

# Leading Operational Change at the Board Level: Navigating the First Mile

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**D**eciding to change things is relatively easy. However, creating stakeholder alignment around that change is another matter. Creating capacity, infrastructure, and a culture to support change is difficult, requiring patience, listening, resources, and respect for people undergoing change. This article explores how to get started, what to expect, and how best to lead in a supportive, intentional way.

## Change Is Complicated, But Necessary

Today's board and executive leaders are bombarded by demands for change: changing healthcare systems, programs, products, services, customer expectations, technologies, and social/political interest. Healthcare reform means change! Some expect change to occur by simple edict, the "make it so" approach, but such simplistic expectations are insufficient in today's healthcare organizations. While research suggests that change is built into the human condition (we are all "experts" in some way or we could not survive), some are more "change-ready" than others.<sup>1,2</sup> Also, there are differences between self-directed change and change that is imposed externally, our focus. This article describes leadership's role in that "first critical mile."

Many misunderstand change, thinking that change is linear (point A to point B), rational, and that people dislike change. Actually, change is more complicated than that, often circular, messy, and emotional, occurring in a fluid environment—everything is changing as you bring about change. Transition is difficult and usually chaotic, despite our best efforts. Further, change is often accompanied by urgency, due to quality or financial performance issues. Before experiencing the integration of change, it is necessary to experience "dis-integration," the undoing of current paradigms, relationships,

structure, etc.—a prospect neither optional, nor easy. While uncomfortable, many will gladly engage in change when there is clarity of purpose. It's often not that people dislike change, they dislike *being changed*.

## Leading Change within the Practical Realities of Daily Work

Change can be incremental, transitional, or transformational, all affecting those engaged in the change process. How change is experienced from within determines readiness for change, requiring two things: *capacity* (or wherewithal) and *the desire* (willingness) to change. Absence of either means low readiness and can occur at all levels, including the board and executive suite. Reasons for low readiness offer clues for how leaders should bring about change successfully. Most lack of readiness is honest and should be dealt with helpfully, responding to the needs of those who must execute the change. This is an opportunity to learn, and to refine approaches. Consider the following algorithm:<sup>3</sup>

- *If desire is high and capacity is high*, engage people as "coauthors" of the change. Authorship leads to ownership.
- *If desire is high and capacity is low*, determine what is missing (skills, safety issues, knowledge, etc.) and provide it via training, resources, process changes, etc.
- *If desire is low and capacity is high*, coaching and perhaps discipline is in order. It is time to clarify expectations.
- *If desire is low and capacity is low*, the leader must use strong, perhaps autocratic direction, a very time-consuming approach. It may be time for new talent.

A proper approach early increases the probability of successful execution. But it requires that the leader first diagnose why readiness is lacking, and then employ an appropriate approach.

## Key Board Takeaways

Creating stakeholder alignment around change is difficult, but five steps can be taken to ensure that the "first critical mile" of desired changes have a higher probability of success:

1. Listen respectfully to all stakeholders.
2. Assess "readiness" and expect different levels in differing parts of the organization.
3. Respectfully help those who cannot accept the change to be successful somewhere else.
4. Ensure a balance of leader styles, offering a variety of perspectives regarding the changes required and the approaches needed.
5. Fully support board/executive decisions, regardless of your own opinions.

## Dealing with Resistance as Change Takes Place

Often, change initiatives encounter resistance beyond simple lack of readiness. Someone will not want change to occur for reasons personal, professional, rational, or emotional. In healthcare, research suggests that nearly 25 percent of medical professionals suffer some level of burnout,<sup>4</sup> and as many as 45–60 percent of employees are disengaged. The reasons are many: unclear and changing expectations, long hours and work–life imbalance, loss of control, lack of emotional support, chaos in the environment, etc. Invariably, despite changes to remedy these issues, a small percentage might never comply, the cynics, rebels, apathetics, and naysayers. All are classic victims expecting your empathy, while really wanting you to reverse the change. They want, in their self-declared "victimization," vindication and work for it in vindictive ways. Several of these characters are well known by most executives:

- Persecuted Paul: "You guys just don't care about us!" (cynic)
- Polly Policy: "This change will violate bylaws, policy, regulations, labor contracts, etc." (naysayer)
- Gang Up Gary: "We've all talked, and we think this is a bad idea." (rebel)
- Social Sally: "Let's go have coffee...I'm sure you'll understand once we talk." (apathetic)

1 John Kotter, *Leading Change*, Harvard Business School Press: Boston, MA, 1996.

2 William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, Perseus Books: Reading, MA, 1980.

3 Adapted from Kenneth Blanchard and Paul Hersey, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*, Prentice Hall: New Jersey, 1984.

4 B.D. Wood and J.B. Killion, "Burnout among Healthcare Professionals," *Radiology Management*, November/December 2007.

There are many similar victim variations, none your friends. It is not compassionate to avoid conflict in these situations, when a simple “no” is the necessary response. This small percentage consumes a great deal of board and leadership time and energy, seldom accepting the changes required wholly and completely. It is ineffective to organize your approaches or invest time in those who do not have the organization’s interests in mind. If your goal is to please or satisfy them, they will continue to ask you to do so, regardless of your or your organization’s needs. Consider helping these people find success somewhere else.

### **Five Steps to Take in the “First Critical Mile” of Major Change**

Boards and leaders can ensure changes have a higher probability of success. These five steps will get things off to a good start:

1. **Listen respectfully to all stakeholders**, especially opponents and adversaries. These teachers will inform your plan.
2. **Assess “readiness,”** and expect variation in differing parts of the organization. Respond to capacity issues with resources, training, and coaching. Respond to desire issues with listening,

and kind insistence that change be accomplished, that personal enrollment is expected. Be prepared to negotiate and conciliate. Ensure attention is paid to “endings” (emotions around what people are letting go of) as you prepare for new beginnings.

3. **Respectfully help those who cannot accept the change** to be successful elsewhere. After effort has been made, in the final analysis, if you can’t change the people, you have to change the people.
4. **Ensure a balance of leader styles**, leaders who can, by virtue of their natural styles, offer multiple approaches to the changes required. Autocratic leaders are highly effective for low readiness, while participative leaders are more effective for a high level of readiness.
5. **Fully support board/executive decisions**, regardless of your own personal opinions regarding those decisions. Leaders must speak with one voice. Failure to visibly support the change in the eyes of those who must execute and then live with the changes undermines everyone.

Change leaders recognize that different types of change demand different

approaches. Proper diagnosis of readiness and the ability to use more than one leadership style is complex. It requires that board and executive leaders build balanced executive and management teams with differentiated skills and styles to offer an array of leadership possibility for what might occur. Leading change requires time and patience in a world that offers little of either. Leaders set a pace allowing for successful integration (“re-freezing”) and the “final miles” of realizing and sustaining the benefits of change. This also takes talent and experience, recognizing change leadership as a practice learned over time. ●

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