

Leadership and Change

Practice Guide



Today, there is little doubt that at some point there will be change and uncertainty in the organisation where you work.

Leaders are increasingly recognising that people cope with change in many different ways, sometimes with enthusiasm, and sometimes with horror (and anywhere in-between). With such a wide variety of responses to change, most managers and leaders struggle with how to successfully lead the organisation through a change process.

Authors and researchers who study change management frequently believe that it is the organisation's leaders who are the key to success. The role of the leader is obviously critical. The leader's attitudes and behaviours can often make the difference between the change process being a failure or success.

Jim Collins (2001) believes that the key attributes of leaders are accountability, credibility, and authenticity. Collins states that when change is taking place in an organisation, great leaders do not incite fear or make the change process painful for employees. Instead, he says that a down-to-earth, pragmatic, committed-to-excellence process keeps an organisation, its leaders, and its people on track to achieve the change that is required.

John Kotter has written much about change management. He states that good leadership is about setting direction and motivating people to help them get there. Kotter knows that change management processes do not often go exactly to plan! Despite much planning and strategy, there are always difficulties and unforeseen setbacks that occur. Kotter believes that great leaders are people who are energetic and run through, or round, the obstacles. To do this well, Kotter (2005) states the most important trait of a leader is their quest for learning. Leaders who are open to discovery, people and ideas are more likely to be supportive and innovative, gaining the trust and respect of others.

Crystal Scott (2010) recently examined the key leadership attributes and behaviours that are most likely to support employees who are experiencing change or uncertainty. The study involved reviewing the current leadership literature and identifying 60 attributes that are considered to be the traits and behaviours of successful leaders. These attributes include being optimistic, intelligent, self-confident, determined, responsible, sociable and having integrity.

Over 800 employees were asked to indicate which of the 60 leadership attributes were most important to them. The results revealed that there were eight key dimensions that are essential for leaders.

- 1 Integrity. A manager with integrity is honest, dependable, fair-minded, and uses good judgment. Honesty and integrity are consistently the number one most admired characteristic across studies on leadership.
- 2 Supportive. Supportive leaders are caring, have concern for individuals, and are team oriented. They are friendly, considerate, and help employees further their careers.
- 3 Charisma. This dimension is defined by leaders who not only exude charisma but who are extroverted, energetic, and enthusiastic. These individuals are sociable and self-confident.
- 4 Intelligent. The intelligent leader understands the business and takes time to learn the current operations before making organisational changes. Intelligent managers are characterised by their analytic ability, creative thinking, and intuition.
- 5 Responsible. Responsible leadership is described by self-control, self-renewal (the ability to learn from one's mistakes), emotional maturity, and open-mindedness. These leaders are sensitive to the environment and understand how resources impact their team's job.

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- 6 Vision. The vision dimension reflects the leader who can articulate a vision for the future and behave as a role model. This person inspires and motivates employees.
- 7 Risk Taking. The risk taking leader uses unconventional behaviour to get things done and does not mind incurring personal risk for the sake of the organisation.
- 8 Challenges Tradition. This leader challenges the process, finds new and better ways of doing things, recognises and supports good ideas, and has the willingness to challenge the system in order to get new products, processes, and services adopted.

Further analyses of these key dimensions showed that under conditions of uncertainty and change, the leadership attributes most desired by employees are:

- Supportive;
- Charismatic; and
- Risk taking.

With these attributes leaders can instill confidence in their workforce and help them to be open to change and adapt more readily to change.

Clearly, leadership is critical during times of change. Great leaders know how to manage, but they understand how critical it is to lead. They have the attributes their people want, and qualities their organisation needs.

No matter what the situation, [the great manager's] first response is always to think about the individual concerned and how things can be arranged to help that individual experience success.

Marcus Buckingham

Pointers for Great Leaders



Spend a lot of time planning your change management process. This is a worthwhile investment.

Empower people by giving them a clear and compelling vision of the desired future.

Involve people in designing the change.

Provide opportunities for people to give input into decision making.

Inform those who will be affected by the change as early as possible.

Make communication strategies a two-way dialogue.

Say what you mean, and mean what you say.

Respond immediately and supportively to concerns and queries.

Time operational changes carefully and thoughtfully.

Select positive and committed people to lead the change.

Show patience and integrity, even when setbacks occur.

Celebrate and recognise small wins and individual trailblazers.

Inspire action and deliver results.

Continually reflect on progress, then refine your actions accordingly.

Collins, J. (2001). Good to Great: Why some companies make the leap and others don't. London, UK: Random House Business Books.

Kotter, J. (2005). Leading Change. Leadership Excellence, 22(11), 5-6.

Scott, C. (2010). Perceptions of Leadership under Conditions of Environmental Uncertainty. Journal of American Academy of Business, Cambridge, 16(1), 30.