

Prod the Turtle

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In times of change, leaders who have a tendency to hide in their shells can create uncertainty and mistrust.

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Change initiatives can be challenging at best, and nearly 70 percent of them fail to deliver intended outcomes.

Lack of communication and effective change management contribute to this dilemma. People who are targets of the change must first hear and understand before they act. Confidence in their leadership represents a significant underlying motivation for their actions.

Hesitant leaders impede organizational change, while leaders who demonstrate conviction, authenticity and managerial courage get superior results.

The recession has impacted more than incomes, productivity and employment figures. It has fostered excessive risk aversion. Rather than acting as effective change leaders, far too many executives are acting like turtles in defensive mode. Their hesitance slows them down, and they emotionally disengage. The unintended consequences are many—credibility, reputation and political capital are affected. Employees can become cynical, disengaged and unproductive.

With so much at stake in today's competitive landscape, it pays to notice and quickly address the early warning signs of "turtling" in yourself or others and to minimize this unproductive behavior as you embark on change initiatives.

Turtle Signs

Turtles and turtling behavior exist at the highest levels. Executives may reach a point of overwhelming reluctance to bear the conviction of leadership. This can occur when there is a significant change in the environment or when leadership demands higher performance, leading to intense visibility.

Turtling signs include the following behaviors:

- Having subconscious reactions to stress and anxiety.
- Trying to avoid rocking the boat or jeopardizing political capital.
- Using a mechanism to prevent taking the fall for poor performance.
- Attempting to dodge risk and difficult encounters with others.
- Having a tendency to micromanage your team.
- Using tightly controlled communications.
- Having difficulty following through on commitments.
- Avoiding conflict, or refusing to deliver bad news and give direct feedback.
- Conveniently not hearing or dismissing challenging feedback.

As a leader charged with leading change, you often have choices. You can be courageous or complacent, take personal responsibility or avoid conflict, speak up and communicate a compelling vision or tolerate groupthink. Change leadership is all about increasing employee commitment to the new vision while decreasing commitment to the status quo.

Leading change requires conviction, authenticity and managerial courage. Being complacent, avoiding conflict, and rewarding the same behaviors in others all lead to an erosion of trust among team members.

Under these circumstances, a leader will get stalled and miss milestones, thereby costing the organization money. You will create an environment of fear, uncertainty and cynicism. Soon, top performers will head toward the exit door.

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Coming Out of the Shell

Effective change leaders mobilize energy and create action plans for themselves and the change effort. To inspire acceptance of changes, leaders should:

- Be challenged in their thinking, especially about engaging in conflict.
- Take a broader view of their values, goals and personal responsibility.
- Strategically evaluate opportunities to influence top leaders.
- Create alignment around their intentions within the organization.
- Visibly fight for the values they think will foster change.
- Engage their team and give employees stretch goals.
- Develop a clear and compelling change story.
- Acknowledge employee concerns and future impact.
- Give frequent recognition as well as direct feedback when necessary.

Continuity Counts

The current economic landscape requires courageous leaders to drive growth and stay ahead of the competition. Leaders will need to simultaneously lead people to perform, drive execution and sustain optimism while living their organization's core values. Otherwise, the costs to the business may be significant.

People make change happen, not organizational charts, redesigned processes or metrics. Leaders must build trust, show that they care and demonstrate that they have the guts to take the heat when the going gets tough. Prodding your own inner turtle when you slip into unproductive workplace behavior is not an overnight process. But it is possible through effort, honesty and consistency.

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