

Initiating Change

—THE LEADER'S BIGGEST CHALLENGE



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Leadership is about looking to the future, almost with the uncanny ability to look around corners and see what is there. Effective leaders are mapping out the future and most of the mapping has to do with making organizational changes, strategic decisions about the business that will ensure an exciting future. Leaders inside organizations have a challenge, however, and that is convincing the stakeholders that change is good for them and the association.

Let's face it. Most human beings become comfortable in their environment and the natural inclination is to resist changing that comfort level. That is where leadership comes into play. It is about marshalling the emotional courage to convince all that change is good for the organization and that change will be good for them as well. Undoubtedly, the latter is the harder part, as all of us react differently to change.

Among the reasons many resist change are:

- **Fear of the future.** This provokes many emotions, most commonly anxiety. It is okay to be anxious, but as I always say, "This too shall pass."
- **Fear that we might fail.** Not an uncommon feeling when we are stepping off into uncharted waters.
- **Dissension and disagreement.** Stakeholders often have different viewpoints.
- **Loss.** All change creates loss, and all loss needs to be mourned. In this sense, some members may be losing power and influence and therefore resist any movement for change.
- **Trust.** If the stakeholders don't trust the leader, then there will be tremendous resistance to the change.

What steps can we take as leaders to initiate change that will cut down the anxiety and effectively begin change in a way that the organization will be able to absorb? Every leader needs to look out over the landscape and assess how he or she can best achieve the change. Of course, when push comes to shove, driving it down the organization's throat may work, but I would argue only in unusual circumstances.

Think about it. Change can be minor or major in scope. It can involve the entire organization or just a part of it. Change may be relatively easy (in terms of time) or it might be a multi-year project. Each of these assessments will require different strategies for initiating the change.

Change is such an illusive word in that it means so many things to so many different people. It does cover strategy, structure, people, systems, and culture, et al. Planning for change is as important as deciding and initiating the change. At the end of the day, all organizations want to move to a better state of affairs, as opposed to a worse state of affairs.

Leaders, take note:

- Assess the degree of difficulty.
- Plan carefully for implementing change. Assess the speed at which the organization can absorb change. Going too fast can be more painful than the change itself.
- Determine whether this is top down change or bottom up change. From experience, most change comes from the top, but turning it around and getting the bottom part of the organization to take a leadership role in effecting change goes a long way in having the change initiated successfully.

Like most business initiatives, change usually takes longer, costs more to implement, and often planned goals are less than what was imagined. That is not a reason to give up. Just adjust your expectations and forge ahead. ★

Now ask yourself...

“Am I a leader?”