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Leaders and Change: Imperatives in the 'New Normal'

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Positioning the ‘Conversation’

The pandemic experience, while incredibly challenging for leaders and teams, also provided important learnings. We came to recognize the greater impact and influence of such attributes as resilience, agility, humility, curiosity, self-care, compassion and caring and attention to growing self-awareness as central to the leader role in guiding teams and ensuring that organization priorities are realized. These are foundational and increasingly expected of the most effective leaders.

Courage, however, stands out as it is a pre-requisite, a ‘non-negotiable’ way of behaving. If our learnings from the pandemic are to be applied in a way which has both positive impact and also yields essential results, then courage and courageous action has to be ‘front-and-centre’. I like Mark Kingwell’s phrase and I think it is quite apt as we think about courage. Through the experience of the pandemic, we see that the place of courage in the leader’s role as being “not so much new as more vivid”.¹

The Ongoing Challenge of Leading Change

As I thought about the changing role of leaders, I was in the process of reading Professor James Conklin’s recent book on change entitled *Balancing Acts: A Human Systems Approach to Organizational Change*.² With his thoughtful model of change before me and my decision to use the courage ‘lens’ as my guide in writing this article, I set out to explore the leader’s role in navigating the uncertainties of the ‘new normal’ of organization life. That led to the generation of a number of ‘courageous questions’ which internal leaders might use in challenging organizations to marshal energy appropriately in making desired changes.

One important note, however, is that Conklin’s model is focused on external interveners, including consultants and related outside advisors. That said – and based on a short conversation with Professor Conklin – I believe that his model can be used effectively by leaders within organizations. The primary caution is that the leader and his/her organization must pay particular attention to areas in which an absence of complete objectivity can potentially detract from the full effectiveness of the change initiative.

(To address this obvious reality, I offer some ideas at the close of this article to mitigate, to the extent possible, the ‘downside’ associated with having an internal leader guiding the change).

¹ Kingwell, M. (2020). *On Risk*. Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis

² Conklin, J. (2021). *Balancing acts: A human systems approach to organizational change*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Applying the Conklin Framework

As noted above, there is no doubt that it is often a daunting challenge to bring tough, sensitive and courageous questions to colleagues and more senior leaders when you are part of the organization; this is never more obvious than when the questions touch on sensitive ways of behaving. As tough as that might be, however, this is very much part of the role leaders are expected to take on in this new reality.

In essence, Conklin's approach looks at the patterns of thought and behaviour in organizations and how they interact with structure or are influenced by it. Those elements summarize what constitutes a 'human system'.³

The notion of paradox, or 'seeming paradox' is intriguing and part of understanding and applying Conklin's change model. His framework speaks to four aspects of balancing in the process of leading change:

1. An initial phase of 'Confrontation and Compassion', in which there is a tension between balance and push, and creation of safety;
2. A 'Planned and Emergent' phase, where the balance is between staying the course and changing the course;
3. A 'Participate and Observe' phase, in which the leader or intervener is in my words 'in the system' but not 'of the system'; and
4. A Fourth phase, referred to as 'Assert and Inquire', where the leader is not there to provide answers but rather to work with the organization to generate or discover answers and approaches.

In each case, the model also assumes that reflection, review, and two-way conversations inform any actions or change in direction.

The Approach

With that in mind I offer a set of questions which I believe might be helpful to teams, their leaders and the wider organization, even when they are accompanied by a necessary tension. For each, courage will be necessary to both pose the question and then work through it and any consequent discomfort. Intention is always to focus on developing clarity and generating options for action. For many, while this will be 'new territory' it has the potential to very rich 'learning territory'! There will be days when the comment that '...now we know what doesn't work so well' becomes the beginning of wisdom.

³ Ibid.

Courageous Questions to Help Leaders Connect, Integrate and Coach at Each Phase of a Change Process

The implicit assumption around the most important change efforts is that the current situation is unwanted, unsustainable and/or unhelpful in the context of current and perhaps future organization priorities.

