



Standing in the Fire

BY DANIEL HOLDEN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We are all subject to work's tough transitions. And while textbook change management tactics can help show us the external actions we must take to guide organizational change, there are internal demands that we cannot simply delegate away. Learn the secrets of cultivating your own resourcefulness and power in the midst of difficult change.

When it comes to handling tough transitions, we all know people who fall into one of two camps. We know people who have somehow emerged stronger, more whole, more resilient through their hardship. They appear grounded, unflappable, humble, and quietly confident that no matter what happens, they will be able to summon the resources necessary to handle anything that life throws their way.

There are others who are just the opposite. Even though they may be successful, this second group seems cautious and fearful, brittle and constantly vigilant over the next threat they will need to confront. They've come through tough times in a more weakened stance, unsure of their ability to land on their feet should tough change come again.

This article is for those who want to learn the secrets of cultivating their own resourcefulness and genuine power in the midst of difficult change.

Despite the deluge of books and articles on change, we're often surprised by change when it happens to us and overwhelmed at least temporarily by the intellectual and emotional demands it places on us. We may think we are prepared, but sooner or later we discover there are variables we did not anticipate. Significant organizational change is like building an airplane in flight — the world does not stop because we have to re-organize, develop new information technology approaches, downsize, or re-engineer customer services. The marketplace does not care whether we off-shore, build a more diverse work force, increase our R&D ratio, or take a year to disseminate our new business model throughout our far-flung field operations. The world keeps flying on, changing and making unending demands on our capacity to respond.

The dual journey: You are the organization

Organizations cannot move beyond the point where leaders themselves have ventured. Change often confronts us with demands for behavioral shifts that we cannot simply delegate away. Even the most well-engineered change initiative carries with it a personal requirement for our own learning. Change is not a rational process only; sometimes it's irrational and surprisingly emotional. When old behavior and old strategies no longer work, the impact can be unsettling. If we open ourselves to learning, we and our organization can prosper. Tom was an engineering executive with a defense contractor. His manufacturing plants have historically been run in a top-down control, bottom-up dependency style. A firm chain of command required people to manage their own areas and ignore what

was happening in other departments. Budgeting, finance, and human capital systems often pitted one department against another in a competitive race for diminishing resources. Interdepartmental change required a level of teamwork and collaboration that the organization — and, more important, its leaders — had not grown into yet. Change efforts often failed to deliver the promised results needed to remain competitive. Post-project evaluation meetings were nothing more than blame sessions, with each group pointing the finger at other groups. Little did they know they were in a sinking ship and arguing over whose side of the boat the hole was on.

Tom knew he had to learn how to let go of control and involve others, but the thought terrified him. His career, his identity as a leader, his reputation as a hands-on manager had been built around the principle of control. But the frequency and rate of change were unlike anything he had experienced before. The more control he attempted to exert, the worse things became. The best he got was grudging compliance; he needed enthusiastic support. Tom brought in a series of leadership workshops that would focus leaders and their teams on recognizing the need for change, to understand that change began with them and that control and dependency would have to yield to skills necessary for building business partnerships across the organization. These new skills would include trust building, dialogue, performance feedback, shared vision, and alignment.

Even though Tom knew this was the right direction, the learning and real-time practice were hard. His team became his teacher, offering him feedback when his control demands were excessive. At first, it was hard to hear the news (and hard for his subordinates to give it). A good sense of humor and a little humility helped

them all know they were in the same learning boat. After 18 months, a very different, more focused and aligned culture began to emerge.

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Leaders often underestimate the behavioral requirements change makes on them. Executive briefings take the place of substantive training, and subordinates are left to figure out ways to circumvent executives who demand that change projects proceed on schedule even while they sabotage the initiatives by continuing to behave in old ways. High control leaders easily unravel team development and interdepartmental collaboration initiatives this way. Executives with unconscious racial or gender biases can compromise efforts to create understanding on diverse engineering teams by continuing to promote only white men. Leaders who are overly concerned with kingdom building and the next promotion make change projects difficult for everyone by insisting that every obstacle means something potentially bad about them instead of simply focusing on the task at hand and moving forward.

The dual journey means that strategic change needs to be joined by a corresponding commitment to personal change in leaders up and down the hierarchy, beginning with those at the top. When we see our own learning as integral to the change effort, we become the real learning experts others need to guide them through the ambiguity of tough transitions.

