

The 10 Questions Change Leaders Must Answer First

By Carol Kinsey Goman

Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D. is an international speaker, consultant, and author of *Ghost Story: A Modern Business Fable*; *This Isn't the Company I Joined*; *Creativity in Business*; *The Human Side of High-Tech*; *Change-Busting: 50 Ways to Sabotage Organizational Change*; *Managing for Commitment*; *Adapting to Change: Making it Work for You*; *The Loyalty Factor*; and *Managing in a Global Organization*. Contact - tel: 510-526-1727; e-mail: CGoman@CKG.com; web: www.CKG.com

Copyright © 2004-2008 Linkage. All rights reserved.

Linkage
Unleash your full potential.

Two or three years ago, I read a news story about an executive who had been hired to turn around the fortunes of a business that was on the rocks. The product was bad. Morale was awful. Management appeared to be confused about what to do. And customers were staying away in droves.

Clearly, this fellow had been hired to make changes, and here's what he said: "We gotta shake this place up and keep shaking until we get it right."

He was a change manager, to be sure. He had been brought in because things were not working well and somebody had to make miracles happen quickly. And our guy did that in spades, firing middle managers with abandon, reversing policies that had served the organization well, and establishing immediately that he was King.

You know what? It worked -- for a while. The operation seemed to take on a new focus, and customers returned. The product got better. Management relaxed and the teamwork that everyone had hoped for seemed to emerge once again. That's the good news.

But I used that word "teamwork" advisedly because this organization indeed was a team -- a minor-league baseball club in a large Southern city. Sports franchises make great cases for the study of change management because the results show up so quickly.

In this case, the "shaking up" of the organization worked for slightly less than one season and the new manager was summarily relieved even as his bravado still seemed to echo off the locker room walls. He was a bold manager of change, to be sure, but he was not a skilled one.

The lesson of our friend's forceful and narrow-minded attack on the company he set out to correct is critical for corporate managers. It says that change cannot be mandated or forced. It says that change has many constituents and that these constituents count.

It says that change managers need to ask difficult questions of themselves before they set out to "shake things up." And it insists that they must listen to the answers. Following are the questions that sensitive change managers must consider before they set out to improve things.

1 - What is the employees' perspective?

To mobilize a work force to transform itself, leaders must:

Know what people in the organization are thinking;

Encourage them to articulate their points of view and their concerns; and

Be ready to respond to them sincerely.

The first question that leaders should ask is: "What is the employees' perspective?" And don't rely on second-hand information or make assumptions about what you *think* employees think. Ask them -- and keep asking them until they tell you. Only then can you begin to design a strategy that builds on synergies and fills in perception gaps.

2 - Did you "set the stage" for change?

One of the most vital roles of leadership is to anticipate the corporation's future and its place in the global arena, and then to formulate strategies for surmounting challenges that have not yet manifested. To proactively respond to these challenges, businesses must continually reinvent themselves. Leaders must encourage employees to join a constant questioning of the prevailing

business assumptions -- and to be ready to act upon new opportunities early in the game to maintain a competitive advantage.

3 - Are you tracking employee perceptions throughout the change?

As important as it is to find out what employees are thinking before the change, it is just as crucial to have a system for monitoring employee perception throughout the change process. George Bernard Shaw once said that the problem with communication is "the illusion that it has been accomplished." When it comes to communicating change, leadership must be especially careful not to suffer that illusion.

Strategies that include employee interaction and feedback systems help organizations track the level of workforce comprehension. You will find that the greatest advantages come when organizational feedback is gathered immediately after the delivery of every important message. One of my clients uses this short questionnaire to query her audiences before they leave the meeting room:

- ◆ What, in your view, are the most important points we just covered?
- ◆ What didn't you understand?
- ◆ With what do you disagree?
- ◆ With what do you agree?
- ◆ What else do you need to know?

4 - Are you giving honest answers to tough questions?

