

# Leading inevitable but unpopular change

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## **BRIEFLY SPEAKING**

*When change is inevitable but unpopular, a leader has to first navigate the present before he or she can hope to get to the future. Find out how to approach managing organizational change in a positive manner.*

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One hundred employees are packed into a small room, shifting nervously in their chairs. They've been called there on short notice and the anxiety is palpable. Change is inevitable.

The company has just initiated a wave of deep cuts and many long-time employees and friends have just been let go... Or perhaps the company is rumored to be going under, or a new owner is taking over, or maybe you've been charged with letting a team know it is about to be disbanded. You're the leader. In a moment you'll be standing in front of them...

So, what do you do?

At times like this, when you are confronted with managing organizational change that is unpopular yet inevitable, it is helpful to remind ourselves what leaders do. The very word, "leader," emphasizes the idea of moving ahead. And it's not a bad idea to approach these types of challenges with an eye towards moving to a better tomorrow. But there is more to it than that. A leader has to first *navigate the present* before he or she can hope to get to the future. This is critical.

Addressing the present in times of managing organizational change can be a formidable hurdle to effective leadership and it's not hard to see why. These situations are fraught with strong emotions such as fear, uncertainty, sorrow, anxiety, and anger to name a few. Dealing with these emotions is not something most of us feel competent at doing. This isn't a skill that is typically learned in an MBA program or a corporate leadership workshop, so the reluctance to take them on can be very strong. Where do we turn for good models? How can we transform these moments into something more, something that actually galvanizes the organization for the future?

I'd like to suggest all of us are familiar with an ancient, time-honored way to lead in these situations. It is in the world of ritual where we can find a clear and powerful analogy. Funeral rituals serve a number of purposes that parallel much of what a leader is asked to cope with in times when change is inevitable but unpopular. Among them are the needs to accept the new reality, to honor the past, to express and process deep emotions, and to form a new self-identity. Let's take each of these needs in turn to see how a leader can skillfully meet them.

**Accept the new reality:** First and foremost is the clear acknowledgement of what is now true. It can be tempting to downplay or "spin" the inevitable change, but I would argue that this is a mistake on several levels. I once worked for a CEO who was fond of saying that the front-line had the greatest "bullshit detector" in the world. And with a moment's reflection I suspect you'll agree. Don't even think of going in front of them and saying anything that isn't factual. They'll see through it in a moment. And in that moment your credibility, and right to lead, is lost. Conversely, being frank and candid shows respect and helps make the change

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a reality that cannot be denied – a necessary first step towards a new future.

**Honor the past:** Chances are high that your people invested heavily in the past that is now changing. They gave it their best and they had strong reasons why they did so. As a result, it's likely there are parts of the past that are inspirational. Honor those efforts, honor those passions. In funerals, an effective eulogy allows mourners to move forward with an enriched sense of what really mattered – and a chance take the comfort and the inspiration of the past into the future. The same principle applies in these leadership challenges. Help people see purpose in their past efforts and to take inspiration from what was good.

**Express and process deep emotions:** Empathy is a key leadership trait. Albert Einstein was quoted as saying, “We should take care to not make the intellect our god. It has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead, it can only serve.” Consider the difference between a leader that is all head but no heart and one that connects both. When leaders acknowledge and respect what we are feeling, we are likely to identify more closely with them and have greater trust and faith in them. “Us” is a more effective starting place for change, than “you” and “me.”

To be clear, empathy doesn't mean “rescuing” others from hard feelings by sugar coating what is true. Simply acknowledging the difficult emotions of others is all that is required. In giving voice to what the group is experiencing, the leader connects with his or her team and puts himself or herself in a position to help guide the emotional tone going forward. This doesn't need to be complex or lengthy. In fact, it can be deceptively simple. For a great example, search YouTube for President Bush's “Bullhorn speech” at Ground Zero on September 14, 2001. In just two minutes, the president is able to redirect the mood of the country in an impromptu speech that demonstrates the power of giving voice to strong emotions and allowing them to be expressed in a positive way.

**Form a new self-identity:** Just as the loss of a loved one redefines the identity of the bereaved, a significant change in the workplace redefines the identity of everyone who is affected. Providing the first step of transitioning into their new role is part of what the funeral ritual offers.

There are many opportunities to address this transition in an organizational context. In fact, this need is an area where leaders are likely to feel comfortable as they lay out strategic visions, reasons for change, goals, expectations, etc. What lesson, then, can we take from the funeral ritual? It is the lesson of allowing time to grieve. How much time? That, of course, depends on the situation but it is an important variable to consider. People can't absorb much when they are still in shock. On the other hand, delaying the inevitable can make change harder. Finding the right balance is likely to be a judgment call. The important thing is to recognize it and to consider it carefully in your planning.

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One final word, recognize that you have the same needs as your team. To be fully capable of managing organizational change in a positive way, you must attend to your own needs. Seek some solitude or the support of a trusted friend, colleague, mentor, or coach to be ready to provide the leadership your team deserves.

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