

Creative Tensions in Change Leadership
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Mastery of creative tension brings out the capacity for perseverance and patience.

Peter Senge

The idea of intellectual, emotional and organizational tension, whether creative or debilitating, has often been mentioned by management scholars and consultants. Senge popularized the concept in his book The Fifth Discipline, Doubleday, 1990. He taught us about the dynamics of creative tension when a vision of the future is proposed and it stretches the imagination and capability of the host organization. The insight derived is that change leaders must stretch the imagination of their organizations in order to get engagement from the organization’s members to address the challenges implied in the change. Too much tension overwhelms the organization and not enough leaves employees complacent and stuck in the current reality. The gap that is created between the current reality and the future vision becomes the field within which change leadership concepts, methodologies and tools are utilized. This provides a base model for better understanding other tensions that challenge the change leader.

1. **Strategy and Operations.** Many leaders experience this tension when they manage their first group and are responsible for the profit and loss (P & L) of the unit. There is pressure from above them in the company (and within themselves) to make a profit. This focuses the leader on making the operations of the business more efficient oftentimes cutting costs to boost profitability. The knowledgeable leader will realize that, while being profitable now is a priority, being able to continue to make profit over the long haul is also important. This insight takes the leader into exploration of the unit’s growth strategy realizing that some or much of future profitability is dependent on the creation of new products and services. The core of the tension pits operational decisions against growth considerations. Peter Drucker, the acclaimed management thinker, warns us that operations drives out strategy as leaders are often rewarded for short term gains rather than their robust future strategies. Many emerging leaders do not pass this test; they ignore the future in order to maximize current earnings and pay the price down the line as no products or services withstand the test of time. Leaders must recognize this warning and fight to keep time, energy and projects focused on creating the future as well as making profit today.

   **Key Question: What amount of my leadership time and attention should be focused on improving operations? Creating the future?**

2. **Business Results and People Results.** A central issue in change leadership has to do with how results are achieved; by running over people and culture or by enlisting the participation of employees in the change effort, honoring culture and improving morale and the capacity to

change for future projects. This is the core issue in my Leading Organizational Change course that I teach at a local university. The key question associated with this issue is, “Are there proven concepts, methodologies and tools available to change leaders that can both attain the business results and improve morale, skills and engagement in the process?”

The answer of course is, “YES.” However, this requires a gut check for many change leaders as their beliefs, values and management styles are brought into questions here. Those leaders with autocratic beliefs and behaviors who see employees as commodities and culture as a vague concept more than likely don’t care about robust change methods, as they cost money, take time and slow the change process down.

Key Question: Do I have a robust change plan that addresses both the human and cultural considerations of change in addition to the bottom line business aspects such as financial ratios?

3. Internal and External Organizational Dynamics. It is imperative for leaders to take an outside-in approach to understanding organizational dynamics. As a leader’s job becomes more strategic he must seek to understand the organization in its competitive situation (outside) to gain important insights into what aspects of the organization’s strategy, structure or processes (inside) must be changed for it to grow and prosper. It is but one of many competing entities which must adapt to changing consumer needs, technology advancement global economic and political shifts and governmental regulation. This shift in mindset accompanies more enterprise wide responsibilities such as the P & L and future company growth. It is no longer acceptable to possess only an internal, operational perspective. With expanding responsibilities the change leader must ensure a fit between the organization and its evolving competitive environment. Shedding old products and services, expanding into new markets, making acquisitions, embracing new technologies and constantly adjusting vision and mission to ensure the company’s viability.

Key Question: Does my organizational perspective take into consideration how it fits or is misaligned with its competitive marketplace?

4. Personal Emotional Tension and the Need to Act. It is difficult for many emerging change leaders to manage one tension. It can be overwhelming to manage two or three. Some are paralyzed in the process. Others rely on their strength (for example managing operations) and ignore other change leadership challenges which can cause further change leadership problems, such as little or no attention paid to the human and cultural change tensions. This is what consultants and authors are talking about when they mention the complexity and uncertainty associated with the leadership of significant change. It is important to know your change leadership strengths and developmental needs. Having and working an individual development plan to improve change
leadership skills is a foundational leadership development activity. It is also important to seek out
individuals for the change team to provide skills that you don’t yet have. Finally, remember that
the tension you feel is a potential source of creative energy. Embracing the tension provides a
pathway for growth and development as a leader of change.

Key Question: What are my strengths and developmental needs as a change leader?

Lessons Learned.

1. Assess your change leadership challenges as tensions.
2. Develop a plan to bridge the gaps between current reality and the future vision.
3. Making change happens requires the leader to be patient and to persevere while managing the
tensions of change.
4. Mind the gap!