In the light of economic realities that offer little in the way of job security, employees must be able to rely on their employer to give them honest information that will allow them to make informed choices about their own jobs, careers and futures. And when you can't answer every question, it is best to tell people that you understand their concern but don't know the answer. Or that you don't have the information yet, but will get back to them as soon as decisions are made. It is even better to tell people that you have the information but can't release it than to withhold or twist the truth. Not everyone will appreciate candid communication, but few will tolerate anything less.

5 - Can you answer the most important question: "What's in it for me?"

I was in Sweden working with a county government agency that was completely revamping its healthcare system. The leader of this enormous change was proud of the way he had communicated to the county's residents. They had been given a thorough briefing -- the reasons behind the change, the timing of the change, and exactly how it was to be carried out. Then he turned to me with a frown, "But you know, there is still one question that I get asked all the time." I interrupted. "Let me guess," I said. "People want to know if the wait for a doctor's appointment will be any shorter than it currently is. Am I right?" The man looked startled. "How did you know that?" he asked. I told him that I knew to expect that question because it is the one I hear most often about change -- What's in it for me?

6 - Is your communication "behavior-based?"

Organizations send two concurrent sets of messages about change. One set of messages goes through formal channels of communications -- speeches, newsletters, corporate videos, values statements and so forth. The other set of messages is "delivered" informally through a combination of "off the record" remarks and daily activities. When I coach senior management teams, I begin with two questions:

- ◆ What do you currently do that already supports the change?
- ◆ What do you have to do differently to align with the change?

For today's skeptical employee audience, rhetoric without action quickly disintegrates into empty slogans and company propaganda. In the words of Sue Swenson, president of Leap Wireless, "What you do in the hallway is more powerful than anything you say in the meeting room."

7- Can you paint the big, little picture?

Vision is the big picture (we'll look at this next), and it is crucial to the success of the enterprise. But along with the big picture, people also need the little picture:

Big Picture -- Present the concept of transformation.

Little Picture -- How are we going to do that?

Big Picture -- Set long-term corporate goals.

Little Picture -- Where do we begin?

Big Picture -- Develop the overall objectives of the transformation.

Little Picture -- What are the priorities?

Big Picture -- Create the mission of the organization.

Little Picture -- Where does my contribution fit in?

Big Picture -- Communicate organizational values.

Little Picture -- What does this mean in my daily life?

8 - Is it your vision or our vision?

Leaders understand the power of vision to imbue people with a sense of purpose, direction and energy. A compelling vision of the future pulls people out of the seductive hold of the past and inspires them to set and reach ambitious corporate goals. Of even greater importance is the sense of meaning that people derive from their jobs when they can tie their contributions to the fulfillment of a clear, compelling vision. Leaders must therefore be able to paint the big picture. But if the vision belongs only to top management, it will never be an effective force for transformation. The power of a vision comes truly into play only when the employees themselves have had some part in its creation. So the crucial question becomes, "Whose vision is it?" Leaders must create a master narrative that coherently articulates the company's identity and ideals, and is embraced by every member of the company. If you want employees to feel the same kind of connection to their work that the executives felt at the retreat, then you have to get employees involved too.

9 - Are you emotionally literate?

To be a consummate manager of change, it is not enough to engage people's logic, you also have to appeal to their emotions. As leaders arrive at the insight that people skills (the "soft stuff" of business) hold the key to organizational change, human emotions take on new significance. Large-scale organizational change almost invariably triggers the same sequence of reactions: denial, negativity, a choice point, tentative acceptance, commitment. Leadership can either facilitate this emotional process -- or ignore it at the peril of the transformation effort.

10 - Do you know what *shouldn't* change?

The greatest challenge for leaders is to know the difference between what has to be preserved and what needs to be changed. The "genius" of leadership is being able to preserve an organization's core values, and yet change and adapt as times require. And the product of that kind of leadership is a firm that goes on for a very long time.

Linkage

Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com