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by Kerry A. Bunker and Michael Wakefield

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The Balance Needed to Lead Change

by Kerry A. Bunker and Michael Wakefield

One reason leading change is so difficult is the tension it sets up between managing *business* issues (creating a vision, aligning resources, restructuring the organization) and managing *people* issues (the legitimate concerns and feelings of those who must carry out the change and deal with its ramifications day-to-day).

Most managers are adept at the business side of leading change. They are trained to deal with structural and operational issues, and they are evaluated on and rewarded for their ability to innovate and to deliver business results.

But the pressures generated by major structural or operational change compel leaders to pay particular attention to what's happening on the human side of the organization. And it is here that many leaders fall short. The result? A destabilized organizational culture, an erosion of trust, insufficient buy-in, and fear and skepticism among employees at a time when a loyal, productive, and enthusiastic workforce is essential for success.

So how do leaders address the people side of change without jeopardizing the business side? How can they make tough decisions without losing sight of the emotions and concerns of employees at all levels of the organization? At the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), we've found that the answer lies in building trust through authenticity.

When leaders focus on establishing trust, they are better able to deal with both the business and the human elements of change. They find they can be both tough decision makers and empathetic people managers—committed to the plan, yet understanding of the discomfort it might cause. They become agile and resilient, able to rise to the challenges of innovation and change.

STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE

To create and sustain an environment of trust during change, leaders must strike a balance between these six pairs of opposites:

Balance #1: Catalyze change/Cope with transition.

Catalyzing change involves the ability to manage an initiative, generate buy-in, and maintain momentum. Coping with transition means recognizing and addressing people's feelings and opinions about the change and its possible fallout. Leaders who are adept at both create

- **Leading change requires striking a balance between six pairs of opposites**
- **One pull is toward business concerns: aligning resources and restructuring. The other is toward people concerns: helping employees cope with change**
- **Building trust enables leaders to make tough decisions while keeping employees engaged and productive**

a climate in which people can work together, even in difficult times. They embrace the vision of change and can communicate that vision with enthusiasm and energy.

At the same time, they give themselves and others permission to express doubt or anxiety. Trust and commitment reach a higher level, and the change initiative gains momentum as people work through the process.

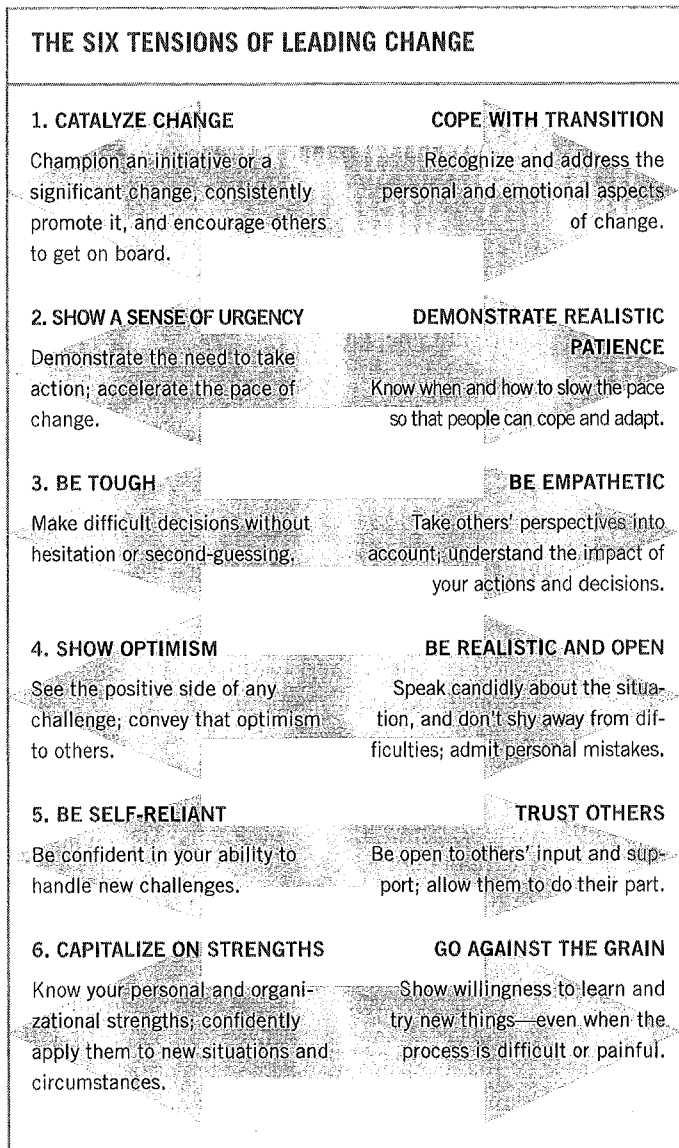
Balance #2: Show a sense of urgency/Demonstrate realistic patience.

