

Change and the Art of Inspirational Leadership

By Bob Waters

Have you ever stared at a three dimensional, computer-generated image in an attempt to view the message or picture hidden among the symmetrical patterns? Maybe you're one of the perceptive few who can immediately see what others often have difficulty seeing or perhaps will never see.

Now think about the never-ending parade of change situations that confront your organization and the way they are perceived by those who are impacted by those changes. Is your change message easily discernable and understandable or is it written and communicated with the clarity of the computer-generated image – a message that some see and embrace while others don't or can't.

Based on what we have experienced throughout the last quarter of 2008 and certainly into the foreseeable future, we can anticipate being bombarded by a continual barrage of challenges that will test your mettle as a leader. In your leadership role, you bear the responsibility and accountability for creating an appetite for your critical change initiatives necessitated by the current business environment. That may sound like Leadership 101, but the reality is that you must deliver your message with clarity and conviction. If your employees don't fully understand the "why", even the most effective communication of the

"what" and the "how" of the change won't really seem to matter very much.

So how do you translate what you need to do into action? As an effective leader, you must be able to communicate to your colleagues and associates, exactly where they're going, why they're going there, what they need to do (individually and collectively) to get there and how they will cooperate and collaborate along the way.

According to Rosabeth Moss Kanter, expert on strategy, innovation and change management, "Leaders must wake people out of inertia. They must get people excited about something they've never seen before, something that does not yet exist."

That being true, it makes sense that your message must inspire people to heed the call to action. It must:

- Be delivered enthusiastically and in a clear and concise manner.
- Ignite passion, be honest, timely and energetic
- Instill confidence in the change initiative and faith in the future.
- Instill self-confidence in those who bear the burden of delivering the business results.
- Be inclusive and focused. Motivate those who chose to get involved, to willingly and aggressively convert your words and passion into their roadmaps for action and success.

Now, whether you agree with his politics or not, no one can argue that Barack Obama executed these communication "musts" flawlessly.

He never strayed from message. He articulated what he believed were the benefits of following his lead. He brought people who had been on the political sidelines onto the field of play. He excited the electorate to the extent that his passion became their passion. He told his followers where “we” need to go, why “we” need to go there and what “we” have to do to make the vision of change a reality. He took little or nothing out of play and spoke continuously about possibilities.

So, oratory skills and personal style notwithstanding, what steps can you take to craft an inspirational communication strategy that will elevate the passion of your team during times of change? Consider the following as possibilities.

1. Be fearless. Create a compelling call to action for your change initiative. This call to action will serve as the burning platform for those impacted by the change and should reflect the “why of the change”, the benefits to be realized, any associated risks and the scope. It should draw people to the challenges associated with the change initiative.
2. Communicate the truth. Tell the real story. Don’t be concerned with telling people what they want to hear, tell them what they need to hear. Stay on message. Keep the change vision alive by continuously seeking feedback. Invite questions and concerns. Give everyone a forum in which to speak.

3. Be inclusive. Give everyone the opportunity to participate and grow. Encourage them to become change catalysts. Change catalysts generate movement. Let them figure out how best to localize and implement the change initiative in their areas of concentration. Give them the freedom to set their own courses of action.
4. Be patient. Even if things go reasonably well and that actions are carried out appropriately and effectively, progress will be strongly nonlinear.
5. And finally, be yourself. Allow yourself to grow into the role of inspirational leader.

Rare is the person who was born on that mountaintop. It all starts with the first step – creating a call to action that engages the hands, heads and hearts and results in passionate performance.

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