story about the challenges organizations face that demand effective change leadership.

Without effective change leadership, these challenges are disruptive at best, and more likely miserable failures. In order to be successful, leaders must understand the reasons most change efforts fail.

Figure 1:

Top Organizational Challenges

(Top five issues by order of importance—1,800 respondents)

Issue	
Competitive Pressure	63%
Economic Challenges	61%
Growth and Expansion	59%
Skill Shortages	50%
Culture Change	48%

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Figure 2:
What approach does your organization typically use when launching a change initiative?

Internal cross-functional team	55%
Internal consulting team	34%
No formal approach	29%
External consulting firm	25%
External training and development firm	14%

Figure 3:
The Challenges of Managing the Change Process

Engaging and energizing employees	48%
Sustaining momentum throughout the process	48%
Building leadership bench strength to support the process	47%
Getting everyone on the same page	44%
Changing rapidly	23%
Teaming effectively	18%

Why Change Efforts Fail

Most people do not initially embrace change. When a change initiative is launched, people often focus on what they will have to give up rather than on what they will gain in the change process. Although there are always a few early adopters and advocates for the change, most people will be neutral. This is primarily because people do not understand the business case for the change, the status quo is comfortable, and they hope the change initiative will simply go away.

In truth, most change efforts get derailed or fail for predictable reasons. But many leaders don't recognize or account for these reasons. As a result, they make the same mistakes again and again. And while there are dozens of documented reasons change initiatives fail, two main reasons deserve comment:

1. People leading the change think that announcing the change is the same as implementing it. They do not provide the information they have that would persuade people of the need to change. They do not provide ongoing leadership or speak with one voice throughout the change process. As a result, the people impacted by the change do not really believe there is any sense of urgency or compelling reason to change. When change is driven primarily by top leadership, the change will probably fail because of a lack of buy-in due to low involvement.
2. People's concerns with change are not surfaced and/or addressed. Although they may comply with the change early on, unresolved information, personal, or implementation concerns will cause them to revert to old behaviors and work processes when the pressure to change is off.

When leaders know the reasons change typically fails or gets derailed and they are attuned to the predictable concerns people have in the face of change, they can be proactive and employ a series of change leadership strategies and tactics to overcome the typical causes of failure.

Another reason many change efforts fail is that organizations try to manage change on their own, with a small leadership team. They do not seek outside expertise or use a proven change leadership model to lead the change process, nor have they developed solid internal change leadership capacity. This point is illustrated through another study conducted by The Ken Blanchard Companies with more than 900 training and HR leaders as to how they approached change initiatives (*figure 2*). Only 14 to 25 percent of respondents in the organizations surveyed sought outside expertise.

In the same study conducted by The Ken Blanchard Companies, respondents cited some of the key challenges they face in managing change initiatives (*figure 3*).

The top four challenges and the bottom one all speak to the issues of alignment and involvement. For change to succeed, everyone must speak with one voice about the proposed change. Collaboration, teamwork, and engagement create energy and momentum for the change. Bottom line—people who plan the change rarely implement the plan. Effective change leadership requires that leaders develop partnerships with the people impacted by the change. It is critical that leaders develop strategies to listen in on and initiate conversations in the organization so they can surface and resolve people’s concerns with change and benefit from the insights and advice they have about how to implement the proposed change.

Stages of Concern

Change—even organizational change—happens one person at a time, something that is often overlooked in most organizational change planning. The success of total change depends on the success of individual change multiplied dozens or hundreds of times over. To be successful in implementing change on a large organizational scale, leaders need to zero in on individual concerns to inform their planning.

Research shows that people have predictable and sequential concerns with change. These concerns, if not surfaced and addressed, can present formidable roadblocks to the successful implementation of change. A US Department of Education project originally conducted by Gene Hall, Shirley Hord, Susan Loucks, and other colleagues at the University of Texas suggests that people have predictable and sequential stages of concern (*figure 4*). This research led us to create what we call the Concerns Model, a process for surfacing and resolving concerns, reducing resistance, and creating buy-in and support for the change initiative at all levels of the organization.

The first Stage of Concern is **Information Concerns**. People want specifics about the change process. They want to have the chance to ask questions about the gap between what is and what could be. They want honest and direct answers. Key questions at this stage include:

- What is the change?
- Why is it needed?
- What is wrong with the way things are now?
- By how much and how fast does the organization need to change?

