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The Boost of Change Leadership

When Captain David Marquet took command of a Navy submarine for the first time in 1999, it was both a dream come true and a leadership nightmare. David had always wanted to be a submarine captain. He graduated near the top of his class at the U.S. Naval Academy. He trained for a year to take the helm at the USS *Olympia*. But at the very last moment, he was instead assigned to take the command of the USS *Santa Fe*, a much newer and faster ship, but also a ship with the worst performance track record in the Navy. In his first stint as a submarine captain, David found himself leading a vessel about which he knew nothing.

Taking his command, he discovered another problem: he noticed that people blindly followed directions from above and blamed “them” if the result fell short of the objective. This problem hit home one day when David gave a command (“two-thirds ahead”) that—unlike on the *Olympia*—was technically impossible to execute on the *Santa Fe*. The command was relayed forward by David’s senior officer, but stalled when the helmsman sheepishly informed his captain that there was





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no “two-thirds” on the *Santa Fe*. When David asked his senior officer if he was aware of this fact, the response was, “Yes, but you gave the order.”

It was high time for a change.

That evening, David gathered his officers and told them, “Unless you start announcing your intent rather than blindly repeating orders, this submarine is simply going to drive in a straight line.” David added, “In fact, I am not going to give orders.” He also abolished the word “they,” asking his people to instead say “we.”

What changed? Everything. David’s team of 135 sailors began—first with skepticism and then with commitment—to assume ownership, think about what they were doing, and strive for excellence rather than the mere avoidance of mistakes. Within a year, the crew went from the worst performing in the U.S. submarine fleet to the best, winning awards for performance and effectiveness while drastically increasing retention. Indeed, David had such lasting influence that the ship continued to win awards long after he moved on to new assignments. “The trick is not to think yourself into a different way of acting,” David told me, “but to act yourself into a different way of thinking.”¹

David was unambiguously in charge of his ship, and he saw a need for change. He drove the change with purpose, and built a fundamentally different culture in doing so: one of performance and accountability. What he learned along the way was that everybody—literally everybody—can take ownership of his or her area of expertise. And when he or she is allowed to do so, “the goodness is no longer tied to you as a person; it is tied to



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people and what they do.” The goodness, in other words, is tied to the culture. This is change leadership at work.

Change Leadership

Change leadership is about transforming and aligning an organization through its people to drive for improvement in a new and challenging direction. This competency creates a wave of change that allows any one person to have impact beyond his or her individual remit. Change leadership is not just about identifying necessary changes personally. It is possible, in fact, for someone to be a reasonably effective change leader without being a strategist. This competency is about driving change through the organization, getting others to want to change, and encouraging them to innovate themselves. What’s more, it is not about forcing change on people but rather getting them on board and cultivating their willingness to accept, drive, and lead change. A critical element is the ability to engage people so that they *want* to change. And as we’ll see in Chapter Six, engaging people means making them feel different about the need for change. It means finding something they truly care about.

An individual with a low level of the change leadership competency is someone who tends to think of the status quo as effective. This person may fail to see the need for change, but could still accept it if pressed. Others with low levels of this competency may accept that change is normal and think well of it in general terms—but not be eager or proactive around the topic. An individual with midlevel competency in change leadership



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is one who begins to actively challenge the status quo, pointing out what needs to change—though not how—and tries to help people who are struggling with this concept. This person may also define a positive direction for change and make a case others can buy into, using logic to persuade people.

Those who have a highly developed change leadership competency actively promote change with an array of approaches to start mobilizing individuals to change. They build coalitions, foster diversity of thought, coordinate the change effort across multiple individuals, and take a more long-term, sophisticated approach to introducing change. They create champions who will mobilize others to change, ultimately creating organization-wide momentum around change. Those at the highest level of this competency cultivate this quality of change across highly complex organizations, or create a culture capable of constant change for improved results.

