

The CEO Refresher

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Managing Paradoxical Opposites

by Gerry Schmidt and Lisa Jackson

Change is the newest "technology" in business. For today's leaders, everything is both urgent *and* important, and the #1 priority changes as often as daily or weekly. The internet, globalization, and consumer expectations have converged to make the process of navigating change one of the most critical for leaders seeking sustainable competitive advantage for their business.

The latest research confirms that 75% of change efforts fail to produce the expected results.

What change efforts are most subject to failure? Those widespread in impact and requiring transformation in several parts of the organization are highest risk:

- Mergers and acquisitions
- Significant market expansion or growth
- New leadership teams
- New product technologies or distribution methodologies

The Paradox Phenomenon

Paradox: (n.) Impossibility, inconsistency, absurdity

What seems impossible and absurd is the job of today's successful leaders.

Dealing with high-risk change amplifies paradoxical tensions in business. The true test of leadership during a successful change effort lies in successfully managing these paradoxes:

- Deliver short term results and drive long-term growth and vision.
- Increase quality and speed and lower cost.
- Improve adaptability and consistency.
- Balance the needs of all stakeholders.
- Secure everyone's engagement while holding fast to the leaders' vision.

Two Success Secrets in Managing Paradoxes

To effectively manage high-risk change, successful leaders (1) Establish Urgency and (2) Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!

Why are urgency and communication important? First, people won't own what they don't create. To successfully balance the paradoxes in change, the best leaders tap into what makes people want to change. And that begins with them "owning" it.

Second, if there is no visible disaster or reason for change, people will gravitate to their comfort zones - at the very time you need them to embrace something *different*. Providing a visible and powerful "reason to change" is critical.

Establish Urgency

Urgency is "felt need" - it's an emotional process versus an analytical one. And it's not always obvious where the pain *really* is - it may be different for leaders and employees.

Four steps to effectively creating urgency:

1. **Define it:** First, determine "Do you have it?" If it's all about making the numbers, look deeper. To be credible, you need a dramatic and interesting story that clearly answers "what's in it for them."
2. **Validate it.** Compare your own sense of urgency with those around you: People love to be asked for their opinion. Leverage this! Simultaneously, gather information about trends and data outside your organization that validate your hypothesis.
3. **Synthesize it.** Turn your hunch and data into a "business case for change." A compelling version answers 5 questions:
 - Why must we change and why now?
 - What happens if we don't?
 - What does change look like?
 - What's our plan to get there?
 - What does it mean for you (the employees)?

You need three versions of your business case for change:

- The elevator speech which grabs people's attention
 - The 5-minute presentation
 - The in-depth presentation, 30 minutes to 2 hours
4. **Scope it.** Sustainable change follows the Elephant Rule: Eat it one bite at a time. Few leaders can sustain attention on an organization-wide change effort all at once. Pick one change-ready area of the organization -- where urgency exists - and transform there first.

Communicate the Heck Out of It

"Communication" is how you *enact* urgency to create ownership - the essential link to managing paradoxes in change.

Four steps to communication that ignites urgency:

1. **Define the change timeline.** Large-scale change can take years. Plan a campaign that spans 6-18 months maximum. Make it match urgency: Daily or weekly communication through multiple channels may not be too much at first.
2. **Narrow, narrow, narrow to a central message.** Your message must boil down to no more than three sentences, beginning with a 2-4 word heading that captures the essence of your message ("Beat Coke" was Pepsi's. "AOL Everywhere" is a brilliant example).
3. **Build the campaign:** Go beyond creating a buzz - that's the easy part. The real goal of communication is driving aligned action.
 - **The Events.** Plan a series of frequent, well-designed meetings to reinforce key messages and cascade news about progress.
 - **The Messenger.** Align several key leaders to deliver a coordinated, aligned message through your events.
 - **Aim the energy.** Don't get people revved up and urgent unless you have instructions about what they can do.
4. **Align intrinsic communication.** It's not what you say; it's what you *do* that counts. Are there points of pain where people or projects are out of alignment with your message? You have to deal with this stuff - visibly -- to maintain credibility and show people you're serious.

If you are dealing with any change, and especially the high risk variety, you increase your ability to manage the paradoxes if you communicate in a way that ignites urgency.

Gerry Schmidt, Ph.D. and Lisa Jackson are principals of Jackson & Schmidt, LLC. As corporate culture experts, their primary focus is on the measurement of company culture, the step-by-step process of improving culture, and its impact on bottom-line business performance. They are currently writing a how-to book on effective processes for improving culture. They can be reached on the Web at www.jacksonandschmidt.com.

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