A good assumption at this stage is that people are smart and if they had access to the same information leaders had, they would come to the same conclusions. Leaders need to be careful at this stage to provide information about the change process rather than try to sell the change process and to talk in terms of what the change is and what it could mean to the organization.

Figure 4:
Six Stages of Concern

1. Information Concerns
2. Personal Concerns
3. Implementation Concerns
4. Impact Concerns
5. Collaboration Concerns
6. Refinement Concerns

Leaders need to create an atmosphere of trust and genuine concern for how the proposed change will affect people personally.

The second Stage of Concern is **Personal Concerns**, which are often the most ignored stage of concern and the primary reason so many change initiatives fail. At this stage, people want to know why the change initiative will benefit them or what they will lose. Specifically, people want to know:

- How will the change affect me personally?
- What is in it for me?
- Will I win or lose?
- How will I find time to implement this change?
- Will I need to learn new skills or do I have the necessary skills now?

To compensate, leaders need to create an atmosphere of trust and genuine concern for how the proposed change will affect people personally. If leaders do not take the time to specifically address individual needs and fears near the beginning of the change process, they will find themselves retracing their steps because their concerns linger. People may comply with the proposed change for a short period of time, but if they have unresolved personal concerns, the people will not commit the discretionary energy required to successfully implement and sustain the change.

The third Stage of Concern is **Implementation Concerns**, such as system alignment, best practices, and the daily mechanics of making the change happen. In this stage, people ask themselves, What do I do first? Second? Third? How do I manage all of the details? Additional concerns can include:

- Where do I get help?
- How long will this take?
- Is what we are experiencing typical?
- How will the organization's structure and systems change?

At this point, leaders need to spell out a detailed change plan about how and when the change will be launched, what resources are available, who will test the change, and how the change will be measured and supported. Remember, the change leadership team should include informal leaders and advocates for the change who can help craft a realistic and credible project plan.

The fourth Stage of Concern, **Impact Concerns**, focuses on issues such as:

- Is the change making a difference?
- Is the effort worth it?
- Are we making progress?

At this stage, people are interested in learning whether the change is paying off. If leaders have done a good job addressing the first three stages of concern, this is the point in the process where people will sell themselves on the benefits of the change. By successfully addressing the initial stages of concern, leaders will find that their employees are more open to the change at this point, willing to advocate for it, and ready to evaluate the change on its merits. It is at this stage that an organization will also want to give focus to building change leaders for the future.

The fifth Stage of Concern, **Collaboration Concerns**, focuses on who else needs to be on board and involved. Now that employees have sold themselves on the benefits of the change, they are eager to spread the word and encourage others to implement the change as well. In addition, employees will be more confident about their ability to advocate for the change and will want to see that the collective knowledge in the organization is used. Questions in this stage can include:

- How can we work with others to get them involved in what we are doing?
- How do we spread the word?
- Are there opportunities to break down silos on this change?

The last stage, **Refinement Concerns**, focuses on making continual improvements. At this last stage, the change is well on its way and employees are focused on new ways to innovate. Employees may be wondering whether alternative approaches might work better and may want to play a role in helping to modify the approach to the change process to leverage lessons of the past. The leader's role is to encourage this refinement, support further innovation, and invite others to challenge the status quo. At this stage leaders might ask:

- What ideas do you have for further improvement?
- What might work better?

A Model for Leading the Change Process

A common reason cited for not including people in the change is that the change sponsors believe people are naturally resistant to change. The reality is that people are not so much resistant to change as they are resistant to being controlled. When organizations try to sell change to people affected by the change instead of involving them and addressing their concerns, they doom their change initiatives to failure.

At the beginning of a change effort, most people have information, personal, and implementation concerns. Since these stages are sequential, they can be predicted. This predictability enables leaders to be proactive in addressing them. When leaders know the concerns people have in the face of change, they can employ a series of change leadership strategies and tactics to overcome the typical causes of failure.

If leaders are able to diagnose stages of concern on an individual level, then communicating the right information to each individual at the right time will lower and resolve these concerns and increase buy-in and support.

Our research shows there are parallels between leading people and leading change initiatives and both require a mastery of three critical change leadership skills.

1. Diagnosing—The willingness and ability to look at a situation and assess the concerns of the people who are being asked to change

When organizations try to sell change to people affected by the change instead of involving them and addressing their concerns, they doom their change initiatives to failure.

