

Paul Aitken: On Leading Change

A COLLECTIVE APPROACH Why is it so difficult to successfully implement change? Paul Aitken has some answers, but those seeking leadership's Holy Grail could be disappointed. by Vicki Jayne

If change really is the new constant, then those able to successfully lead organisations through times of change are increasingly vital. But as Paul Aitken points out in his recent book*, research suggests that as many as 70 percent of change initiatives fail to realise their goals.

What's going wrong?

That's an enquiry that informs not only his writing but the consultancy work Aitken has been doing with both public and private sector organisations in New Zealand and the UK. As visiting fellow at Henley Business School and Southampton University and international director for Concordia, he's focused on creating a framework for developing change leadership that is both effective and measurable in terms of organisational impact.

"Are leaders a force for good or bad? Very rarely are there performance measures in place to measure their impact on people and on culture – I think we are doing some groundbreaking work on those measures," he says.

In New Zealand recently to run master classes on change leadership, Aitken reckons there has been a huge focus on individual leaders marked by an almost "holy grail" hunt for the right leadership recipe. For him, it is much more to do with developing leadership cultures than individual hero leaders.

"There is a background influence on the way I came to that. I grew up in a

coal-mining community in the Midlands and if you didn't do what is called collective leadership down the mines then people died. So there is something there about collective team-based responsibility rather than a huge focus on individuals."

Experience in the field has also convinced him that too much individualism or ego in the mix seldom produces sustainable outcomes.

"Getting overly focused on the great man or great woman theory of leadership can only take you so far. I'd like to move

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away from definitions of what leaders are to what they do – and in the case of the book, what they do to implement change."

What they don't do is spend excessive amounts of time strategising or coming up with new policy initiatives.

"I think leadership has to be more focused. Doing more with less is a reality that's been around in the public sector for a while now and it's really about implementing a smaller number of priorities more effectively. I've worked with policy people (in the public sector) both in the UK and here,

as well as with top companies, and there is often a disconnect between making policy and implementing it on the ground.

"Change leadership is more about implementation than endless debates about policy or strategy. How you do that is through distributed leadership – you connect people up across the system."

A public sector example in the UK is an initiative called "Total Place" which takes a specific geographic region and gets all the public sectors agencies in that region to join up in delivering frontline services

to a local community. The idea is to map flows of public spending and make links between the services to identify where public money can be more effectively spent, says Aitken.

"So it's moving away from a whole-of-government dictate to put more power back in local hands to deliver on the needs of that specific community because their needs vary. That is something else about change leadership – that it comes in various forms. It's not about responding with a one-shoe-fits-all approach. It's being open

and responsive to local or organisational needs and differences rather than having everything managerialised, standardised or systematised.”

An example from business is Starbucks’ move to give local managers the power to change local outlets to suit the local environment, says Aitken.

“I think that’s smart – the product is still the same but it allows local managers to tune into local diversity and identity. Local identities matter.”

It’s why change leadership and organisational culture go hand in hand – and why many change initiatives (particular mergers and acquisitions) don’t work.

“There’s good research to show that 70 percent of change initiatives are ineffective. They over-promise and under-deliver. And when you peel it back, it was not lack of finance or a problem with the idea; it was lack of getting people on board to help the change happen.

“There are some classic failures – Daimler Chrysler for instance, where you had German and US cultures rubbing up against each other and it just didn’t work. Change leaders have to cope with that.”

So what makes a good change leader?

Aitken has identified 10 capabilities drawn both from research and from his own 20 years of experience in leadership, academia and consultancy work and notes there are two themes underlying these.

“One is that change leaders have to be able to continually learn and to promote learning because if you don’t do that, you won’t pick up on what’s around the corner and will lose any sense of innovation.

“The other thing – and this is back to basics – is that if you can’t relate to people and have quality conversations with them, then you are not going to lead anyone anywhere. So those are skills assumed of leaders, particularly when they get to senior roles – but guess what...”

Capability one, he says, is about being mindful and open to change.

“There’s this idea leaders need to be decisive – you have the answer and can’t be seen to be weak or wavering. But when you’re dealing with change, you can box yourself in so this one is about being open

to shifts in the environment or unfolding events that require different responses.”

Capability two is being able to access the “broadband” capability of organisational leadership. “Draw on the different nationalities, genders, cultures and bring those different windows on the world to work on issues,” says Aitken.

Next is the ability to create a learning environment. “Follow the [Jim] Collins recipe – research shows it works. Continually review what you are best in the world at, how do the economics of this business work best and what best ignites the passion of your people.”

Fourth on Aitken’s list is “future sense-making” combined with strategic thinking. “It’s about being sensitive to the world and what’s changing in it. Research shows leaders spend 80 percent of their time on things that account for just 10 percent contribution – the day-to-day politics and internal machinations. Change leaders have to spend more time thinking about the external environment.”

Five is developing “total” leadership – a walk-the-talk ability to model the behaviours you want others to follow, says Aitken. “Leaders really need to know the impact of how they operate in their work environment.”

Six is trans-cultural competence. The lesson for change leadership is that one size does not fit all, says Aitken. “You have to be sensitive to cultural difference – not just in terms of nationalities but the different values driving, say, sales force or IT.”

Capabilities seven and eight have to do with relational skills and the ability to coach. Coaching has to be on the agenda – and coaching not just one to one but one to many. “How many leaders can facilitate groups to draw out ideas, to bottom out differences and to manage conflict. That skill set is vital for change leaders – unless you can facilitate audiences like that I’m not sure you can generate change.”

Contributing to that facility is capability nine: emotional intelligence. If you can’t make good

connection with people, then don’t try to lead them.

Tenth on Aitken’s list is the ability to institute a high-quality performance challenge culture and dialogue throughout the organisation. “Are you setting that expectation in the workplace?” he asks.

And despite authoring a book, Aitken warns that developing younger generations of leaders may require different learning media. “When developing talent, change leaders will have to think about how younger people learn – it will probably be different to how we did it. A book might not be the right way to go.” **M**

**Developing Change Leaders: The principles and practices of change leadership development.* Paul Aitken and Malcolm Higgs. Published by Butterworth-Heinemann.