Guided by Conklin's language let's look at each phase and propose a few questions which will balance two essential elements: the need for respect at all times – for ideas, resistance and challenge – with the equally-important need to be clear and toughminded in order to help the organization move forward:

1. The Confrontation & Compassion Phase:

- Why is this change effort an imperative for you?
- What are your underlying assumptions, beliefs and values which you bring to the initiative? Let's talk about any biases, conscious or otherwise, which might impact the work, both yours and mine as you perceive them.
- What is at risk for you personally in engaging actively in the change? What risks will you be willing to assume, and which will you not? What are the risks for me in taking on this role?
- What needs to happen to make this challenge as 'safe as possible' for you and your colleagues (e.g. team, organization unit)? What do I need to do to help ensure that there is that level of safety? What should I not do?
- What concrete actions will you look for that build trust in my leadership or facilitation of the change effort? Again, what will work against or erode that necessary trust?
- To what degree do I have freedom in asking the difficult (but what I believe to be necessary) questions? What might be off limits?

2. The Planned and Emergent Phase:

- When we have the data, understand it, and identify major themes, are you willing to commit to an action plan which I draft, we discuss, revise, and finalize? Where will you anticipate the team being less open, less certain, or less comfortable? Where do you think I will need to be especially aware of concerns in the team or areas of potential disagreement and resistance arising?
- Some of what I find will probably require that you and others will have 'to suspend disbelief' in order to understand countervailing opinions or perspectives clearly at odds with your understanding and view of the reality. What might I expect by way of

behaviours in those instances? Will you be willing to declare them in order for us to see new options for moving forward positively?

- What will you need from me if I see a need to 'change course' based on new information or emerging themes?
- What are the key elements in creating and maintaining confidence in our ongoing communications?

3. The Participate and Observe Phase:

- In order to lead this change effort, I will need to be intimately involved with you and your colleagues in this change effort. We know each other well and we are part of the same organization. That said, my role is to participate fully but also maintain a distance to avoid colluding or losing any sense of objectivity. That is no small task, so what is going to be the key challenge for you and the change team? For me as a leader?
- A key challenge is one that an external consultant would not face. In a sense, while I am 'of the system', for this work I need to behave as if I am only 'in the system' – a 'visitor' in a sense – but as much as possible without having our work derailed or overly-influenced by my obvious vested interest in the change outcome. While it may be 'raggedy' and imperfect, what do I need to do to achieve that balance to the extent possible? What can I count on you and your team to do to help with that 'boundary' issue?
- On occasion, I will need you to push back, if you think I am mixing the 'participate' role with the 'observe' role. Will you be willing to do that in the interests of the critical need for integrity in our change process?

4. The Assert and Inquire Phase:

- If I am going to be truly helpful to the team in making the change, I will have to balance making statements with asking questions; the former must take second place to the latter if I am to lead effectively. Where do you think I will have the most difficulty in achieving that balance? How can you help me with that challenge(s)?
- There may be occasions when you look to me for an answer and I will resist or choose not to provide one. (I may have ideas or even think I have the answer, but it will be my answer and not one that you have thought about and committed to). How will we have that important conversation?
- My job is to enable the best answers. This may take time, be frustrating and obviously position me in a coach role, not 'subject matter expert' or 'boss'. Where do you think you'll need support in staying with that distinction in role and what will you look to me for as a coach-leader? Where do you think you will be most stretched or challenged with learning new approaches (and perhaps letting older ones go)?

- Where do you think that you might be in the best position to ‘coach’ me? Based on what you know of me, where do you think coaching will most benefit the change initiative and my growth? Can I count on you to be ‘straight’ with me when you think I need that clarity or feedback?

The Role of an Internal Change Leader: An Owner’s Manual

This article is and was a ‘work-in-progress’, in that it attempts to work with a model not originally designed for use by internal leaders of organizations. But more importantly, we have no complete certainty as to what the ‘new normal’ will ask of us as leaders in our organizations. That said, given the need to lead change and inspire others to join in the effort, leaders have no choice but to engage, consult, learn, act and coach.

While Professor Conklin’s ‘architecture’ is obviously a very strong model for making change, we must also recognize that by virtue of being part of the organization, there are limitations and challenges to how the leader goes about being the courageous change agent. In an exchange with Professor Conklin on this very point, he points out that the internal leader’s use of the model is “difficult, but not impossible”.

