

How to Be a Successful Change Leader

Learn how to lead change effectively with our research-based guidance on what we found that successful change leaders do to create a shared understanding of the “what” and the “why.”

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9 Competencies for Effective Leadership Through Change

Leading change successfully is one of the biggest challenges of individual leaders and one of the most common problems that modern organizations face. In today’s world, the strategic imperative to change is often clear: Without being able to do things differently, your organization is unlikely to succeed, or even to last.

At its core, change management for leaders requires working together to create a shared understanding of change required to execute the strategy, and how to best make it happen. But change-management research has demonstrated time after time that organizational change initiatives fail more often than they succeed, despite all the resources put into creating change management processes.

We know that effective leadership is essential to successful change. But we wanted to understand the *differences* in change leadership between successful and unsuccessful change leaders, so our researchers

conducted [a study](#) and asked 275 senior executives to reflect on successful and unsuccessful change efforts they'd led.

Our goal was to characterize “change-capable leadership,” define the key leadership competencies necessary for effective leadership through change, and better understand leadership behaviors that could contribute to change failures.

The executives we surveyed were all participants in our [Leadership at the Peak](#) program, which targets executives with more than 15 years of management experience, responsibility for 500 or more people, and decision-making authority as members of top management teams. All of them were seasoned leaders. Our researchers found that the most [change-capable leaders](#) have 9 shared competencies that ensure effective leadership through change.

Our study revealed 9 competencies for leadership and change management that can be further divided into 3 main categories:

- Core competencies that we call **“the 3 C’s of change leadership:”** communication, collaboration, and commitment;
- Competencies related to **leading the process of change;** and
- Competencies related to **leading people through change.**

Let’s look at each in turn, as together, these 9 competencies are key in how to lead change most effectively.

The 3 C’s of Change Leadership: Communicate, Collaborate, Commit



Our researchers found that 3 core skills provide the essential connection between the *process* part of change and the *people* part of change, which is why we call them the essential 3 C’s of change leadership.

Core Skills for Leading Change

1. Communicate.

Unsuccessful change leaders tended to focus on the “what” behind the change. Successful ones communicated *both* the “what” *and* the “why.” Change leaders who explained the purpose of the change, and connected it to the organization’s values or explained the benefits, created stronger buy-in and urgency for the change. (This is why we say [purpose in leadership](#) is so important.)

2. Collaborate.

Bringing people together to plan and execute change is critical. Successful change leaders [collaborated across boundaries](#), encouraged employees to break out of their silos, and refused to tolerate unhealthy competition. They also included employees in decision-making early on, strengthening their commitment to change. Unsuccessful change leaders failed to engage employees early and often in the change process.

3. Commit.

Successful change leaders made sure their own beliefs and behaviors support the change, too. Change is difficult, but leaders who negotiated it successfully were resilient and persistent, and willing to step outside their comfort zone. They also devoted more of their own time to the change effort and focused on the big picture. Unsuccessful change leaders failed to adapt to challenges, expressed negativity, and were impatient with a lack of results.

Leading Through Change Requires Balancing Process & People

Skills for Leading the *Process* of Change

Strategic change doesn't happen on its own. Managing change as a leader requires you guide the process from start to finish. Here are the 3 key competencies that are part of how to lead change in terms of change processes.

4. Initiate.

After understanding the need for change, effective change leaders begin by making the case for the change they seek. This can include evaluating the business context, understanding the purpose of the change, developing a clear vision and desired outcome, and identifying a common goal. Unsuccessful change leaders say they didn't focus on these tasks enough to reach a common understanding of the goal.

5. Strategize.

Successful change leaders developed a strategy and a clear action plan, including priorities, timelines, tasks, structures, behaviors, and resources. They identified what would change, but also what would stay the same. Leaders who weren't successful said they failed to listen enough to questions and concerns, and failed to define success from the beginning.

6. Execute.

Translating strategy into execution is one of the most important things leaders can do. In our study, successful change leaders focused on getting key people into key positions (or removing them, in some cases). They also broke big projects down into small wins to get early victories and build momentum. And they developed metrics and monitoring systems to measure progress. Unsuccessful change leaders sometimes began micromanaging, got mired in implementation details, and failed to consider the bigger picture.

Remember that, as organizations evolve over time, both stability *and* change must coexist — which is not a [problem to solve, but rather a polarity to manage](#). To help your organization achieve its full potential, change leaders must acknowledge both simultaneously. When change leaders find the sweet spot of “*both/and*,” they can present the change effort in a way that others can embrace.

Skills for Leading *People* Through Change

While formal change processes might be well understood, too many change leaders overlook the all-important [human side of change equation](#).

