

Tech Talk

Why and How Leaders Change: Rome Wasn't Built in a Day & Neither are New Leadership Competencies

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Leaders create change. They achieve results through their leadership behaviors and strong relationship skills. They are supportive and energetic. They make change possible. But even leaders need to turn their focus inward to explore and initiate change within themselves. In this article, I will explore the reasons why and how leaders change and the most effective approaches for doing so.

In the world of work, the following are the most common catalysts for change:

- Results you desire are not being achieved. You are not personally satisfied with them nor are those to whom you are accountable.
- It is challenging to get buy-in and commitment to your goals. You feel a strain or superficiality in your relationship with peers, direct reports, the Board or investors. You often find yourself suppressing conflict; or when you express disagreement, you find it is damaging to the relationship and your credibility.
- You come to the realization you need to grow your leadership skills to gain greater responsibility and to move up in your career. You recognize your lack of formal or recent leadership development. This is common when a person is promoted because of their functional or technical expertise.
- A performance review or 360° assessment indicates you are capable of achieving and contributing more by improving your leadership skills.
- Getting fired. Albeit too late, you realize your lack of development of some serious leadership behaviors. You are determined not to let it happen again and want to “fix” the problem.

How Leaders Change

How does a leader change and develop leadership behaviors? I firmly believe we are all created to grow, achieve and contribute throughout our entire lifetime. It is within our capability to improve our leadership behaviors. Yet improvement rarely happens overnight. Change takes time. But there are effective approaches to improving leadership skills. These consist of getting a current assessment, identifying gaps, developing a strategy and action plan and, finally, implementing the plan.

Self-awareness is the start. The Greek philosophers were right when they said “know thyself.” Volumes of books have been written with methods and systems on how to improve. There is no

silver bullet; there is no one way that works best for everyone. However, there *are* fundamentals to the change process. Change takes time but also motivation, determination, humility, sharing, understanding and the assistance of others. And it begins with a willingness to recognize our “blind spots” and confront our issues.

Sooner or later in a person’s career, they get feedback about a blind spot - that is, a negative behavior they are unaware of. Often, a leadership behavior that has worked well for years no longer works because the individual is in a new situation. This may be due to a promotion or company reorganization, for instance, with new challenges and a different staff. For example, leaders often get feedback that they are not tough enough, that they don’t “hold people’s feet to the fire.” Conversely, leaders can be seen as too direct, insensitive, dictatorial and only interested in their own goals and no one else’s.

Do either of these sound familiar to you? Behaviors such as these hurt a leader’s relationships and ability to deliver results. Feedback, which is critical to improvement, is often tough to accept. Often, people are shocked to discover their blind spots. It may be that they have never been given the feedback before; or they may have received but not “heard” it because the behavior did not negatively impact their overall effectiveness at the time. The individual described in Case 1 was completely unaware of how his behavior was perceived by others. His initial reaction was one of denial.

Specific, detailed, actionable feedback is key to recognizing blind spots and correcting the behaviors that interfere with a leader’s effectiveness. What is it about the way you interact with people, including tone of voice and non-verbal cues, that has a negative effect upon others? You need specific examples in order to understand and begin to know what and how to change. It is then important to pick one or two behaviors to work on; specifically, those that will have the greatest impact on your effectiveness, your challenges and your organization’s goals.

Case 1 - Moving a Research Organization to a Product Sales Organization

The Challenge: As his organization grew, the president of a company was becoming increasingly frustrated that his leadership team was not making the shift from a research organization to a more production- and sales-oriented focus. He found that silos were beginning to form, resulting in competition among groups. Although he had successfully taken the company through key phases, including an intensive research organization buildup, establishment of a breakthrough technology platform and small scale production, growth into its next phase was hampered by his leadership style.

The Solution: Through a 360° leadership assessment plus other instruments, he realized that he was a significant part of the problem. He was seen as dictatorial and unsympathetic. The assessment results convinced him that he had serious blind spots. Coaching focused on helping him make the needed changes.

The Results: A 360° progress assessment one year later indicated he had made substantial improvements in managing disagreements, giving feedback and taking an active interest in

developing his people. His strengthened relationships played a key role in his ability to shift the company from a research organization to a production- and sales-focused one.

As a leader begins to work on changing behavior, the reality sinks in that change is indeed very hard work. They often feel that nothing is changing. They become frustrated, particularly if they are trying to change a negative behavior. It feels like the behavior is ten times worse as they attempt to change it. They feel inept and begin to doubt that they can change. This is because they are now fully aware of the problem and its negative consequences. They need to give themselves a break and recognize that there will be setbacks along the way. They need to understand that this is a critical stage which I call the “try and try again stage,” similar to learning to ride a bike by falling off and trying again and again.

Case 2 describes such an individual. He quickly accepted the feedback he received and plunged into the hard work needed to change his behavior but became frustrated because his expectations for progress were initially unrealistic. Changing behaviors developed over a lifetime can be a slow process; however, this is no excuse for putting growth on the back burner.

There is “no learning in the comfort zone nor comfort in the learning zone.” Leaders attempting to change ingrained behaviors need to push themselves out of their comfort zone and get continued support and feedback from those they have enlisted to help them make the change possible.