Change leadership is a critical competency at the early stage of sustainability transformation because it is so vital in building the momentum needed to get going. Owens Corning and its chief sustainability officer, Frank O'Brien-Bernini, provide a rich case study of this competency in action.

How Frank Rejuvenated Owens Corning

Frank O'Brien-Bernini remembers the moment he began his evolution in becoming a change leader. Standing in the office of his CEO, talking to the boss about the general need to embrace sustainability issues, something in the air shifted.



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In fact, Frank recalls, there may not have been any pronouncements made. “It was very short and sweet, led by the CEO’s body language at that meeting. It was: OK, I’ve got it. I don’t understand it, but I hear what you are saying and I trust that this is important.” It was unspoken but understood. Frank knew he had his marching orders.

With that, Frank both headed the company’s R&D function and became its chief sustainability officer, even though no one had really clarified what that second title entailed. At the time, Owens Corning was operating under bankruptcy protection, so sustainability meant more than the traditional “green” efforts. The very sustainability of the organization itself was on the line. Would Owens Corning emerge a viable business concern? Would it be a healthy, thriving organization in the future? Could it be, in this very stark business sense, sustainable? Frank believed that the “green” sustainability and the business sustainability goals were necessarily and uniquely intertwined. One would open the door to the other.

Frank decided that to drive change, he needed muscle. From all corners of the company, he tapped individuals to serve on the company’s first Sustainability Council. The members came from different divisions, critical functions, and different places on the hierarchy; notably, they did not share any one vision for the definition of sustainability. What they did share was organizational respect and influence: they were people who could get things done. This was a key decision by Frank. He didn’t want a council full of tree-huggers. Instead, he wanted a diversity of opinion as to how sustainability should play out in a manufacturing environment. It was a challenging



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collection of individuals, not all of whom were willing. Frank recalls, “I had one person come to me and ask, ‘Why am I here? I don’t need to be here.’” But if the council was to fulfill its role as part of the change process, that person did need to be there. The initial council was made up of a select cross-functional subset of the organization’s most influential business leaders—typical of the lean structure of the best newly minted sustainability teams.

Frank’s first task was to help the council understand its mandate. There was plenty of debate around the table during those early meetings, he recalled. “When we would get together, it was a learning thing. Few knew what it was all about.” Many had questions like, “What is sustainability? Why does it matter? What is our role? Do our customers, employees, investors care? And the ultimate and potentially disempowering question: is our top leadership really committed to this?”

This kind of debate is not an uncommon or even undesirable part of a company’s transformation process. In fact, it’s essential as any organization moves along the sustainability continuum in pursuit of a culture of purpose. But it is also a bit of a danger zone because too often, this lack of concrete vision is used to stop the transformation before it starts. Because the team is infused with a sense of urgency but not yet armed with a road map, naysayers may take the opportunity to disparage and discourage. It’s critical to remember that this urgency-without-clarity is a common, even necessary and useful emotional state. If properly channeled rather than shut down, this energy will inspire the next steps.



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This is precisely how Frank dealt with his council. He told them, You are the voice of sustainability as it leaves this room and travels back into the everyday operations of this company. You are the person who will raise the sustainability issues and opportunities that matter in your space. If there is an IT project being reviewed, the IT member of this team would be the one to raise the issues of where servers are being housed and if they are more or less efficient than the servers being replaced. If you are in manufacturing, you are the voice in the meeting asking whether the latest capital project is better or worse for our environmental footprint in the plant. If you are in product development, you are the one who asks whether the new product will be better or worse than the old product when used by a customer designing to one of the various green building programs, or comparatively better than alternate solutions across its life cycle. The council, he explained, is designed not to convene and discuss its issues at one meeting, but to converge and then disseminate the need for change throughout the company.

