

**Be the Change You Want to See**

by  
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The current economic conditions and an increasingly competitive marketplace have awakened many top-level leaders to a new awareness that a fundamental transformation may be needed for their organization to thrive in these challenging times.

Transformative organizational change has been known by a variety of terms over the years, from "re-engineering" to "total quality management" to "re-visioning." Whatever the label, the underlying theme is the same: a conscious, planned, proactive decision by top leadership to address critical issues from an assertive stance, not a reactive one.

This crucial decision to be proactive requires an evaluation and planning process. The degree of structure and scope of the planning will vary with the circumstances, but the intention is the same: to improve the organization's capacities. Whatever the process, once the planning phase is completed, another critical phase emerges: follow-through and implementation. This phase becomes a litmus test of a company's resolve and the character of its leaders.

For any organizational change to be effective, top management/leadership must go beyond "buy-in." It is not enough to just agree on a plan and outline a set of goals and objectives. What is required of

leaders is to move into action, personally demonstrating and modeling the changes that are needed. As Albert Schweitzer said, "Example is not the main thing in influencing others; it is the only thing."

If, for example, your company has decided to move in new directions, explore new markets, or set a higher bar for performance, then "business as usual" won't get you there. The whole point of a planning process is to reach higher and become more effective. Maintaining the status quo is not a strategy for long-term growth and success. In urging employees to reach higher, leaders must do the same, committing to their own personal and professional development.

It is usually quite easy for leaders and managers to identify changes they would like to see in their employees: to be more efficient, more productive, more creative, better communicators, better at customer service, better team players, etc. However, this cannot be a one-way street. At the same time, or even prior to setting new performance standards for employees, leaders must model the way by personal example, learning new skills, stretching out of their comfort zones, changing their own behaviors in ways that will better serve the organization. If they are asking this of their employees, leaders can do no less.

Although this maxim may seem obvious, simple observation suggests it is often not followed. Many times leaders expect change from their employees,

yet remain firmly fixed in their own less-than-exemplary behaviors. In the most egregious examples, leaders may give lip service to desired changes, but their own cynicism or fear blocks them from genuine commitment to change. At risk of restating the obvious, without the leaders' demonstration of change, no real changes (at least for the better) will take place. There may be temporary pockets of improvements by strong, self-motivated employees, but not a generalized lifting of overall company performance.

Most people hunger for true leadership. Employees who are inspired by their leaders will enthusiastically tackle organizational changes that will benefit the entire company. If the leaders themselves embody the change process, employees will see and feel the authenticity of the call for new ways of working. Employees today are sophisticated in many ways, and the old "tell and sell" approach just doesn't work very well. It is no longer sufficient to "tell" employees about changes or decisions and then try to "sell" them on what they need to do differently. Employees need to be engaged in the change process, from analysis and planning through implementation.

One example from my own experience is a local high-tech manufacturing firm that is successfully addressing these issues. Top leadership is committed to leading a change management process. The management team meets regularly to work on their own skills in communication,

dialogue, and accountability. These same skills and principles are then extended throughout the rest of the organization. Their leadership on these issues is far more effective due to their own first-hand, personal experience. In effect, they have first asked of themselves what they are asking from their employees.

At another company, the CEO has decided to change certain aspects of his management style, giving up familiar and comfortable patterns in order to become more effective. He is demonstrating by personal example his commitment to fundamentally transform the culture of the company. His conviction is genuine, and it is providing a compelling and inspiring example of leadership.

With their leaders serving as role models, both of these companies have an excellent probability of successfully transforming themselves and moving up to the next level of success. As a leader, looking honestly and objectively at your own behaviors, habits, attitudes isn't easy, but it is essential. For those leaders who have the courage and character to do so, the positive effects will ripple throughout the company, quite probably for years to come. In business, as in many areas of life, "A rising tide lifts all boats."

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