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LEADERSHIP & MANAGING PEOPLE

Change Management and Leadership Development Have to Mesh

by Ryan W. Quinn and Robert E. Quinn

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Leadership development and change management tend to be top priorities for many organizations. In spite of this, a majority of organizations tend to fall far short of their goals for both. One major reason organizations struggle is because they treat both leadership development and change management as separate rather than interrelated challenges. Cultural changes cannot happen without leadership, and efforts to change culture are the crucible in which leadership is developed.

For better results, organizations should coordinate their leadership development and change management efforts, approaching them as one and the same. True leadership involves deviating from cultural expectations in ways that inspire others to choose to follow. What's more, leadership is not the sole responsibility of the C-suite. Managers at all levels of an organization

must overcome resistance if genuine cultural change is to occur. Thus, change initiatives—which require a deviation from a dominant set of norms and behaviors—are the best learning environments for star managers to develop leadership skills, as well as a necessary component of a successful culture-change initiative.

How then, should organizations go about integrating their change management and leadership development initiatives? We recommend an approach that is both top-down and bottom-up.

The bottom-up part of the integrated development and change process requires potential leaders throughout the organization to engage in a process of learning how to enact a desired change in an organization's culture in the everyday experiences of organizational life. For example, one company suddenly found itself audited at the request of their largest client and were told that they needed to change their accounting procedures. In response, many employees insisted that the changes could not be made by the demanded deadline. They were impeded by cultural beliefs around how quickly the organization could mobilize and complete complex tasks. Janet, a member of the task force assigned to handle the requirements of the audit, was participating in leadership development training at the time. Using a leadership tool we developed called the fundamental state of leadership, she decided to reach out to employees who had a stake in the new requirements to understand their perspectives (rather than wait for others with more authority to tell her what to do). She gathered new information and discovered their fears, while simultaneously coming to the realization that the deadline could be met. With this new understanding, she was able to help other employees question their beliefs and come up with creative ways to streamline the accounting procedures so as to meet the deadlines.

As part of a class assignment from her leadership training, she also reflected on the experience and used her own (and others') reflections to inform her subsequent plans and actions. Eventually, more and more of her colleagues began to accept the importance of the accounting changes and their accompanying deadlines, and were participating in creative action. Their actions led to bottom-up change: the emerging culture and accounting policies could not have been planned in advance, but came from the ideas and actions of motivated employees and were uniquely suited to the local challenges they faced. Janet, however, was more than just a change agent in this one situation. Her planning, acting, reflecting—and planning again—demonstrated true leadership.

But a bottom-up process is unlikely to work unless it is also embedded in a top-down learning process. A top-down process creates structure and motivation for employees to maintain engagement in the change/leadership development process. If done well, it also provides emotional and social support potential leaders, because deviating from cultural expectations can be a lonely endeavor.

A successful top-down process begins with executives clarifying desired results for change management/leadership programs. For example, executives may want to change accounting procedures or inspire creativity in order to become more efficient, as in Janet's company. Or they may want to lower barriers between departments or create financial stewardship throughout the organization. The goal depends on the organization and its situation, but what is important is that it is specific (ideally, with a measurable outcome) and accepted by all members of the executive team.

Once the goal is clear and accepted, executives can identify potential leaders throughout the organization to engage in the leadership development/change management process. These may be executive team members, people in key positions, people who have shown a passion for this specific change, people who are deemed to be "high potential," or some combination of these characteristics. Many variables about the type of change program could drive the decision about which potential leaders to include, such as strategic, the number needed for a critical mass, the need to stage the change process, the amount of support that can be provided, geographical dispersion, the diversity of expertise or demographics involved, and so on.

Selected leaders should be given structure, accountability, support, and motivation as they engage this process—but also the freedom to create their own solutions, as Janet did with the help of the accounting team. The objectives of the change and development effort, the scope of initiative, the time frame, the type of support to be given, and the rewards for success should be made clear when invitations are extended. Classes can offer advice but the key is to instill a plan-act-reflect cycle—and then support managers as they learn on the go. The attention of senior executives and the needed financial support should be guaranteed; a worse-case scenario is for a fledging leader to have the rug pulled out from under them partway through the change and development process.

Once the structure and motivation is secured and outlined, potential leaders can launch their repeated efforts at creating experiences that enact the new objectives using the plan-act-reflect

cycle. Ideally, reflections could be shared so that potential leaders learn from each other as well as from their own efforts.

Change management and leadership development programs have a woeful record at most organizations. In large part that's because they come up against a common challenge—deviating from a dominant culture (the true test of leadership) is very difficult. Tasking managers with driving bottom-up cultural change will provide leadership training in itself. They will require top-down support to succeed.

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Thanks Ryan & Robert - excellent, spot-on insights and prescriptions. In our work with executives, this is precisely how we work with organizations, using the organization's strategic aspirations and change requirements to accelerate the development of its executives and a structured, fun and energizing way - and the results are always amazing. We've long past the need for this change as we watch efforts to isolate these initiatives fail.

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