

# The StraightTalk Coach

## Insights for Leading From Strength

### Making the Leap

By Cathy A. Higgins & David J. Kreischer

Change is even desired and positive is stressful. Change forced on an organization by the competitive landscape ratchets up the stress exponentially. So it is not surprising that most organizations have a natural resistance to taking uncomfortable risks to improve, especially when their previous initiatives have resulted in significant successes. Yet the ability to change effectively and more quickly is fundamental to an organization's capacity to remain competitive.

Today's global marketplace presents opportunities and threats at such unprecedented speed that remaining with the tried and true is strategically questionable. Leaders and organizations must constantly learn, innovate and change to succeed.

Taking a risk to change sounds easy enough until one personally faces a journey into unknown territory and imagines the potential disasters. Change suddenly looks as dangerous as leaping across a chasm. How can leaders prepare themselves to make that leap?

#### Get Ready to Leap

Actually beginning a significant change is difficult for almost everyone. However, it will be much easier if you

treat preparing for change as a distinct phase of the process.

Just as you would not start a new exercise program without the right guidance and equipment, you should not begin a potentially risky change without proper preparation and tools. The following six-step cycle provides both.

---

Vision is not enough; it must be combined with venture. It is not enough to stare up the steps; we must step up the steps.

~ Václav Havel

---

#### Step 1: Partner with the Right Change Champions

Two heads are better than one at preparing for a significant change. Organize a group of champions to help you choose the right opportunities to pursue, generate innovative solutions and implementation plans, and provide encouragement and reality checks.

The right group of change champions will depend on your individual

style; it may also evolve as the change proceeds. For example, a kitchen cabinet may be helpful in the early stages to suggest which opportunities and risks are worth tackling. Later, a change agent may smooth implementation. A coach, spouse or life partner can be a valuable sounding board throughout.

Whichever change champions you choose, strive for a mix of supporters and critics who are committed to using StraightTalk to help you get started, celebrate successes, recover from setbacks, identify lessons learned and stay focused on the goal.

#### Step 2: Set the Right Goal

Your change objective should be both aspirational and strategically relevant. Given that significant change can risk both your reputation and critical resources, the goal must justify the leap. In other words, the potential outcome should be recognized by all key stakeholders as a breakthrough advance.

Articulating a goal that combines strategy and aspiration will also help attract the largest group to begin and sustain a significant change effort, regardless of the risks and discomfort it will no doubt entail. If your change journey does not strive for a BHAO

(Big Hairy Audacious Outcome, to paraphrase Jim Collins) in a way that inspires others, perhaps you are not aiming high enough.

### Step 3: Learn Broadly and Deeply

As much as significant change represents a foray into the unknown, navigational tools are almost always available from earlier explorers.

Look broadly and deeply for information to increase your options for innovative solutions and to learn about the experiences of others who have made the leap into similarly sweeping changes. Ask people you know, tap into different disciplines, surf the Internet and scour libraries. As your change strategy progresses, look for lessons you have learned and apply them to improve the process and its outcome.

The more you take a steady-aim-fire approach to learning what is possible, what might derail your change strategy and what unexpected opportunities the process might offer, the more confident you will feel about leaping into the breach and taking your organization with you.

### Step 4: Leverage Strengths to Drive Change

Barriers to change are strong; breaking through them demands one's strongest talents — individually and collectively. Clearly understanding your talents and the situations in which you apply them most effectively is an important step in overcoming natural barriers to beginning major change.

Take the time to develop or update an inventory of your strengths and those of your organization, then compare it to your goal. To what extent are they aligned? Do you have the required competencies? If not, will you need to hire people with specific abilities? What will you do with people whose skills are no longer needed?

### Step 5: Practice, Practice, Practice

Staging small successes in small arenas is one of the best ways to prepare to leap

into a major change. Trying less risky versions of your ultimate goal also builds confidence and sharpens skills while creating opportunities to plan and learn — all of which will help you make the larger-scale change more efficiently and effectively.

High-tech companies excel at using pilot programs and early adaptors to test innovations. Look for ways to do the same with your goal: Is there a group, small geographic market or portion of your customer base that could participate in a trial and provide feedback to help prepare you for the larger-scale change?

### Step 6: Support and Reinforce

Starting and successfully completing large-scale changes requires a steady stream of courage, focus, flexibility and resiliency. Sustaining such a high level of energy requires ongoing encouragement and positive reinforcement, which is one reason change champions are so important.

Your organization also needs support and positive reinforcement to help it fully engage in and complete a significant change process. Encourage every leader at every level of the organization to be a champion for his or her team. Recognizing successes and failures, articulating lessons learned and explaining mid-course adjustments will help refresh people's appetite for participating in the change effort and reaching its objective.

### Beware of the Sideshow

Following the six-step process outlined above will help you and your organization become more able and ready to risk leaping across the chasm of a major change. However, be prepared for a predictable and dangerous pitfall: sideshows.

Discomfort with the intrinsic risks of change often spurs leaders to create absorbing, seemingly important activities that keep them and their organizations so busy making pretend changes that they cannot make relevant changes. Such sideshows can range from a flavor-of-the-month program to budget planning, cost-cutting, improving productivity,

rolling out new technology, attaining zero defects and the like.

Some of the most insidious sideshows are long-standing programs or processes that, upon careful examination, no longer support your strategic aspirations.

Although frequently unintentional, sideshows represent a retreat into the comfort zone that is an unaffordable luxury. How can you tell if an initiative is a sideshow? Ask yourself and your change champions what role it plays in achieving your strategic intent. If a program does not move the organization forward by directly addressing significant threats or opportunities, it is most likely a sideshow that will absorb energy and resources vital to accomplishing strategic change.

There is only one effective remedy for sideshows: A leader must be brave enough to stop them so the organization can focus on taking appropriate risks to generate game-changing performance.

Building the courage to leap into a major change is just the beginning. The same courage and fortitude — and the same six-step cycle — can help you and your organization launch several major change initiatives simultaneously. Although resistance to making risky changes is normal, such change is essential. In a market as fast-moving, complex and demanding as today's, leaders and organizations that are determined to succeed cannot afford to hesitate at the edge of the change chasm. Leaders and organizations must prepare and then leap, taking risks to innovate, grow and change. [HK](#)

*Change or Die: The Three Keys to Change at Work and in Life* by Alan Deutschman

*Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series) by Robert E. Quinn

*The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life* by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander

© 2007 Higgins Kreischer & Associates