Indeed, this is the key way in which change leadership differs from another familiar process, change advocacy. Many who have dealt with issues of sustainability are accustomed to hearing from advocates—evangelists who will come into a company or into a conference room and exhort and lecture about their brand of change. That's not unique to sustainability, of course. Change advocates preach for gun rights and for gun control; for evolution and for creationism; any cause will do, really. They favor monologue over dialogue, however. Change *leadership* augments this approach. It starts with the willingness



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to stand up for a point of view that requires action in close quarters, even if you are the only one in the room advocating for that particular thing (indeed especially then). Leading change means not only presenting your view to others but also transforming those people into multipliers of the message from their own vantage points.

I liken the difference between change advocacy and change leadership to the difference between a trebuchet catapult and a Trojan horse: one is designed to overcome and destroy walls, the other to be invited in. And in this invitation, I have found again and again, the seeds for a far different outcome. An individual may be swayed by a powerful lecture. But how much more impact that same message might have if it came from inside that individual's work team. Frank didn't send his team out to give lectures, but rather to convey aligned messaging and drive different actions from inside the walls of Owens Corning's culture.

Of course, not everything can be moved forward through discussion, so the council also adopted some more concrete tactics. One was the creation of a capital fund—sort of an in-house venture capital project—set to support sustainability projects around the company. “If we just go around saying, ‘We are really worried about energy, and we need your help and let's all invest,’ that's not going to be successful,” Frank says. The council needed more firepower. It needed a way to get inside the capital investment decisions of managers all over Owens Corning. The result: a pool of funds earmarked for sustainability initiatives, with the sustainability council as its keeper and investor. Owens Corning employees, and their facilities, had an opportunity to compete for it—putting forth their best projects



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in hopes of securing funding. What was different here was that, over time, confidence grew that the best energy projects would get done. The extra effort to develop those projects, on the part of otherwise busy people, would absolutely be rewarded with funding.

Around the company, eager participants stepped up.

“What we ended up with was an awesome pipeline of projects—lighting projects, compressor upgrades, motor replacements, natural gas leak detection. All of these were relatively small as single projects, but had a large impact when shared across the company. We later came to call these low cost/no cost capital projects,” Frank says.

At some locations, plant “green teams” sought funding to install more-efficient motion-sensing lighting in warehouses, and other off-the-shelf energy savers. Other projects were more creative. At a plant in Toronto, a particularly active plant “green team” crafted a plan for a solar wall. Their vision: paint the south wall of the building black, with a special glaze, and use that as part of the plant’s space-heating system.

The projects themselves were beneficial, but their existence did much more than create small sustainability inroads throughout the company. Over time, they began to create a behavior—indeed a culture—biased toward productivity programs that reduce resource consumption.

Also as part of this change leadership process, Frank and his council began working to create a new language that supported the cultural changes of sustainability. For example, the word “broken” came to mean more than “no longer works.” In a manufacturing setting, anybody would say he already



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knows what the word “broken” means. It means you flip the On switch and the thing doesn’t work. But as part of the transformation process, the sustainability council encouraged a new definition of “broken.” Now, they said, it takes on a broader meaning. Something that still functions—a fixed-speed fan, for example—is deemed broken if its efficiency is 70 percent when equipment achieving 90 percent is readily available, such as a variable-speed fan. This kind of easy and accessible language empowered people throughout the organization to look for what’s broken, what could be improved.

Through his experiences, Frank learned an important truth about how to be a successful change leader. The key, he says, is to know where the task starts and finishes. Change leadership is a competency that spikes at a certain point on the journey toward sustainability—the early part. Great change leaders do their best work there, and then move on. The role, Frank says, is to give birth to the new process—in a single team or in a division or even company-wide—and once it becomes autonomous, look for the next challenge. “If you’re an optimizer, this would drive you nuts,” he says. “You have to hand it off well before it’s optimized. You’ve got to love to start something and then say, OK, this team’s got it, they’ll improve it incrementally. And you’ll move on. So you have to force yourself to stand back and let go when things are becoming most interesting, and move on to the next thing you want to ignite.”

