

## Blueprints for Successful Cultural Leadership

*Expert leaders provide hope, deepen relationships, and work toward bringing people together.*

By [Robert Pater](#) | Sep 01, 2015

What are the schematics for successful leadership? We are frequently asked to boil down what strong leadership can do to elevate cultural improvements. There are two critical strategic and often overlooked actions best leaders can actually affect in order to boost real organizational changes in Safety and overall performance:

### **1. Enhance the Communications and Feedback Systems**

Best leaders consciously control their messaging. They primarily focus on how they've propelled, protected—as well as impeded—the organization's progress towards highest-level Safety culture. And then what they can practically do to progress this in even small ways. They ask themselves, "What messages am I *really* sending?" As organizational guru Edgar Schein contended, "the bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the culture in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them." Because they understand that what they don't see runs them, superior leaders open up their perceptual intake valve by enlisting courageously honest people for feedback. While this may be uncomfortable, they know it's better to figure out weaknesses in private than parade them in public, unaware, for everyone else to see.

Simultaneously, they help others honestly raise their self-perception. They share the tools they personally use. Many people don't see themselves accurately, either overinflating or undervaluing their strengths, or don't see their own weaknesses realistically (overdwelling or underestimating).

They connect people to their best selves. Knowing that each person has core desires, best leaders help others become consciously aware of what they want out of this world and what they can uniquely contribute. For example, one way to

accomplish this is by asking, "Which new things or experiences are interesting to you in this organizational change period?" "What would you like to do that you've never done before?" They then creatively determine ways to synchronize organizational needs with individual worker objectives. At times, this may result in leaders honestly conveying "We don't have here what you're looking for," setting up an atmosphere where no one loses face when someone leaves for a better-fitting job. This "employment ergonomics" approach is critical to sustaining highest-level performance, engagement, and loyalty, as well as retaining the right people in the right positions in the right organization.

Further, leaders consciously create feedback channels that connect and help people focus on what matters for moving toward higher-level performance.

Cultural change entails venturing into uncharted terrain. Because change always creates vulnerabilities, leaders help people embrace uncertainty, become more comfortable with being uncomfortable. Credibility is founded on the leader's willingness to not have to prop up a false image as being all-knowing, so best leaders admit what's still unknown in the change process—even and especially if it makes the leader look imperfect.

Communications have to be upped significantly, even to the point of uncomfortableness. Start with the known issues blocking implementation, admitting what's obvious to all by taking personal accountability ("We don't have this all figured out"). Then being honest about what is *not* going to change, especially with unpopular processes and procedures that others want to go away.

In essence, cultural leaders help others become more "intentional," to realize they are making choices rather than blaming others for what happens *and* doesn't happen to them. They help people focus on what they can do with current resources to move to next levels.

## **2. Focus on Tuning the Informal Networks for Change**

Expert leaders provide hope, deepen relationships, and work toward bringing people together. Numerous studies (Zohar, Cooper and Marshall, others) corroborate the critical role of social support (manager-worker, supervisor-worker and worker-worker) in reducing dysfunctional and distracting work stress toward building stronger safety and organizational culture. When stressed by change, many default to shutting down critical communications and resisting any change. Help them become more connected with themselves (their physical body, mental blockages/resistance), work environment and peers (change can be isolating), and with the company's sense of purpose. Also remind them that they're not being targeted; change is happening everywhere. High-performance leaders honestly

discuss what each individual can get out of the cultural changes, learnings they can apply to improve their personal life. Above all, they remind people, "We're not alone—we're in this together."

Leaders can best initially select and get aboard those critical employee and management people that others respect and respond to. They don't expect, or wait for, even close to 100 percent buy-in to take next steps in a change process. For perspective, those planning a financial corporate takeover often need to influence only 30 percent of shares; the critical mass required for rut-shrugging organizational change can sometimes be even lower—as long as long as leaders have the right opinion-formers aboard. It also helps to arrange for key logistics support and encouragement (then exceed what's pledged).

Leadership adepts enhance the informal systems for developing and supporting change agents within their company, especially those on a grassroots level. They encourage change agents to support each other first while simultaneously incorporating strong mentorship systems for selected change agents so they can do the same, in turn, for peers, to help them see how they'll be part of the new cultural shift.

Best leaders emphasize what can be gained rather than lost by change (while still honestly acknowledging the latter). They don't allow fear and negativity to dominate. They move forward, rather than "playing not to lose," because "prevent defense" works no better in cultural change than it does in American/Canadian football.

Above all, they maintain flexibility in handling ambiguous situations. There will always be more "unknowns" than "knowns" in a process of cultural change. As Will Rogers reminded, "Planning gets you into things, hard work gets you out of them." Culture change is hard work but worthwhile. And, above all, highly accomplishable.

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