In order to take account of that caution and mitigate any unwanted impact when the change leader is an intrinsic part of the system, I suggest the following actions as potentially useful:

- The choice of a leader for the change initiative is crucial. Demonstrated effectiveness, thoughtful listening skills, concern for the wellbeing of colleagues and a reputation for ‘honest dealing’ in achieving results can position the leader most effectively to lead the work;
- A pre-requisite for launching the initiative includes positioning the work as a learning opportunity first and foremost. Convening a conversation which includes the designated leader and key stakeholders to talk about ‘learning’ and ‘un-learning’ and to define the nature of the risks which might arise, the likelihood of their occurrence and the potential impact on the initiative is a key step;
- A supportive and skilled HR business partner can be a great assist to the leader in both understanding process, broader organization culture and dynamics while potentially serving as a coach to the leader;
- Active involvement of executive and other senior leadership sends a strong signal of support and commitment both to the initiative and to the leader charged with being at its head; active support is what the organization will both see and therefore believe;

- A commitment to ‘reflect and refine’ throughout is a further opportunity to ensure that unwanted outcomes or ‘stumbles’ do not detract from or compromise the impact of the change work in a lasting way; and
- Finally, the extent to which the leader is self-aware in respect of such factors as his or her ‘blind spots’, any ‘unconscious bias’ and remains open to clear feedback throughout will contribute directly to the potential for a successful change process and a strengthening of the leader’s role and the trust others have in him or her.

On this last point – and incorporating an email exchange with Professor Conklin – the leader’s task is to ensure that he or she is deliberate in identifying any “hidden commitments” which might impact their attempts at balance and objectivity. As Professor Conklin reminded me, the work of Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey developed in their enduring and thoughtful work entitled ‘Immunity to Change’ remains a very relevant reference for the self-aware leader.⁴

Concluding Thoughts

A clear implication and one which runs across each of the phases outlined above, is that ‘straight-talk’ and courage will be foundational in the leader’s role. In addition, there is an implicit assumption that leadership is going to be informed by and at times shared with stakeholders. The process requires time to ensure that common understanding and commitment are present throughout and that focused time for reflection on actions taken, results and adjustments to plan is built into the change initiative.

The leader remains in what some have described as the ‘conductor’ role. But what is new...or ‘more vivid’ as Kingwell writes... is that he or she becomes the primary and increasingly courageous voice in connecting relevant ideas with necessary actions, integrating these with larger organization priorities and coaching the behaviours in colleagues charged with executing and operationalizing the plans – a skilled ‘conductor’ certainly but also a ‘respectful provocateur’!

⁴ Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock potential in yourself and your organization*. Harvard Business Press.

About the Author



Ross Roxburgh is a leadership coach and organization consultant with several decades of experience with a wide range of clients, both domestic and international across the private, public and para-public sectors. He has a strong interest in the effectiveness of individuals and teams in complex organization environments; in many cases he brings both coaching and consulting experience to client engagements. Ross holds the designation of Certified Management Consultant (CMC) as well as that of Master Corporate Executive Coach (MCEC). He has been certified in the use of the EQ-I 2.0 instrument as well as the LEA 360. He is a facilitator with Queen's IRC on a range of programs related to Board effectiveness, Committee evolution and [Performance Management](#). He has written a number of articles for Queen's IRC on the topics of coaching and leadership.

References

Conklin, J. (2021). *Balancing acts: A human systems approach to organizational change*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock potential in yourself and your organization*. Harvard Business Press.

Kingwell, M. (2020). *On Risk*. Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis.

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed this article, you might be interested in others which the author has written for Queen's IRC:

- [Courage and Coaching](#) (2019)
- [Active Curiosity in the Coaching Process](#) (2019)
- [A Humble Mindset: A Coaching Differentiator](#) (2020)
- [Team Effectiveness: From Pandemic to Promise in the Learning Organization \(Research Report\)](#) (2021)
- [Team Effectiveness: From Pandemic to Promise in the Learning Organization \(Executive Summary\)](#) (2021)
- [The Shifting Challenges for Leaders](#) (2021)



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