Case 2 - Managing Venture Capital and Board Relationships

The Challenge: A technology company’s president and CEO had taken the company from research to pilot production. His relationships with board members and investors were rocky. In order to gain the next round of funding, he needed to improve them significantly and quickly.

The Solution: Through one-on-one interviews with his entire staff and investors, leadership and other assessments, he came to realize the specific changes he needed to make. The interviews and assessments showed that he needed to show more confidence, push back on board members more and build more personal relationships. He also saw clearly how specific non-verbal behaviors were seen as negatively judgmental of others and came to understand the situations which would trigger these behaviors. He improved his ability to face and manage conflict, specifically in high stakes situations where there were strong differences of opinion and emotions ran high.

The Result: He built stronger relationships, managed board conflict better and received a new round of investment that enabled him to take the company to the next phase of growth.

Can any leader have all the leadership strengths they desire? No, the key is to fully utilize current strengths and develop those needing growth. In some cases, there may be neither the time nor the ability to develop all the leadership strengths and knowledge required. A very practical solution can be building or using team strengths to compensate for leadership limitations. Another practical solution, as illustrated in Case 3, is to change the individual’s responsibilities or restructure to align their strengths with the organization’s needs.

Case 3 - Aligning Strengths with Business Needs

The Challenge: A highly valued scientist and technical manager was promoted to director and became a member of the executive staff. He was not participating in strategic discussions, even though his boss felt he had the knowledge to competently do so. He was also seen as so respectful and caring of others that it interfered with his ability to achieve performance objectives

The Solution: The organization gave him an opportunity to develop his leadership capabilities. Assessments showed he was highly introverted and that he had difficulty holding people accountable. Persuasion was a critical behavior that he also needed to build. Interestingly, he felt that his scientific credibility had suffered during the five years he had spent as a manager and that this negatively affected his ability to use persuasion effectively, particularly with his direct reports. His boss did not see this as an issue.

Both he and his boss filled out a “role expectations questionnaire” that indicated which leadership behaviors were critical to success in his new role. Results showed that the scientist placed a higher value on asking others for their opinions than on his own independent decision making. In contrast, his boss felt the scientist should rely on his own expertise in order to shorten the decision-making process.

The Results: Through coaching the scientist was able to improve his leadership behaviors and made major progress in meeting project deadlines. He also gained a greater sense of confidence and learned to constructively challenge his boss in making product research portfolio decisions. However, he soon came to the conclusion that his improvement curve was insufficient. Through a series of discussions he was promoted to the individual contributor position of Distinguished Scientist. The leadership development process was successful in that it led the scientist to a position that was a perfect fit for his strengths and helped the organization meet its short and long term research strategy development needs.

The goal is for a leader to become the best they can be. In the case of changing an ineffective behavior, the change process involves four major steps, as indicated below.

| <i>Step</i> | <i>Awareness Level</i> | <i>Performance Level</i> |
|-------------|------------------------|--|
| 1 | Unconscious | Incompetent (your blind spot) |
| 2 | Conscious | Incompetent (developmental opportunity and challenges) |
| 3 | Conscious | Competent (mastery) |
| 4 | Unconscious | Competent (effortless mastery) |

In Step 1, behaviors that need to be changed are identified. In Step 2, as we work on changing these behaviors, we look back at an interaction and still see the ineffective behavior. As we

progress through this stage, we actually begin to catch ourselves exhibiting the very behavior we vowed to change. In the final phase of Step 2, we begin to recognize problematic situations in advance and prepare for them, preparing to apply the new behaviors we have learned. In other words, we adopt the right frame of mind and anticipate using the new behavior before we get into the situation. In Step 3, we are conscious of using the new behavior. Finally in Step 4, the new behavior is so ingrained we are not even aware we are using it effectively.

A key to gaining the confidence to try a new behavior is to first practice with a trusted colleague or coach. Then plan to use the new behavior in a specific upcoming situation and debrief afterwards. What were the results and what do you need to improve the next time you encounter a similar situation?

As you change your leadership behavior, it can be unsettling for others you interact with. They are often concerned about how you will judge their leadership capabilities and how it will impact your mutual working relationship. Indeed, you may begin to see them in a new light. Be assured that in time they will become comfortable with your new behavior and see it as authentic. Furthermore, many leaders need to improve the leadership capability of the people who report to them. By actively working to strengthen their own leadership skills, they will be setting an example that will inspire their direct reports to do the same.

In my career as a leadership coach, I have seen this process (self-assessment, develop action plans, practice, fail and try again) work successfully to enhance growth in leadership skills and behaviors. These changes often enrich both the personal and professional lives of those leaders who have committed to change. The work is not easy but it is worth it.

The enemy of becoming a great leader is being a good leader. The enemy of becoming a great company is being a good company. Great companies are made up of great leaders. A great leader believes we are never finished, that we never “fully arrive.” To live is to change. To have changed often is to truly live. As my father and his family, who truly showed great leadership by immigrating to this great country, would say, “Buon Viaggio e Buona Fortuna!” I wish you a good journey and good fortune!

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