

The Qualities of Leadership: Leading a “Readiness for Change” Culture

What defines leadership? Executives ask this question every time they choose a new leader or train their current leaders.

In order to be truly effective, there are five critical qualities that a leader must have. A leader must be a Visionary; A leader must be a person of Integrity and Honesty and have Values; A leader must know how to properly motivate others; and A leader must be able to lead change and finally, A leader must be able to lead a culture of change.

While each role is unique, they are also interdependent. In this series of articles, we will explore these leadership roles-what they are and how to hone your skills for each role.

A “Readiness for Change” Culture

Imagine an environment where people didn’t fear change but instead embraced the progress enabled by the change? What if the first reaction to a change initiative was not resistance, but instead a curiosity about the new possibilities before us?



“Emergent change” comes from establishing just such a “readiness for change” culture. Organizations are becoming increasingly interested in learning how to create a

“readiness for change” culture that goes beyond a specific change implementation project. These organizations strive over time to create an environment that is not only ready for change, but also accepts it and thrives in it.

The question then becomes, what are those necessary conditions for this “readiness for change” culture?

Four Characteristics of a “Readiness for Change” Culture

In order for change to “emerge” naturally in an organization, leadership must figure out how to put in place four specific cultural elements. Once these elements are in place, the more likely it will be for change to emerge easily on its own and the less likely there will be substantial resistance to the change.

There are four cultural elements that must be installed in order to create a “readiness for change” organization. These are:

1. A workforce that is business literate
2. A workforce that has permission to act
3. A workforce that will challenge the status quo
4. Leadership that encourages a “readiness for change” culture

We briefly discuss each of these cultural conditions below.

Team Members who are Business Literate

A business literate workforce is defined as one that understands both the strategic context of

the organization and the personal impact they can have on critical business outcomes.

Ensuring that the team understands the strategic context of their work is a critical leadership task in creating a “readiness for change” culture. Employees who understand what their department and organization as a whole are trying to accomplish are better able to interpret the need for a specific change and accept change that’s been thrust upon them. When they can see the organizational “big picture,” they are better equipped to make the right decisions and offer relevant ideas.

The second aspect of “business literacy” is efficacy. That is, do employees understand the impact their specific job has on the critical goals of their department and organization as a whole and do they see the link between their job performance and the organization’s overall success?

If they are able to understand how a change in their day-to-day activities might affect the organization as a whole as well as the linkage between their job performance and the subsequent performance metrics of the organization, they will be more likely to know precisely what action they must take to have a positive impact.

Team Members that Have Permission to Act

In order for team members to initiate change for improvement on their own, they must be allowed to do so. Employees should feel they have permission to make the day-to-day decisions necessary to meet departmental and organizational objectives. Team members are more likely to suggest change and feel responsible for carrying out the change if they know they have the authority to make changes. Further, changes will be more rapid if employees have the necessary autonomy, and thus, don’t have to wait for permission to act.



A critical leadership skill is learning how to install boundaries and to encourage freedom to act within those boundaries. Leaders throughout the organization must learn how to set goals, communicate boundaries, and then “let go.” The more specific and understandable the boundaries are, the better. For example, a leader might tell the facilities team that they can make changes to their service schedule, as long as 1) every service is completed within the designated timeframe, 2) they communicate any changes that will affect staff members, and 3) there is no increase in labor costs. When “empowered” in this way, employees are more likely to take ownership of decisions and to become more committed to the resulting course of action.

Team Members Who Will Challenge the Status Quo

If team members feel their ideas are listened to in an accepting, open environment, they are more likely to recommend creative “out-of-the-box” solutions. In an “emergent change” culture, employees must feel comfortable offering ideas that may run counter to the usual manner in which things are done. If leaders allow such “constructive disagreements,” then the workforce will become more creative and be more likely to embrace change.

Role of the Leader in Creating a “Readiness for Change” Culture

The role of the leader in creating this type of culture is to initiate and reinforce the three ingredients described above.

This can be a challenging process but we have seen leadership groups succeed at creating a “Readiness for Change” Culture by going through each element and determining asking the following questions:

- Does my workforce understand the organization’s “Big Picture”? If not how can I change that?
- Does my workforce understand their role in the organization’s success?
- Does my workforce feel empowering to make day-to-day decisions?
- What boundaries on decision making will leadership be comfortable with?
- What measures have to be put in to place in order to monitor success?
- What possible training do my employees need?
- What information does my workforce need to make these?
- Are employees approaching with new ideas?
- Are new ideas well received by leadership?

By going through this planning process, and answering these questions, many leaders are able to get more comfortable with process of creating an environment where team members feel inspired to act.

Final Thought

If no one on your staff has come to you with challenges to ideas or the status quo, this may signify that they aren’t comfortable discussing these issues with you. If you are unaware how your employees feel about expressing their opinions and ideas, voicing concerns, and

challenging your thoughts, then ASK. What you find out may surprise you.

Mark Twain was right: people want progress, but not change and one of the most difficult challenges campus leaders face is managing a change initiative.

Establishing a “readiness for change” culture will make your job easier. A “readiness for change” culture means everyone in your organization will not only be more likely to accept change, but also more likely to welcome it and flourish under the changing conditions. While this culture cannot be established overnight, in time and with the proper leadership in place, your organization could experience a vastly dramatic cultural transformation.