Inner and outer worlds of change

Change always comes in twos. There is the outer change, which we are paid to manage, and the inner emotional world of change we would like to ignore. Both require our attention and skill. The outer world is the external interface: metrics, measurements, forecasts, performance objectives, schedules, timetables, and accountabilities. This is where our leadership focus typically goes. The inner world contains

our assumptions, judgments, feelings, fears, and hopes. The critical stamina, endurance, and resilience we need to fuel our change efforts are embedded in the inner world and often go unrecognized and therefore untapped.

Kevin is a retired military officer with a long career in information technology. After his retirement, he took a senior-level position with a manufacturing organization to begin building his resumé for what he hoped would be a long, second career in private industry. One year into this position, the company filed for bankruptcy. He was downsized but was offered another position in a successful company 1,000 miles away. His wife did

two years, and then three years had passed. Kevin and his wife found a way to make this work, and even though it was not ideal, it at least gave him the illusion of comfort he sought as a means of building a safe and satisfying future. Something was shifting within, however, that concerned Kevin. When he came to my office for executive coaching, his complaint was he had lost his competitive edge and drive for results. This was embarrassing to Kevin, a man who had seen a war, overseas duty in several assignments, and significant advancement over a long and successful career. The sudden vulnerability was new and troubling. He sensed a threat to his

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the emotional demands of change. Layoffs, mergers, collaboration with former enemies (customers, vendors, other departments, superiors, union members, etc.), downsizing, re-engineering, work redesign, changes to the business model — each carries with it an emotional component. We don't need to sit around a campfire and talk about feelings. What we have to do is understand that emotions are part of organizational reality and, therefore, part of our leadership. We have to build capacity to work with emotions, beginning with our own. Here are some quick tips to remember:

- Fear often shows up disguised as anger or frustration.
- Grief often follows perceived loss. It can look like anxiety, hyperactivity, loss of focus, melancholy, indifference, or anger.
- The higher in the organization, the greater the optimism; the lower you go, the more hopelessness there is. The more racial and gender diversity in an organization, the more variation you will see in emotional climate. All perspectives are valid and need to be given voice.
- You don't have to act emotional to express emotions. Learn how to say, "I'm upset with the status of this work" without standing on top of the desk and yelling.
- When someone expresses an emotion other than the "approved" ones (for example, anger, impatience, or frustration) or cries, you don't have to do anything, fix anything, or even give advice. You simply have to listen. Listening well is like any other discipline of study: It takes learning and practice to become competent at it.
- Emotions help calibrate how important something is to us. This is useful information to know if you're a leader trying to motivate and inspire others to great things.

Practice asking people how they're doing. Better yet, begin by letting

Older workers more open to change

Stereotypes about older workers resisting change may prevent companies from benefiting from their knowledge and experience, according to a Louisiana State University professor of psychology.

When the state of Pennsylvania upgraded its computer systems three years ago, Tracey Rizzuto, Ph.D., wondered how older workers would fare in adapting to the new technology.

Contrary to common belief, Rizzuto found that older workers exhibited more willingness to learn the new technology than their younger counterparts.

"Older workers are more inclined and interested in making changes to benefit the organization than younger workers," she said.

While some research shows older workers may not be as quick in learning new technology skills as younger people, Rizzuto concluded that the commitment and willingness to learn is stronger among older workers. And because older workers are more likely to stay with a company than change careers as their younger counterparts are prone to do, investing in specialized training programs for older workers is a good investment.

not want to move, so they decided he would take this position for about a year so he could continue to build a post-military resumé. During this year, he would make frequent trips back home. Soon after taking this job, Kevin's mother passed away suddenly with a heart attack. Four months later, his father died following complications from pneumonia. Kevin took care of all the necessary funeral arrangements as well as settling the estate matters. Life and career had to go on.

Always priding himself on his work ethic, Kevin continued to excel in his new position, earning one and then another promotion. One year became

career he had not seen coming.

I listened to his story and then recounted for him the amount of change he had experienced over the past four years. I then asked him one question: "You've been through a lot of loss. What exactly have you done with your grief?" Kevin looked down and slowly wept. When he composed himself, he looked at me and simply touched his heart, as if to say, My grief has been tucked away here. I told him directly: "When you find your grief, you'll find your original passion for achievement just behind it." And he did.