People have to have influence on the change they are expected to make.

2. Matching—The ability to use a variety of change leadership strategies comfortably, to provide individuals with what they need
3. High Involvement—The willingness to partner with the people who are being asked to change in order to surface their concerns, influence the process, and increase their commitment to the change

Once a leader has diagnosed people's stages of concern and committed to expanding involvement and influence throughout the process, then the leader must flexibly use the appropriate change leadership strategy and corresponding behaviors to address the specific concerns people have in each stage of change. Doing so significantly increases the probability of implementing successful change.

Strategies for Increasing Success at Every Stage of Concern

The five change leadership strategies provide additional insight about what leaders need to do at each stage to initiate, implement, and sustain change.

CHANGE STRATEGY 1

HIGH INVOLVEMENT OUTCOME: BUY-IN

Our core belief in leading people through change is that the best way to initiate, implement, and sustain change is to increase the level of influence and involvement from the people being asked to change, surfacing and resolving concerns along the way. Without this strategy, it's difficult to achieve the cooperation and buy-in needed from those responsible for making the proposed changes.

This change leadership strategy must be used relentlessly and consistently throughout the change process. The bottom line is that people have to have influence on the change they are expected to make to win their buy-in and cooperation. By seeking people's input and ideas, and surfacing their concerns, leaders can make better decisions during the change process.

CHANGE STRATEGY 2

EXPLORE WHY THE CHANGE IS NEEDED OUTCOME: COMPELLING CASE/INSPIRING VISION

At this point in the change process, leaders must build a rationale for the change and create a picture of what the future holds.

Messaging is extremely important. The focus should be evolutionary, not revolutionary. A revolutionary message can imply that what was happening in the past was wrong. It is unlikely that it was wrong. More likely, what you

were doing met the demands or opportunities of the day but the demands and/or opportunities (market forces, regulations, resources, technology, etc.) evolved. An evolutionary message ties the change to successes of the past, but organizations can expect to see some resistance here. To counterbalance this, be resolute in your position on the need to change and be flexible on “how to get there.” Organizations should continue building buy-in by asking employees what they see in the internal and external environments that drives the need to change.

Creating a clear vision is essential for not only getting people on board with the change but also enabling them to see where their role fits once the change process has been initiated and implemented. It is all well and good if the leadership can envision the future of the organization with the change. However, an essential function of the job of leaders in a change effort is to help others see what they see. People focus on what they are going to lose, not gain. An inspiring vision allows people to lower their own personal concerns because they see themselves in the picture of the future and are excited about the future.

CHANGE STRATEGY 3

COLLABORATE ON IMPLEMENTATION OUTCOME: RIGHT RESOURCES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

For change to succeed, leaders must be able to break down the walls between departments, units, and personalities. As stated earlier, it is important to include people in the planning process and to spend time surfacing and addressing people’s concerns, identifying and supporting early adopters, identifying resisters and understanding the reasons for their resistance, and courting those who are neutral. By involving others in the planning process, you can anticipate obstacles with implementation and together create strategies to solve those problems.

The plan should define, step by step, how the change will be implemented and which metrics will be used to gauge progress and goal accomplishment. Areas to pay attention to here include

- Defining how the success of the change will be measured (i.e., metrics)
- Providing the right resources
- Identifying who is accountable for what
- Planning for quick wins
- Accounting for what could go wrong
- Anticipating unintended consequences
- Creating the infrastructure that is needed

Be resolute in your position on the need to change and be flexible on how to get there

Employees may need coaches to instruct and encourage them, especially in regard to implementation concerns. The change will likely require new skills and resources, so it is important to plan for and provide the training, tools, and resources to accelerate the learning curve in a safe environment.