The most effective change leaders know that another key in how to lead change is devoting effort to engaging everyone involved in the change and remembering that people need time to adapt to change — no matter how fast-moving the change initiative — to [combat change fatigue and encourage embracing change](#). And they exhibit these 3 crucial competencies of leading people through change:

7. Support.

Successful change projects were characterized by leaders removing barriers to employee success. These include personal barriers, such as wounded egos and a sense of loss, as well as professional barriers, such as the time and resources necessary to carry out a change plan. Leaders of unsuccessful change focused exclusively on results, so employees didn't get the support they needed for the change.

8. Sway.

[Influencing others](#) is about gaining not just compliance, but also the *commitment* necessary to drive change. It's also about mapping out the critical change agents and defining what “buy-in” looks like from each stakeholder that will lead to a successful outcome. Effective change leaders identified key stakeholders — including board members, C-suite executives, clients, and others — and communicated their vision of successful change to them. Unsuccessful leaders told us they were more likely to avoid certain stakeholders rather than try to influence them.

9. Learn.

Finally, successful change leaders never assumed they had all the answers. They asked lots of questions and gathered formal and informal feedback. After all, [great leaders are great learners](#). The input and feedback allowed them to make continual adjustments during the change. In the case of unsuccessful changes, leaders didn't ask as many questions or gather accurate information, which left them without the knowledge they needed to make appropriate adjustments along the way.

One Last Thing: Resilience Matters for Change Leadership, Too

Lastly, managers who are tasked with leadership through change should recognize that leading people through complex change is difficult, and that [all change comes at a cumulative cost](#). Simply put, change can drain employees — and leaders, too.

That's why **successful change leadership also requires *resilience***. Resilience helps people handle change's inherent pressure, uncertainty, and setbacks. Leaders need to build their own reserves in support of their mental and physical health, and can guide others to face change in healthy and sustainable ways by learning and sharing [practices for resilient leadership](#). In the end, that's one other thing that change leaders need to be able to stay the course and succeed.



Based on Research by



Shannon Bendixen, MA

Former Faculty

Shannon designed and developed leadership development programs for mid- to senior-level leaders and was the Colorado Springs Lead Faculty member for our [Leadership Development Program](#). She is also an executive coach, researcher, and keynote speaker.



Michael Campbell, MA

Former Faculty & Portfolio Manager

During his time at CCL, Michael engaged in both facilitation and research focused on talent management, succession management, high potential leaders, and senior executive leadership. He designed and trained workshops on coaching effectiveness, executive selection, and vision, and he co-designed experiential modules, tools, and activities for programs. Michael also co-authored our [Talent Conversations](#) guidebook.



Roland Smith, PhD

Former Managing Director and Senior Vice President – Asia Pacific

Roland was responsible for our business across China, India/South Asia and South-East Asia. He also served as lead researcher and subject matter expert in several areas including top teams, talent sustainability, change, and transformation. He's a recognized expert in the fields of leadership, transformation, talent sustainability, and high-functioning teams. Roland co-authored the guidebooks [Talent Conversations: What They Are, Why They're Crucial, and How to Do Them Right](#) and [Influence: Gaining Commitment, Getting Results](#).



Kristin Cullen-Lester, PhD

Former Senior Research Faculty

During her time with us, Kristin's work focused on improving leaders' understanding of organizational networks and the ability of organizations to facilitate collective leadership, complex collaboration, and change across organizational boundaries. Her research has been published the Journal of Management, Leadership Quarterly, and Journal of Vocational Behavior.



David Dinwoodie, DBA

Senior Faculty

David has worked with us for more than 15 years as a researcher, author, educator, and coach. He co-authored the book [Becoming a Strategic Leader: Your Role in Your Organization's Enduring Success](#), and he is a research associate on the Leadership Across Differences project.



**Bill Pasmore, PhD**

Former Senior Vice President & Organizational Leadership Practice Leader

A thought leader in the field of organization development, Bill advises CEOs and Boards on challenges of the future including business disruption, new ways of organizing, creating more effective digital networks, leading continuous change, and improving senior team effectiveness. In his role as Senior Vice President, he led our efforts to help clients develop strategies to transform their organizations' leadership cultures and capabilities.

**Laura Quinn, PhD**

Faculty

A certified feedback coach, Laura serves as faculty for many of our programs, including [Leadership at the Peak](#) for C-suite executives. In her 25+ years with CCL, she has also led work in strategy development and execution, talent sustainability, organizational and leadership culture, organizational change, transformation, and executive team leadership, and has co-authored several white papers.



At the Center for Creative Leadership, our drive to create a ripple effect of positive change underpins everything we do. For 50+ years, we've pioneered leadership development solutions for leaders at every level, from community leaders to CEOs. Consistently ranked among the top global providers of executive education, our research-based programs and solutions inspire individuals at every level in organizations across the world — including 2/3 of the Fortune 1000 — to ignite remarkable transformations.

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