

BUILDING THE STORY OF CHANGE *TOGETHER*:

Three Rules for Leading Change by Focusing on People First

With so many capable leaders inside our organizations, why do so many critical initiatives fail? Far too often, organizations identify a need for change, define the root causes, obsess over the solution and process details, but then neglect to put the focus on the people who make change happen. When the Crossland Group sets out to lead change, it focuses on three fundamental rules: first, meet people where they're at; second, acknowledge that all change is personal; and third, build the story of change together.

RULE 1

MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY'RE AT

Think of the last major change in your life. Maybe it was a new baby; maybe it was a big promotion. Whatever the experience, think back to how it impacted all your day-to-day rituals and activities. Your full-time office job just might not fit in with caring for your newborn. Forty-five minutes of exercise at the end of the workday is now impossible with your new job responsibilities. We are constantly making tradeoffs in our lives. But how do we make the decisions on what to prioritize and what to let go of? When it comes to change in the workplace,

we must also consider how our shifting view of priorities aligns with those of our colleagues and staff.

As leaders, we often forget that any change initiative will have a ripple effect on all other work activities. Taking a systems view of change and its impact is essential. This means acknowledging that our employees have full workloads prior to initiating change in our organizations. We have a tendency to assume we can just pile on changes to someone's already packed schedule and expect results.

SUCCESS STORY

As Junior Achievement Africa began to redefine the demographic it wanted to reach across its twenty-three countries in Africa, the CEO contemplated two possible ways forward: either instruct all her country directors to follow the new vision, or focus on those directors who were already prepared to collaborate. She chose the latter solution, working with the leaders who were already comfortable with the tradeoffs and necessary changes. Doing so ensured early success among this group and helped convince other country directors to follow suit.

Instead, we must help people make the right tradeoff decisions and/or cultivate new resources for critical initiatives. When preparing to lead change, we need to take a holistic view of the imbalances we are about to unleash, and ask ourselves these two critical questions:

? What are the other initiatives currently taking up people's time? What can I ask of staff in terms of focus and integration? Appreciating the broader implications of our ask will help employees interpret what is important and what to let go of. We need to help them prioritize initiatives in order to satisfy both strategic needs and emotional ones.

? What is the right entry point to begin the change? Once we have a better understanding of the burden of change people can bear, we can determine the right level of initial engagement for people based on their current capacities so that the process gets significant traction and is effective from the start.

Once we have a solid and evidence-based understanding of the capacities and constraints of the people who will help support our goals, we can focus on addressing the emotional implications of change that will drive their motivation.

RULE 2

ACKNOWLEDGE THAT ALL CHANGE IS PERSONAL

Any initiative will fall short if it fails to address the mindsets and skills of the people who are going to execute it. *Remember, organizations don't change, people do.* While we may understand this inherently, our tendency to focus on outcomes first and people second belies this logic. So, how do we avoid this trap?

Crossland has found that encouraging leaders to focus on people first means

following some core practices:



Empathize with the burden of change By reaching out to those with the biggest loads to bear, we learn to empathize with people's burdens by first inquiring about what they are. Only by truly appreciating how employees internalize new changes and priorities can we build a compelling rationale for their support.

REACH INDIVIDUALS THROUGH THEIR HEARTS & MINDS

In acknowledging that all change is personal, we recognize that change incites fear of the unknown and we need to help employees through this. We need to appeal to individual self-interest and answer these core questions:

- 1 How will I find out what concerns and hopes my staff has about the impending change?
- 2 How will I help my employees understand their value to the organization and that what they do really matters? How will I communicate how they will benefit from this change?
- 3 How will I anticipate and assess the future skills required for this change and where there are gaps? Who are the individuals we must inspire to stay and help us through this change?



Speak the truth with an authentic voice

We must demonstrate our belief that people at every level are critical to the change and that what they do matters. This begins with speaking the truth, managing expectations, and relentlessly communicating what is happening, why it is happening, and when the initiative will be completed. Everyone must understand how decisions are made, how outcomes will be achieved, and how the change is likely to affect them. Doing so will help people see that there are concrete opportunities for them to grow and develop as a result of the new strategy or changes.



Excite individuals with the possibility for growth

We must take stock in individuals' skills and help seed the idea that they can grow and develop in exciting new directions. We need to reinforce, particularly among a staff population that is anxious about change, that not all capabilities are expected of them immediately, and that the organization is committed to ensuring a path to achieve the necessary capabilities.

Of course, part of connecting on an emotional level with our organizations is believing that success is rooted in a *shared* vision of the future—a Herculean task on the part of leaders, and one that requires consistent and direct efforts.

SUCCESS STORY

When Lou Gerstner decided to transform IBM from a predominantly hardware business to a software and services business, he made a couple of key strategic choices—one, don't break the company up, and two, use the collective power of people closest to the work to enable change. By embracing the Accelerating Change Together (ACT) process (a problem-solving and engagement strategy that Crossland has used across multiple geographies and business units), IBM and Crossland built capability in 3,500 employees to personalize the changes and help people navigate them. It worked. Hundreds of ACT sessions later, IBM had a cadre of leaders who understood the power of navigating complex change—one person at a time.

RULE 3

BUILD THE STORY OF CHANGE, TOGETHER

To create this shared vision, we must start with the assumption that everyone views a strategic shift through an individualized lens. While employees may be present for the announcement of a five-point strategic vision, they might only hear the one part that immediately touches an emotional nerve. Their first thoughts will likely rest on how the new strategy will affect their work or that of their team.

story of change together. By testing the description of our vision with a multitude of stakeholders, we'll uncover missing links in individual understanding and identify common gaps and misinterpretations that need clarification. Second, we gain a tremendous opportunity to delve into our stakeholders' appetites for change. From these conversations, we can glean insights into what it will

TESTING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OUR STORY OF CHANGE

- 1 Can our stakeholders articulate the vision back to us?
- 2 Can staff articulate the core elements of the strategy and the rationale for each one?
- 3 Does everyone know how the new strategy will affect their work or that of their team? And can they tell us why this change is important?

So, how does this reality shape our organizations' stories of change? First, it means that before devising our communication strategy for this shift, we must consider the impact it will have on everyone it touches. We must build the

take to get everybody on board—which greatly informs the communication plan. Third, this process can be an effective mechanism for identifying our change champions, so that the senior team is not the only one directing the change.

THE BOTTOM LINE

FOCUS ON PEOPLE AND YOU WILL CHANGE THE OUTCOME

Managing change is hard work. Any transformation that begins without focusing on people first is like trying to lose weight without the pain of exercising or making healthier eating choices—it just doesn't work. When we redefine our objectives for change based upon the people who will make it happen, our organizations will find it easier to embrace and realize a desired future, rather than remain wedged in the past.

As leaders, we have to embrace the inhibitors of change and delve into root causes of why things are stalled or not working. There is no way to circumvent the detail. We have to constantly look at the change holistically—taking in the entire picture. Only then will we turn fear and resistance into shared excitement and a collective vision.