

People Skills: Change Management Tools—The Modern Leadership Model

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This is the third in a series of columns about some of the most effective models, methods, and processes of organization development (OD). OD is a discipline that offers much to the MS/OR practitioner determined to help clients solve real-world problems. Because it is based on a systemic view of organizations, OD includes the whole universe of fuzzy people issues that increasingly determine the success or failure of efforts to implement otherwise flawless technical solutions.

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Successful change enablers rely on a handful of tools that work. One of the most powerful tools in my toolbox is the modern leadership model. This model emphasizes the vital importance of people to the survival and success of the modern enterprise. Whereas traditional leaders give orders, modern leaders empower their followers to achieve common goals collaboratively. So profound has been the revolution in leadership precipitated by the advent of the modern era of turbulent, often chaotic change, that to ignore it can be professionally fatal for managers and their organizations.

The New Organizational Reality

Recent rapid advances in technology, transportation, and communication have ushered in an era of information, globalization, and seemingly constant change. As Warren Bennis, one of the strongest proponents of modern, participative leadership argues, because of these major environmental changes, top-down leadership “will erode competitive advantage and destroy the aspirations of any leader or organization... (it) is dysfunctional in today’s world of blurring change and will get us into unspeakable trouble unless we understand that the search engine for effective change is the workforce and their creative alliance with top leadership” (Bennis 1999, pp. 7–8). If traditional, command-and-control leadership is increasingly dysfunctional, what is the alternative?

James MacGregor Burns (1978), Pulitzer Prize winning author, described the alternative to traditional leadership. He called it transforming leadership. Burns (1978, pp. 1–3) argued that there was a “crisis of leadership” because people did not understand the essence of leadership; namely, that it is less about

individualism, elitism, and heroism than it is about human development and the pursuit of a “collective purpose.”

Bradford and Cohen (1984) gave substance to the theory of transforming leadership. To lead in the modern era, they said, a manager must do three things: (1) create a common or shared vision of the future, (2) share responsibility for achieving this vision with his or her followers, and (3) focus on developing the capability of the individuals in the organization to perform at their best.

This simple and elegant three-step process is the modern leadership model. It has its theoretical roots in the fundamentals of modern change management. Consequently, its practical applications are remarkable for their ability to transform organizations.

Modern Leadership and Organizational Change

In two previous columns in this series (Levasseur 2001, 2002), I described Lewin’s change model and ideal-state analysis, two of the most important tools of modern change management. Stage one of the modern leadership model, which involves the articulation, discussion, enhancement, and internalization by the organization of a common or shared vision, draws on the power of both of these OD tools.

Creating a shared vision of an ideal future state is the first step in ideal state analysis. It sets the organization up for success by ensuring a focus on transformation, not incremental change. In parallel, creating a shared vision unfreezes the situation in the most positive way possible according to Lewin and thereby minimizes resistance to change. People support what they help to create; in this case, the common vision.

By sharing responsibility for achieving the desired outcome in the second stage of the process, the leader capitalizes on the power of people working together to move mountains. The keys to the success of this stage are the active use of participative processes, another important OD tool, and teams.

Finally, by focusing in the third stage on the individual, the group, and the organizational development needed to achieve the vision, the modern leader reinforces his or her commitment to human development and the group's effort to manifest a common or collective purpose, both of which Burns (1978) identified as crucial to transforming leadership.

Implications for the Practice of MS/OR

Assuming that modern leadership is essential for success in the new, supercompetitive era, what can an MS/OR practitioner do to help his or her managers in their efforts to practice these new behaviors and create a flexible organization that embraces change? Three thoughts come immediately to mind based on the three parts of the modern leadership model.

First, be a champion of participation. Seek out the people affected by the change and get them involved in the problem-solving process from the outset and keep them in the loop throughout. Tell them what you are doing and why, ask them for their opinions, share your preliminary results with them, and bring representatives with you when you meet with management whenever possible. In other words, create as much of a sense of participation in the process as you can without violating the prerogatives of management or diluting your effort. This will certainly facilitate the unfreezing of the situation, and it will probably provide you with valuable data based on the

first-hand knowledge of the people in the organization that would not otherwise have become available.

Second, focus on the common vision. As you walk about engaging participants in the analysis, relate everything you are doing to the overarching goal. Reinforcing the common goal in this fashion will assist the leader as he or she strives to keep the organization's motivation and focus on the common goal at peak levels throughout the change effort.

Finally, contribute to the development of others by sharing your knowledge with them when appropriate. You will build the capability of the organization to function at a high level without your involvement. People revere teachers both for their knowledge and for their willingness to share it. Do your part in a straightforward, helpful way to transfer the essential elements of your technology to the organization, and both its members and its leaders will hold you in similarly high regard.

Conclusion

The modern leadership model has revolutionized how managers lead and raised the expectations of followers in organizations all over the world. Embrace it and become part of the solution, or ignore it and become part of the problem.

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