Here we see Frank, notwithstanding his C-suite title, enabling others to take ownership. Of the psychological studies that have explored how power can influence behavior, one involving cookies memorably concluded that “high-power



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individuals were more likely to chew with their mouths open and to get crumbs on their faces and on the table.”² Unlike Frank, in other words, some people endowed with the power of leadership positions tend to domineer and lose consideration for others (and as we will see in the next chapter on influencing, this limits the scope of change in an organization). You might say that cookie monsters are poor change leaders, because they do not willingly share their power with others. Great change leaders, in contrast, allow those around them to take ownership, rather than monopolizing the change.

To wit, Frank decided that he’d know it was all working when the news of some sustainability success got back to him—and it was the first he’d heard of it. Frank recalls picking up the phone one day and hearing about a successful water reduction program at one of the Owens Corning plants. The caller was delivering congratulations to the chief sustainability officer, but Frank had not known about that particular effort. His knee-jerk reaction might have been, *Oh, I should have known*. But in reality, that he didn’t know and that it happened without him are even more remarkable—and even more worthy of congratulations. On a day like that, when the sustainability goal was met with no input from the change leader, he could say, *We’ve made our goals so clear and they’ve been embraced so completely that people take it upon themselves to do something*. It may be the work of a plant supervisor or one of the environmental leaders at a division, but it’s not the original sustainability council giving orders. Sustainability has become an organic part of the way the organization functions. It is change that no longer relies on a leader, because it is part of the culture.



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Another sign: when the culture of purpose is so ingrained in the company that it starts to spread the message outward to customers and vendors. Frank related a story to me about a homebuilder in Denver with a strong interest in incorporating better energy efficiency into the houses he builds. Frank and his team, in partnership with the builder, have been working through a totally new approach to this process, looking for ways not only to improve energy efficiency but also to better communicate this improved performance to the home buyers: What language can be used to do essentially what was done so well at Owens Corning? How can the Denver homebuilder act as a change leader, bringing in Owens Corning as a critical part of his “sustainability council” and ultimately influencing homebuyers to want to join in the change process? It’s an exciting extension of Frank’s change leadership abilities, and it reflects the broader possibilities of sustainability transformation. Such a transformation is portable beyond your factory walls and can travel with you as you do business out in the world.

Going for the Handprint Instead of the Footprint

In addition to understanding the tactical steps of change leadership, it pays also to consider the tone of communications. In sustainability circles, the discussion will increasingly be framed with the “handprint” versus the “footprint” labels. Many who have heard about sustainability issues over the years are



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familiar with the use of the word “footprint” in this context. We are constantly exhorted to reduce our footprint—that is, reduce our impact on the world around us. This is how we have been schooled to demonstrate our care for the planet and for the cause of sustainability. And it’s about as motivating as daily beatings.

When it comes to change leadership, we should place our bets on handprints. Instead of focusing on reducing bad unintended consequences, let’s talk about maximizing the positive impact we can actively pursue as a primary objective. Convey your information in a context of what can be done *beneficially* rather than in the negative context of what has to stop. This thinking will take you to the core of what your organization does—its purpose. And rest assured, the purpose of your organization is not to reduce carbon emissions.

In the case of Owens Corning, the footprint perspective leads you to reducing the energy footprint ever more, first relatively with respect to production and then absolutely. Ultimately, you will “win” when you shut down the business and consume no more energy. That does not sustain the business.

From the handprint perspective, in contrast, change goals consider how the world is affected by Owens Corning products—how much energy is saved in an insulated building, for example. It is a much more aspirational approach: whereas the best you can do with a footprint is get to zero, a positive handprint has no upper limit. When you frame sustainability issues in this handprint context as Frank does, you adopt a



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tone of aspiration and collaboration rather than criticize your listener's destructive behavior. Changing to good is much more rewarding than changing from bad. When the handprint context augments the footprint context, it is inspirational and creates a change momentum of its own.

