

CC:YOU

# Claim Your Change Power

Whether you're a leader or a follower, you are a force of change.

By Pat McLagan

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Consulting all over the world, I've helped many companies through the process of change. I've seen disillusionment, fear, blaming, "stuckness," and dependency. I want it better for us: I want each and every one of us to claim our change power.

Whatever roles you play at work or at home, you are a force of change. Mail clerk or CEO, salesperson or factory worker, leader or follower, wife or husband, young or old—you are an

active participant in the changes around you. You can choose your thoughts about what's happening, and you can choose your actions. It's possible to develop practices and a point of view that will help you thrive in change.

Your beliefs are crucial. In fact, beliefs are often more important in change than techniques. Techniques work when you think to use them; beliefs influence your choices whether

you're conscious of them or not. Note that there are two different kinds of beliefs: "say beliefs," the beliefs you talk about having; and "do beliefs," the beliefs that actually drive your behavior.

## The role of formal leaders

**Old belief:** Formal leaders must drive change and act as role models for the perfect and preplanned change process.

**New belief:** Leaders are co-learners.

A few years ago, I met with a group of union stewards to brainstorm how to better involve associates in business processes. After a heated debate, one of the stewards said, "We're wasting our time. We can't change until *they* (senior management) change." But a few days later in my meeting with senior management, an executive said in frustration, "We can't change until *they* (the workers) change."

One of the most often mistaken beliefs about major organization change—the kind that requires new roles and relationships—is that one group must change before others do. If organizations were fully mechanical and rational, perhaps that would be possible. A leader or group of leaders would plan a change and communicate it to others. The leaders would put systems, structures, and rewards in place to get full alignment. Then they'd educate and support everyone in changing their behavior. Those seers would be role models of courage, appropriate behavior, and rationality.

But expecting such perfection from leaders is unrealistic. The reality is that many of the demands of new markets, a global economy, and shifting technology are new to all of us. They require new leadership skills and behaviors, new worker skills and behaviors, and new interaction among all players. Leaders can't play the change game alone.

Leaders, too, must have space to learn. Very few people in formal leadership roles were schooled in the Internet. Few had role models to teach them the leadership skills needed in what futurists Stan Davis and Chris Meyer call "the blurred economy." Few planned to lead a global workforce encompassing baby boomer pre-retirees, Gen Xers, Nexters, telecommuters, and others.

To expect perfect leaders under those conditions is to immobilize the organization and its leaders. *Perfect* is an expectation that goes with the common, yet erroneous, belief that stability is normal and change is the exception. In truth, both stability and change are normal.

If you're a formal leader—someone with significant control over resources and strategies—you can support change in important ways. For instance, look for opportunities to nurture new (even crazy) ideas long before they move into the mainstream. Once a plan for change has been put into place, you can communicate it to the rest of the organization—even though you may not have all of the knowledge and skills to see it through.

Whether you're an associate, a follower, an employee, or a team member, you have a right to expect formal leaders to be committed to the changes they espouse. You have a right to expect formal leaders to be aggressive learners, so that they can play strong and wise leadership roles. You have a right to expect that they'll take counsel from people who can help accelerate their learning. You have a right to expect that they will listen to you and treat you as a partner in change.

But be careful not to demand perfection. Remember that leaders are human; don't lie in the wings looking for their missteps. Leaders are in the difficult position of trying to keep an organization performing during challenging times: They must keep the business going while positioning it for a future that has only a fuzzy shape.

## What are your do beliefs about the role of formal leaders?

Do you frequently

- announce, "The director is not a role model of the change"
- say critically of someone in power, "What she does contradicts what she says"
- feel insecure and blaming when you see formal leaders doing or saying something that's at odds with a change
- look for imperfections and missteps in leaders and contribute to gossip about their inadequacies
- feel as a leader you have to be perfect and therefore can't be a visible and active learner or take counsel from others
- feel as a leader to make verbal commitments to new directions but don't fund them?

