

Leading the Social Side of Change

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According to a recent MIT/Sloan Management Review article, what really distinguishes high performers from the rest of the pack is their ability to maintain and leverage large, diversified networks that are rich in experience and span all organizational boundaries.

Ironic, isn't it? Here we are, smack in the middle of the Information Age, discovering that our greatest advantages aren't coming from what we know but rather from whom we know - and that the high achievers of today are not so much a product of superior expertise as they are a product of superior networks.

Not that it should have come as a surprise to those of us who study organizational behavior. Flattened hierarchies and virtual enterprises have increased workplace complexity while reducing institutional support. We've gone from relying on org charts to depending on social networks. So now, more than ever, successful professionals must leverage their relationships.

Which makes me wonder about the connection between personal networks and organizational change . . .

In the pursuit of "hard skill" competencies and formal strategies we may have failed to notice that the most effective change agents are those individuals who have placed themselves at the center of intricate webs of relationships. How to help employees build and maintain these unique relationships may be the most effective change-management "technique" a leader could learn.

The new business fundamentals include an increasing focus on knowledge, trust, relationships, and communities. And social networks - those ties among individuals that are based on mutual trust, shared work experiences, and common physical and virtual spaces are in many senses the true structure of today's organizations. Anything you as a leader can do to nurture these mutually rewarding, complex and shifting relationships will enhance the creativity and readiness for change within your team or throughout your organization.

This is true because your team or organization is an example of a complex adaptive system. In the natural world, examples of complex adaptive systems include brains, immune systems, and ant colonies. In each of these systems there is a network of individual "agents" acting in concert. In a brain the agents are nerve cells, enzymes, etc.; in a corporation the agents are departments, functions, individuals. Each agent functions in an environment produced by its interactions with other agents in the system. The relationships among agents are the conduits for the intelligence of the system. The more access agents have to one another, the more possibilities arise for creating innovative solutions to challenges faced by the whole system - and (as a direct consequence) the more prepared the system is to anticipate and react to change.

But, in order to capitalize on the business potential in relationships between people, trust has to be established. Trusting is not a matter of blind deference, but of placing - or refusing to place - trust with good judgment. In what are called "dense" relationships, the strength of connection is such that trust is taken for granted. In newer, less dense relationships, trust must be built.

Trust is the belief or confidence that one party has in the reliability, integrity and honesty of another party. It is the expectation that the faith one places in someone else will be honored. Or at least that is the definition of trust in its "benevolence-based" form. Another type of trust, "competence-based," describes a relationship in which one party believes another to be knowledgeable about a given subject. When building personal networks, both types of trust are

essential. People have to believe that you know what you're talking about, that you have accurate information and expertise, but they also have to believe that you're taking their perspectives and concerns to heart.

Another ingredient of trusting relationships is consistent credibility. One thing I've learned over the years is that you can talk until you're blue in the face, but you will never create trust unless your sustained behavior parallels what you say. That's why building trust can take so long. People are waiting to see a long-term, consistent pattern of behavior that is congruent with what you've been telling them.

High-trust relationships are also very personal. Beyond the obvious link of work-related issues, we develop relationships through finding things in common: loving the same music, rooting for the same team, having children in same school, liking the same kind of food, or playing the same sport. And sometimes a leader has to create experiences that enable individuals to get to know one another as fellow human beings.

A story I often tell in my Creative Collaboration program is about Jeff Garbin, whose first management assignment was to help facilitate John Deere's change from the "cell concept" of manufacturing in which employees merely performed one or two operations on a component before passing it on to the next cell to a "modular production system" in which all employees working on a given component would share equal responsibility for the finished product.

Along with the other new module leaders at Deere, it was Garbin's job to help his employees through the transition - and he had inherited a problem. In Garbin's words: "We had ten people working the early shift and five on the late one. There were people on the two shifts who had never spoken to one another before. They didn't know each other, they came from different manufacturing disciplines and they had a reputation for not getting along. I had to build some kind of relationship between the two shifts - and I had to do it quickly. What I thought of was pretty simple, but it turned out to be very effective. I got everyone together in a room for a couple of hours, with no limits on what they were to discuss, except that it couldn't be business-related. That was the beginning. Within three months, people started coming in early or staying late just so that they could talk with people on the other shift about what was happening at work."

Another issue leaders should be aware of is motive. Ron Burt, of the University of Chicago, discovered through numerous studies that certain patterns of connections that individuals build with others brings them higher pay, earlier promotions, greater influence, better ideas, and overall greater career success. But the MIT study found that high-performers didn't develop and maintain these networks because it was "political" or self-serving - but rather because it was a natural consequence of the most effective way to get work done. And the connections made with others worked in ways that were mutual and reciprocal.

I'm not saying that leaders should throw out all formal change-management strategies. But I am suggesting that leaders should understand that the social side of change - which includes building personal networks and developing trusting relationships - might prove to be the most powerful strategy of all.

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