Next

What happened to Owens Corning? When Frank began his work on sustainable change and his efforts at change leadership, the very existence of the company was on the line. Bankruptcy is a last resort and comes with considerable risks. Fix this situation by this date, or we break this company up and sell off its parts, and you fade into business history.

After six years, Owens Corning successfully emerged from bankruptcy. It emerged because it did a lot of things right and repositioned for the long term. Sustainability was an important part of that strategy and will continue to be going forward.



As we have seen with Frank's example, change leadership first requires a perspective on the need for change itself—as evidenced by the fact that nobody knew what his new title entailed. Frank believed that sustainability would be instrumental to Owens Corning's future, and he stood up for this point of view. Second, he encouraged change in individuals,



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starting with the council he handpicked according to members' ability to multiply the message rather than their ideology. And third, Frank scaled the change through supportive infrastructure, not only internally through the in-house capital fund that allowed everybody to participate but also externally by partnering directly with homebuilders.

Notice that Frank did not pull rank—indeed, he defines success as the process running without his prodding. Anybody can give orders. But who can lead change?

Discovering the Leader: Markers for the Competency of Change Leadership

When evaluating a potential leader, what can you look for that will tell you how this person will step up as an agent of change? The competencies of the leaders you enable to lead change will define the quality of the change itself. The incidence of highly competent change leaders at the C-level (1 in 16) is triple that of the general management population (1 in 47), and whether in a nuclear submarine or an advanced materials manufacturer, these are the people you want to put in position next to you as you drive change.

Because change leaders can be division heads, or managers of teams, or the individual in the department who can be most relied on to create forward momentum on any given project, the markers will vary widely. What follows is a list of questions to help you zero in on the ability to lead change.



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What to Look For	How to Look for It
<p>These individuals invite the most powerful people to their side—especially if they don't readily agree with them.</p>	<p>When have you tried to assemble a diverse group of influential people together to deliver a major change? How did you do that, and what happened?</p> <p>What person have you partnered with who was most diametrically opposed to your views? How?</p>
<p>By crafting narratives that reflect the personal aspirations of others, they allow others to own and feel good about change.</p>	<p>[Listen]</p>
<p>They are effective at scaling initiatives and stand back as soon as others take ownership.</p>	<p>When have you recruited others to become change agents?</p> <p>How did you choose and entice them?</p> <p>How do you know when to let them run with things?</p>
<p>They stand up for and are authentically committed to change.</p>	<p>When have you championed the need for change in front of a skeptical or hostile audience? How did you go about it?</p> <p>How is your devotion to this initiative reflected in your life more broadly?</p>
<p>They believe in the power of groups and opt to join them.</p>	<p>Have you played a team sport? Was there a moment when you had to help the team adopt a different point of view?</p>
<p>They create mechanisms that scale change through multiple degrees of separation.</p>	<p>How have you used social media to advance an issue?</p> <p>Tell me about a time you picked up the echo of an initiative you launched from an unexpected place.</p>
<p>They exploit language to build a vocabulary that captures meaning in ways bespoke to their culture.</p>	<p>Are there acronyms or rallying cries you have used along the way? How did they come to be? How did you use them?</p> <p>When have you found language to be at its most powerful in driving change?</p>



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What to Look For	How to Look for It
Favoring scale and pace over efficiency and control, they resist the temptation to optimize.	When have you handed control over to others too early? How did you pick that moment? Looking back, when could you have handed control over to others earlier? What was the opportunity cost of not doing so?

Red Flags: The opposite of change leadership is change resistance, so beware of people who consistently fail to support new business initiatives by others or to contribute meaningful ones of their own. Such individuals will generally not recognize or acknowledge any need for improvement. In referencing them, you are likely to hear frustration from those who feel that this kind of person actively resisted change even in the face of compelling evidence.