One of the most critical tasks for leaders of change is communicating a sense of urgency. A sense of urgency keeps positive energy flowing and increases productivity.

Patience, however, is just as important. Realistic patience involves knowing when and how to slow the pace so that people can adapt. A lack of patience with people can undermine their commitment and impede the change process. Balanced leaders don't panic, overreact, or make everything equally important. They make a conscious effort to provide support and guidance when it's needed. They recognize that people adapt to change in different ways. Some may require additional training or time to meet new expectations; others may need a forum to air their gripes. Realistic patience also means giving consistent, honest feedback. People need to know what they're doing well and what they can do differently.

Balance #3: Be tough/Be empathetic.

Being tough involves facing challenges head on, being decisive, and taking a firm stand in the face of resistance. Being empathetic means understanding and being sensitive to the feelings and experiences of others.



Empathetic leaders are able to put themselves in other people's shoes, consider individual limitations, and value people as much as results. They know that a lack of empathy can corrode morale and motivation.

These two competencies are among the most difficult for leaders to balance. Many leaders have been taught to shut down their emotional responses in order to make difficult decisions. They worry that letting their "soft side" show will communicate weakness or lack of commitment. But connecting emotionally actually creates the opposite effect in times of significant change or crisis. People want to know that their leaders can be tough and decisive, but they want them to be human, too.

Balance #4: Show optimism/Be realistic and open.

Leaders play a crucial role in maintaining optimism about major change. They need to see its positive effects and convey that vision to others. When people are stressed by change, they look to their leaders for energy and confidence. Optimistic leaders are genuinely committed to the change at hand, and their optimism is contagious.

But balanced leaders are not blindly optimistic. Their optimism is balanced with realism and openness. They can clearly read a situation for what it is. They don't sugarcoat the facts, and they can admit their mistakes. Balanced leaders ask the hard questions, deliver the news (both good and bad), and draw attention to challenges and struggles. A balance of optimism and realism generates trust.

Balance #5: Be self-reliant/Trust others.

Leaders who are self-reliant have confidence in their own skills and abilities. They are accustomed to working independently and often pride themselves on "going it alone." Trusting others means allowing them to do their part of a task or project without interference or overmanagement. In situations of complex change, it is critical for leaders to trust others to bring their own perspectives and expertise to the table.

Many leaders find this pair of competencies very hard to balance. The myth of the heroic leader who remains strong, courageous, and self-reliant in the face of extraordinary challenges is a deeply ingrained one. In reality,

leaders are more likely to rise to new heights when they confront complexity with a strong team of allies. Whatever the challenge, a collaborative approach yields insight, innovation, and action that even the most talented individual cannot generate alone.

Balance #6: Capitalize on strengths/Go against the grain.

In times of crisis, leaders have a tendency to draw on the traits and abilities that led to their success in the past. But overreliance on past behaviors can cement leaders into strategies that no longer work, and the failure to recognize conditions that demand a new approach can

Leading Change *continued*

be disastrous. On an individual level, failure to adapt is the main reason leaders derail. Leaders must have the ability to leave their comfort zone and challenge preferred patterns—in essence, to go against the grain.

To balance their innate strengths with new skills, leaders must first assess their strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and default behaviors. In CCL programs, they do this through a combination of 360-degree assessments, feedback, and coaching. Direct and honest feedback from bosses, colleagues, and direct reports can also provide leaders with a clear picture of their own performance and behavior.

Such awareness allows leaders to identify their strengths, shore up their weaknesses, and practice different behaviors. Self-awareness also allows leaders to leverage the diverse talents, experiences, and opinions of others, eliminating tunnel vision and groupthink.

THE PARADOX OF LEADERSHIP

Leading change requires managing the constant tension between business-driven and people-focused priorities. Circumstances will sometimes demand that leaders play harder on the business side. But when they have built a strong foundation of trust, those who follow are more likely to do so in a spirit of cooperation and teamwork.

It's not possible to be perfectly in balance all the time. But wise leaders recognize that it's an ideal worth striving for. ♦

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