

Leading into Change

Top managers shouldn't be the only ones effecting change in an organization. Employees at every level of an organization can effect change and influence results.

I recently attended a meeting where someone asked if change in an organization could be led by an employee who isn't in a top-management position. The answer from those in attendance was a resounding, *no*, that only those at the head of the organization can lead change. This is a very popular misconception. The truth is that leaders of change—and catalysts for change—can come from anywhere within an organization. So how can we identify the leaders of change within our organization and learn from them?

Defining Change

The first step is to determine why a change happens within an organization. There can be any number of reasons. It could be the simple desire to increase profits. It could be a recognition that the organization is becoming irrelevant. Sometimes it's a glaring increase or decrease in profits. Other times it could be a case where the statistics and the trends within the industry or organization indicate a downturn in the

organization's position in the market. In any of these situations, someone must realize that a change is needed and then step forward to take action to effect that change. If no one recognizes the need for the change, the organization can enter a decline that can continue until a leader in change arrives.

When you begin to analyze who in your organization is leading change, start by asking what leading change really entails. The definition of "change" in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is "to become different; to make (someone or something) different." "Leading" means "having great importance, influence, or success." Based on these definitions, anything from updating a form to completely restructuring the organization could be considered "leading change" if the changes are carried out successfully. But that doesn't necessarily mean the person who makes the decision to change a form is really leading change. A leader of change is an individual who not only coaches his or her team to success but also has the personal drive to see and act on a situation that needs to be changed.

Defining the Leader

After a change has been defined, the easiest way to determine its leader is to look at why the change happened. Ultimately, the answer generally will boil down to one of two explanations: education or "fresh blood." Either of these reasons can originate from any level within the organization. But what are they? When a staff member becomes aware of a best practice, new practice, or new theory, he or she becomes educated. When that individual applies this education, it can be a catalyst for change. Fresh blood means a new individual is brought into the organization or a current staff member transfers to a new division or position. The new employee can add a fresh perspective or new experiences that can lead to change.

But being a leader of change doesn't involve simply providing staff with education or hiring new employees. A leader of change creates a vision and empowers the members of the team. After that, the leader ensures that the team members embrace the same vision. The team members, as well as the organization as a whole, continue to share the empowerment and vision. Then they set (and accomplish) small goals to



grow the feeling of individual success as well as the whole team's success. The leader then directs and propels the organization to the point where the change becomes an ingrained part of the organization's culture. All of these actions have to occur for an individual to lead change.

Consider three situations that would likely lead to change. The first involves an existing department head who attends an IMA® continuing education class and learns of a way to manage inventory more efficiently. The second is a board of directors hiring a new CEO with the intention that the CEO will restructure the organization. The third is the CEO and board of directors selecting a new board member to join the board because of her history of creative new ideas.

All of these situations involve education or fresh blood and are simple first steps of change. In each instance, a catalyst *initiates* the change that eventually leads a person to *facilitate* the change. The person who facilitates the change is the leader of it. Then he or she creates a plan and vision. After that, an effective leader adds additional key members to the team. This is the stage where the act of leading change truly begins.

Let's look at the individual examples of change more deeply to see who is leading the change. In the first example, the department head finds a catalyst in education and begins the change from the middle of the organization. In this example, the change can trickle down and affect the individual department, and other departments can use it as an example of a best

practice to start their own change effort.

In the second example, the board hires a new CEO to intentionally be the catalyst. Who is the leader of change in this situation: the CEO or the board? The board is the initial catalyst, expecting change when it makes the decision to select a new CEO. The board decided which person to bring into the organization. Though the board is the initial catalyst for change, the CEO will ultimately be the leader in change. If he or she is unable to lead change, no widespread, intentional change will occur. The only change will be inconsequential.

In the third example, the CEO and the board select a new board member to use as a catalyst to generate new ideas, which will influ-

ence the board and the organization as a whole. In this instance, there are two potential outcomes. The new board member could successfully become a leader of change on the *board* and be a true leader of change within the *organization*, or she may only be a catalyst of new ideas without being a leader of those ideas within the organization.

You Can Lead Change

Is it correct to expect that all change comes from the top down? As we've seen in the examples, and in most real-life instances, long-term global success is most effective when it happens from the top down. But it doesn't have to be limited to that. Pockets of change can start at any level in an organization and be fueled by the desire of one or more individuals. In all of the examples, the individual catalyst has an impact on the organization or the members of a team. No matter their position in the organization, individuals who lead change are those who directly lead people into the change. If you are going to lead change, you have to influence others. To determine if you are a leader of change, ask yourself if you have successfully influenced anyone to really change. If the answer is *yes*, then you are a leader of change, regardless of your position in the organization. **SF**

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