If you answered yes to any of those questions, then shift to a new way of thinking:

- Look at a variety of actions and words by leaders to determine whether they're making real efforts to support and live changes.
- Tell leaders when their behavior doesn't match their words or is inconsistent with a stated change goal. (*"I'm getting mixed messages from you about what's important. You said this and did that. I'm confused, but I'm committed to the changes that are going on, and I want to do the right thing."*)

- Give leaders time to align their actions with their words and planned changes. If you see major resistance or sabotage, raise the issue with someone you trust.
- As a leader, talk in public about what you're learning and how you're changing to meet shifting needs.
- As a leader, consult with people who have different perspectives, experience, and views—from inside and outside, up and down, in the organization.
- As a leader, act as a protector and supporter of major changes—even when short-term pressures demand your attention and resources.

## The role of followers

**Old belief:** Followers have little power and can't be trusted to care about long-term concerns.

**New belief:** Followers have power.

In many people's change lexicon, change participants are divided into the thinkers and the doers. The thinkers (leaders) plan the changes. The doers (followers) implement them, with minimum questioning and challenge.

It's true that formal leaders are responsible for creating direction and providing resources for major change initiatives. But followers are *not* passive recipients and order takers. In today's complex world, the members of any community both think and do. Followers (and everyone is a follower in some way) play at least three important, active, and conscious roles.

**Innovator.** People who are closest to customers and operate in the value stream that provides products and services get clues about change all of the time. You may see new challenges long before they're formal topics of strategy

discussions in the boardroom, so you can offer early warnings and note opportunities for change.

**Self-manager.** In the midst of change, your current identity and roles may be threatened. When that happens, try to understand what's really going on for you. What will you have to give up if this change continues? What work will you have to do? What values and beliefs will you have to examine? Will you have to take a stand because your integrity demands it? How will you participate and take care of yourself?

**Risk taker.** If, after serious reflection, you believe that changes aren't in the best interests of the organization and its stakeholders, you may need to take a stand against them—despite the discomfort. Or, you may need to take a stand *for* changes, even though doing so necessitates personal changes and challenges. Either way, your reaction to change takes action—letting go of your own assumptions, fears, and biases and getting out of your comfort zone. Of course, you're also opening up to the excitement and growth of new learning and relationships.

Followership isn't a passive and receptive role in which we have to do what others plan. But it does demand that we keep a perspective on what's best for the organization and its stakeholders, and for us as members. We have a responsibility to notice early signs of change and to process our own personal reactions and dynamics. And we all must be active, learning, and risk-taking participants in the change process.

### What are your do beliefs about the role of followers?

Do you frequently

- discount yourself as a powerless player in a larger game managed by someone else

- take a reactive stance, without thinking, in following orders or refusing to participate in changes

- leave thinking and responsibility for the future to others, focusing just on your day-to-day work

- feel such emotions about work as anger, blame, resentment, gratitude, and relief without trying to understand where they're coming from or what impact they're having on your behavior

- refuse to act on your ideas because you're afraid to fail

- as a formal leader, keep people in the dark and assume that you and other leaders must take care of workers and protect them from the truth or from change?

If you answered yes to any of those questions, then shift to a new way of thinking:

- Think about what's going on around you so that you can influence ideas about options and the bigger picture.

- Appreciate your feelings and reactions even when they're negative. Explore their cause and what you need to do for your own integrity.

- As a formal leader, treat the people in your organization as intelligent partners who can handle the truth, and who have important roles to play in shaping and implementing change.

**Our do beliefs create our world. They determine what we pay attention to, and they affect how we act. They can create self-fulfilling prophecies.**

Note two different outcomes that are possible in the change process:

**Vicious cycle.** Our beliefs create catastrophes. *I believe (a do belief) that leaders must be perfect role models of the changes they talk about. I notice that they are not. So, I become cynical and refuse to commit to a change that, if I thought about it, might consider a good one. Because I and others like me don't act and continue to criticize, leaders become defensive and less confident in their changes. The vicious cycle continues.*

**Virtuous cycle.** Our beliefs create a new world. *I expect leaders to actively support the changes they sponsor and to try to change themselves. I notice the things they do that are supportive and tell them that I appreciate them. If I need*

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*something else from them, I tell them that, too. I notice that my supportive actions are well received. My own commitment and willingness to risk grow. Noticing my changes, leaders feel more confident that the organization can follow through. They increase their own efforts. A virtuous cycle occurs that accelerates the change process.*

Become as conscious as you can of your actions and the beliefs that drive them. Imagine what could happen if

you practiced new beliefs. If they don't change the organization, you'll at least create a better world for yourself and those around you.

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