Leaders frequently fail to consider

others know how you're doing when things are tough. More than anything, communicating our emotional depth in a calm way lets others know we're human and real. This matters. Reflect on significant transitions you have successfully navigated. In the toughest part, what were you feeling? For many of us, the answers would be anger, frustration, overwhelmed, disoriented, alone, scared, or confused. Change can be very emotional, and leaders who grow stronger during tough times and make a difference find simple, straightforward ways of inquiring about the inner reactions of themselves and others.

- "It's tough seeing Tim and the others go. They've been with us a long time and I'm sad to think they won't be with us going forward."
- "The two cultures of our merged organization are different. I find myself wanting naturally to spend time with those I'm familiar with, but I realize this natural tendency doesn't serve the new organization going forward. Let's watch our tendency to reach out only to old friends."
- "How are you doing? How are you handling the amount of change being thrown at you?"
- "What have you noticed in yourself as we move into this transition?"

If we've made a living dealing with the rational (external) side of change, even contemplating wading into these (internal) emotional waters can seem upsetting. The fear is that we will cause the very disruption we're attempting to ameliorate. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, doing or saying nothing (and only focusing on the tasks at hand) when your team is upset can lead to these unacknowledged emotions building and spilling out in inappropriate ways.

When tension serves us

I met a great teacher several years ago who taught me precisely how to culti-

vate and use the right kind of tension to move through times of turbulent change. His name was Stephen, and he was a 21-year-old machinist in an aftermarket automobile transmission plant in the Midwest. This plant had seen its share of tough times and had barely survived being closed by its parent company. It had seen five plant managers come and go over a three-year period and had suffered the loss of nearly 30 percent of its work force, including two members of Stephen's family. I was there to meet the new plant manager, who had brought in an empowering style of management to a place that had been run like a military boot camp for 50 years.

The plant manager was delayed and asked Stephen to take me on a tour of the plant. We stopped at a number of workstations, each involved with a different part of the business. I was genuinely shocked to hear Stephen describe — in detail — the challenges and objectives each aspect of the business faced. He knew the vision and current challenges of each area in startling detail.

"We're going to keep this plant operating in this town. That's what we're trying to do. We've lost some good people and maybe one day we'll bring them back. Maybe not. What matters is that we become competitive. Everyone knows this is the game we must win, and to do this we each have to act like this is our business. You can call it empowerment; I call it taking responsibility as if this were my business because it is. We've got to reduce our shipping costs by another 3 percent to even be in the same ballpark with our competitors. In production, we have to get product out the door four and a half cents cheaper than we do today with no compromise on quality. Our scrap costs need to fall another 5 percent, and we haven't met any of our quarterly milestones on scrap this year. There is another meeting this afternoon.

"We've got two new products we're really excited about; the prototypes performed better than expected and we've got customers already asking about them even though we had not planned on making them available until the fourth quarter. We've got challenges and we've taken some hard hits over the past three years, but I really believe we're building something great here. Some of those folks we lost couldn't get it into their heads that times had changed, but those of us who are here believe it. You have to keep your head clear. We've got women doing work only men had done in the past. We've got people of color, where just a few years ago only white people worked here. We've learned to trust and rely on each other in ways we never did before. Our job is to keep this place competitive and open and located in this town. Any thought, any process, any person that doesn't support this is gone. Anything that helps us move forward, we talk about."

I can see Stephen walking me through his plant as clearly now as when it happened. He taught me more clearly than ever that:

- Purpose matters. People want to do something great even if they don't talk about it. Maybe it's time we talked about what we're trying to build and why this matters to us.
- Vision focuses our attention. At each workstation, Stephen reminded me that unless you know specifically what you're trying to do, it is easy to veer off course. Or worse, it is easy to stay busy and do nothing that moves you forward. Can you see and smell and taste what you're trying to achieve?
- There is nothing untouchable in current reality. Everything needs to get scrutinized and discussed. Processes, products, people, and our assumptions about these things are all on the table. In most places this is not the case; only certain aspects

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of current reality are looked at while others are ignored. Underlying attitudes, limiting assumptions we hold about other people and departments, and mistrust between levels of management need to be identified and discussed. I saw in Stephen's plant a furious commitment to look at everything with one question in mind: Does this help or hinder us moving forward? Tough decisions are made clearer following this question.