CHANGE STRATEGY 4

MAKE THE CHANGE SUSTAINABLE OUTCOME: SUSTAINABLE RESULTS

The key in this stage is accountability. Leaders and employees alike must be held accountable for implementing the change. Measuring the impact of the change should take place and the results should be shared with key stakeholders. Feedback needs to be delivered in real time in order to be motivating. Leaders should collect success stories and share information widely about early wins. It is critical to:

- Demand that leaders walk the talk
- Measure impact
- Ask who else should be involved
- Listen for and remove obstacles to successful implementation
- Eliminate policies that don't make sense and rules that feel bureaucratic

It is sustainable change that we aspire to. Once the goal is reached, leaders should find ways to anchor the work behavior changes into the organization. But don't stop there. Look for way to cross-pollinate the lessons learned and successes gained to other parts of the organization. It is important here to:

- Evaluate what is working and what is not working
- Document how the change works in practice, not in theory
- Share best practices
- Ask who else should be involved
- Provide cross-training and mentoring opportunities
- Celebrate success and anchor the change in the culture
- Identify new challenges/stretch goals and the leadership capacity to achieve them

CHANGE STRATEGY 5

EXPLORE POSSIBILITIES OUTCOME: OPTIONS

Perhaps the only thing worse than not seeing a change effort come to fruition is selecting the wrong change prescription. While leadership may feel pressured to hurry to a decision, they must spend the necessary time exploring alternative possibilities. By involving others in the process of exploring possibilities, leaders can immediately reduce information concerns as a new change is announced, because people are in the loop about deciding what needs to change and which solution is the best. To ensure face validity and inclusion of the best options, the options identified should be reviewed by a representative sample of those being asked to change. In using this strategy, it is important to scan the environment and the competitive landscape for challenges, opportunities, and threats as well

as identify the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the organization itself. Lastly, the customer's perspective must be included and examined.

What Sets Effective Change Leadership Processes Apart?

There are many change management models and methods on the market. The following are some guidelines to use when selecting a change management process.

1. Does the process diagnose before prescribing? Most change models prescribe a series of steps for leaders to follow in implementing change. But these strategies often fail to recognize that employees are going to be at different stages of concerns throughout a change process and need different leadership behaviors at a given point in time. For a change effort to succeed, employees need to feel that they can express their concerns and be heard. They need to feel that the people leading the change will consider their needs in planning the change.
2. Does the process expand involvement and influence as the key strategy to drive buy-in and commitment among those being asked to change? Most change models have a step in their change process that is labeled something like Motivate Employees to Change. Leaders are reminded to create a sense of urgency and to share why the change is needed from their perspective. In contrast, when leading people through change, it is important to help them draw their own conclusions about the need for change. People need to be involved from the very beginning—assessing the status quo, exploring options, building the business case, creating the vision of the future. Change should be done *with* people, not *to* people.
3. Is there appropriate time in upfront planning to ensure success? Experience has shown that most changes fail because they get off track early in the process. For example, the change leadership team may not have included the right cross-section of people on the team. Or the organization did not share enough information to create a credible and compelling business case for the change. Most organizations do not take time to pilot, experiment with, or test-drive the changes. The pressure is so great to change that the problems with implementation are not worked out before the change is rolled out to a larger audience.

Spending enough time to get the change off to a good start will ultimately save time, increase buy-in, and enhance performance. Investing in people and pilots at the front end of the change process minimizes headaches and the need for rework on the back end.

About The Ken Blanchard Companies®

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Conclusion

Mastering the art of leading change does not need to be mysterious or complicated. By teaching leaders how to address the stages of concern and respond with strategies to increase involvement and influence at each stage of the change process and build the capacity for future change, organizations can dramatically increase the probability of successfully initiating, implementing, and sustaining change.

About the Authors, Pat Zigarmi and Judd Hoekstra

Pat Zigarmi, PhD, and Judd Hoekstra are organizational change experts and coauthors of The Ken Blanchard Companies' Leading People Through Change® and Leading Up During Change programs. They share a commitment to the principle that people have a right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives and the concept that those who plan the battle rarely battle the plan. Leading People Through Change teaches leaders how to identify and address the typical concerns and questions that employees raise in the face of change, as well as how to use situationally appropriate change strategies to lower and resolve concerns. Zigarmi and Hoekstra are coauthors of *Leading at a Higher Level: Blanchard on Leadership and Creating High Performing Organizations* with Ken Blanchard and the founding associates/consulting partners of The Ken Blanchard Companies, and of the programs 21 Days to Becoming a situational Leader, and the the 12-module SLII Challenge. Zigarmi is also the coauthor of many other Blanchard® leadership training programs and books, including SLII®, and *Leadership and the One Minute Manager* with Ken Blanchard. Zigarmi and Hoekstra also coauthored *Who Killed Change?* with Ken Blanchard and John Britt.

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