Forward Pressure for Courageous Leadership

People are typically uncomfortable with change. That's why making things happen entails dealing with others' fears.

By Robert Pater | Feb 01, 2016

If you truly hunger for game-changing Safety, I can absolutely tell you that real, eye-popping change is possible. Caveat: This has to be spearheaded by leaders passionate about and skilled in making things happen. These are the people I admire most, those who have braved significant uphill battles, entrenched negativity, and inertia in order to help make life and Safety better for others.

Among the slew of attributes that fit into a strong leadership mix, two critical ones are dissatisfaction and courage. Compounded together in the right proportions, these can drive innovation and surprising successes.

Rather than living off past laurels, high-level leaders are dissatisfied with the status quo, perpetually looking for ways to make things better. Dr. Robert Jarvik, inventor of the artificial heart, contended, "Leaders are visionaries with a poorly developed sense of fear and no concept of the odds against them." While that describes some change leaders, others discern potential resistances and other obstacles standing in the way of change but still draw on the confidence that strong preparation and right strategy can erode or even overcome these blockages. Some may be impatient, others discontented with rounds of internal runarounds that preclude needed changes getting done. We've seen some courageous leaders break through corporate barriers of "we can't do that!" They assume some risk to make Safety change happen—several leaders spring to mind—different from others who are more reflexively "cautious" or resistive.

I'm not suggesting that professionals devolve into a throw-caution-to-the-wind approach, becoming so wild or confrontational that they alienate potential allies. But in order to lead, they must get ahead of, not be pulled down by, "the crowd." And while noting and maintaining what's working is also important, there's a balance.

Too commonly, some leaders don't see that long-in-place, seemingly "tried-and-true" approaches have deteriorated into "tried-and-*tired*" diminishing results. There are pressures in many companies for professionals to "mind their place." This can be especially true in Safety, Legal, Purchasing, and Human Resources, all of which can be highly concerned with recognizing and averting risks. So consider, it's easy for those in these fields to gravitate toward being over-cautious and static.

Of course, reduced to an extreme, companies can drastically shrivel Safety and legal risks by firing all employees, not manufacturing or providing any product or service. After all, some fear, just as every step walked has potential of a slip or trip, any action taken can backfire and put the company and that professional in jeopardy. But this, of course, is not the only alternative and certainly not what I recommend. Actually, Safety can alternately be seen more proactively, as living and working to a high level, getting things done that are important to a person as safely as possible.

Don't settle for half-hearted performance. You've likely heard the expression, "Fortune favors the bold." Change is inseparable from any improvement; it entails letting go of some older ways of doing things, replacing these with better methods. Yet it's impossible to let go while simultaneously clutching on, and loosening a tight grip is also critical for spurring engagement and for successful delegation. My colleague Ron Bowles says, "If you keep the keys to a car in your pocket, no one else will actually be able to drive it."

Best leaders distinguish how much to hunker down, protecting and preserving select existing organizational elements vs. how much to press for change. Of course, it takes energy to resist the pull of the past. Like advanced internal martial artists, powerful leaders can learn to employ "forward pressure." That is, propelling the right amount of continuous expectation and force for moving ahead, but only up to the extent that others don't pull away. It's an artful balance, requiring mindful monitoring; rushing people toward disengaging doesn't foster positive change.

How to make things happen?

- *Make fear an ally and advisor, not your commander.* Remind yourself it's OK and desirable to be comfortable with the discomfort of change.
- *Change viewpoint.* Superior leaders are architects of change. "Superstar" architect Bjarke Ingels said, "Sometimes the Eureka moment is actually when you give up a stance and say, OK, we have to try something else."
- *Relentlessly seek out what isn't working.* This includes "solving" longstanding injury sources that never seem to improve. (For many companies, slips/trips/falls head this list.)
- *Unearth pockets of dissatisfaction* in Safety policies, procedures, training, and equipment, rather than waiting for this to come to you, then look for opportunities to make changes that will make

these dissatisfied workers into potential allies. An "open door policy" isn't enough: As part of revealing current dysfunction, root out current mixed messages.

- *Bite off less—pilot possible changes*. Focus on small changes that make large differences, laying the foundation for more widespread improvements.
- *Do something soon to make a difference*. Don't wait for any "final answer" or "total cure."
- *Use successes as a platform to take even more leadership "risks*."
- *Provide prompt progress reports on what changes are being tried*.
- *Transform setbacks or mixed results into recalibrated interventions*. Don't allow yourself to fall into a "We've done the best we can. I guess things really can't get that much better here" mindset. Worst of all, don't accuse others of complacency when leaders are actually setting this tone. This defeatist thinking rationalizes inertia and often backfires into worker disengagement.

People are typically uncomfortable with change. That's why making things happen entails dealing with others' fears. But it ultimately means not accepting any problem as unsolvable and never being satisfied with mediocre results, despite pressures to do so. Courage combines the willingness to let go of old methods, the energy to sincerely consider new ideas, and the strength to take considered risks for implementing real change.

About the Author

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