

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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Leading Change ▶ 08/11/11

An all-hands rebellion

Marta's coaching had been over for almost a year when she called me with a bit of panic in her voice. "I've got a full-blown rebellion on my hands, Tom," she told me.

The day before, at an all-hands meeting, she had announced a re-structuring of three of her groups. She'd expected some resistance but what she got was anger and shouting. She'd lost control of the room and people had left in a fury.

"We had a communications strategy, Tom," she said a bit defensively. "We all thought announcing the new structure in a meeting was the way to go. I don't know what went wrong."

I asked a lot of questions. Who'd been involved in planning the restructuring? What was the timeline for implementation? Whose jobs would be affected by the change? Almost every answer convinced me that she and her team had unwittingly brought this firestorm on themselves.

Leading change is a complex, high-stakes task. One of the acknowledged thought leaders on the topic is John Kotter, Professor of Leadership emeritus at Harvard Business School. His book, *Leading Change*, lays out an eight-stage process that should be required reading for any leader needing to navigate through the minefield of change.

Before I talk about how to communicate change, which is one of Kotter's eight stages, let me tell you a story that may illustrate why Marta's people erupted so angrily—and why every change initiative is fraught with danger.

Blood in the aisles

It's May, 1913. The city, Paris. The famed Russian ballet is premiering a new ballet choreographed by the legendary Nijinsky, set to music by Igor Stravinsky. As the lights dim, the packed crowd falls quiet.

A lone oboe plays a haunting Lithuanian folk tune. Flutes join in. Then, three minutes in, everything changes. A primitive, dissonant pounding begins. And continues. And continues.



Some people begin booing. Supporters yell at them to be quiet. Fistfights break out. Blood flows. A full-blown riot erupts while the ballet continues. Police arrive but can't quell the crowd. The dancers, unable to hear the orchestra over the fracas, plow on bravely. The next day the press is vitriolic in its condemnation of the music and the ballet. The premiere of "The Rite of Spring" is a disaster.

Now, fast-forward ten months. March, 1914. Paris. This time, a concert, no ballet. The piece on the program? Once again, Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring."

The concert is sold out. All year, people have talked about the riot at the ballet and the scandalous music: everyone wants to hear what was so shocking, so horrifying.

What do you imagine happened that second opening night? Did the crowd riot again? Hardly. They cheered. They carried Stravinsky out of the concert hall on their shoulders. The press hailed him as a hero. In the following days, police shielded him from adoring fans tearing at his clothes in the streets.

From riots to raves

What moved Stravinsky from villain to hero in ten short months?

Familiarity.

In those intervening ten months, no one heard the music, but they were able to *think* about the music. They had time to accept the *idea* of primitive dissonance. When they finally had the opportunity to hear the music again, they could be thoughtful about what, ten months earlier, had been disturbing and unrecognizable. Chaotic dissonance now had pattern; the strange now seemed familiar.

Marta's all-hands meeting wasn't that different from Stravinsky's original opening night. Her news was so shocking, so unsettling, her teams couldn't process it. No one had prepared them to receive what was to them frightening and disorienting information.

When I talk with leaders about preparing people to receive change, I tell them the story of "The Rite of Spring" and emphasize the different outcome achieved when people had ten months to just *think* about something new. The lesson? Information alone created a different outcome.

(Time defused "The Rite of Spring" even further. Less than 30 years later, the piece had become so mainstream, Walt Disney used it in "Fantasia" alongside pieces by Bach, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky.)



When given information, people are able to adjust to the idea of change. But Kotter illustrates how that's exactly what's lacking in most change initiatives.

He cites studies showing that in any three-month period, typical corporate employees receive a total communication in the amount of 2,300,000 words or numbers. However, in the same three month period the same employees receive a mere 13,400 words or numbers about impending change—that's a mere .58% of the the total communication that leaders devote to communicating change!

Any wonder people greet many change initiatives the way "The Rite of Spring" was first greeted?

Communicating change

Kotter identifies seven strategies leaders must employ to communicate change effectively. They are:

1 Make it simple

Completely eliminate all jargon and technobabble. Speak plainly.

2 Use metaphor, analogy and story

A verbal picture is worth a thousand words.

3 Create multiple forums

Big meetings and small, memos and newspapers, formal and informal interactions—all are effective and necessary to drive the idea of change deep into an organization.

4 Repetition

Ideas only take root after people have heard them repeatedly. Don't be afraid to say the same things over and over.

5 Lead by example

Any behavior that's inconsistent with the vision undermines the change. Nothing creates cynicism faster than leaders who live by the motto: "Do as I say, not as I do."

6 Explain inconsistencies

No plan is perfect. People see the inevitable holes. Addressing the inconsistencies creates credibility; ignoring them makes leaders look out of touch or deceitful.

7 Engage in dialogue

Non-defensive, two-way communication is always more effective than one-way, top-down directives.



What a great list. Does it require effort? Oh, yes. But getting groups of people to think new thoughts and alter behavior doesn't come easily. I mean, really, think about how hard it is to get someone who loves you to just put the darned cap on the toothpaste! Now think about creating large-scale change in a diverse work group. Yikes! No wonder it takes an immense amount of planning to implement change successfully.

No matter how large or small a change you need to create, Kotter's book, *Leading Change*, will expand your thinking. The first thing I did when I got off the phone with Marta was order a copy for her—with express shipping! I felt certain that, like Stravinsky, she could get a second chance and create a different outcome—if only she'd engage *The Look & Sound of Leadership*TM.

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