Learning how to discuss continuously both where we're headed (vision) and where we are now (current reality) can be very unsettling. It leaves us feeling unfinished or unresolved when we are consistently reminded that there is distance between our vision and reality. Yet this creative tension and the energy contained in it can fuel our move forward. Leaders who are successful

leading change consciously cultivate this creative tension by repeatedly talking about where the organization needs to head and then modeling for and teaching people how to look at current reality in a disciplined, candid, and nonpunitive way. Build this into your meeting structure over the next several months. This kind of dialogue requires some learning but is transformative when done well.

Your end game strategy

There are difficult passages we each will make in our lifetime that defy everything we thought we understood about how life works. Important aspects of our lives end with little or no warning. An illness or injury takes the life of someone we care about or causes us serious harm. A job is lost. Someone close suffers from chemical addiction. You know something important ended and you must somehow go on, but the

next step has not yet become clear. You feel lost.

There are two strategies we use when faced with challenges like these. Both have merit but neither is sufficient. The first is to tough it out and trust that by perseverance and will power alone we can prevail. Who would argue that this approach does not get us through many long days and nights when we are at our wit's end? The magazine covers at the bookstore are testimony to those of us who have stories to tell about this strategy.

The second strategy is to resign ourselves to the reality that there is nothing else we can do but move on to other things and in other directions. We simply redirect our energies elsewhere. Again, there is wisdom in knowing when to walk away because it simply makes no sense to pursue a way that is not open to you.

Both strategies require great cour-

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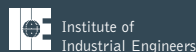
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age and resilience, as well as the need for discernment and patience. They confront us with our own limitations, which we naturally resist. Those who grow stronger from the fire of change, however, often do something very different.

There is a third, more powerful option seldom explored in management periodicals. It has been used by many of those we know who have been deepened and strengthened by the passage through the transforming fire in their lives. These men and women have not grown weaker or more brittle because of life's hardships. Rather, they have come into their own power, resourcefulness, and wisdom through tough times.

The third strategy invites us to stand in the middle of our lives when things fall apart and surrender our experience to the sacred, to our higher power or higher self, or to God, as we understand this term. We are each free to work out our own definition of terms. This option acknowledges that on the other side of our planning and preparation there are forces that we don't control that influence our circumstances.

This strategy has much to recommend it. First, we continue to be fully engaged in the task at hand yet

relatively unattached to its outcomes. The outcomes have been released. Through letting go, our ego investment has also been broken. This action alone can help us stay open to, recognize, and consider actions we might not have seen before. Most important, we sidestep our own arrogance when we acknowledge and invoke forces beyond our own personality and bring them to bear on our lives, our work, our relationships, and on the impact we wish to make with our lives. We don't need a Supreme Court decision. We are not asking our school boards to change their curriculum. There are no sermons to preach, no special pictures to hang, or other artifacts to exhibit. This quiet, invisible transaction takes place where all real change begins and ends — in our hearts and minds.

Karen is executive director of a successful, highly regarded nonprofit agency. Active on both state and national levels, she was shocked when she received notification that her agency was not going to receive a significant grant even though all required standards had been met. Layoffs were imminent, and ripples would be felt in many other agencies with which Karen's was involved. Angry and frightened by the news,

Karen called key benefactors and allies, each of whom gave her the same message: There is nothing you can do; it's happening to all of us.

Karen calmed down and reminded herself of a key choice she had made years earlier — not to live and work in fear. She put down her phone, invited her unseen spiritual resources to come into these troubling circumstances, and went about her work. She remained vigilant. Within 36 hours, she received a call from the governor's office in her state and was told the funding decision was wrong and would not stand. Senior officials of the funding organizations, perhaps under pressure, reversed their decisions and restored all funding.

The strategy behind door number 3 is for those who want to experiment, who want to take a risk because there is a contribution they know they must somehow make with their lives. Regrettably, this option is often taken as a last resort. Some call it a fox-hole strategy because of its use only when all else has failed. It requires that we befriend our helplessness and our defenselessness. The more we learn, however, the more obvious it becomes: we can choose this strategy as early as we want. We need not wait for the bottom to fall out of our life or leadership. ❖

**We sidestep
our own
arrogance
when we
acknowledge
and invoke
forces beyond
our own
personality
and bring
them to bear
on our lives,
our work, our
relationships,
and on the
impact we wish
to make with
our lives.**



"THE ONLY PULL I HAVE AROUND HERE IS GRAVITATIONAL."