



Leading with Agility

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The north shore of Lake Superior is an awesome sight. The lake is an inland sea with the largest surface area of fresh water in the world. Cool, fresh pine scents the air. Black, rocky cliffs form an imposing backdrop as they disappear into the water's edge. Waterfalls tumble down rivers rushing to their destinations. As calming and refreshing as Superior is, she also is dangerously unpredictable. At a moment's notice, her calm temperament can become a raging force, swallowing huge ships—like the *Edmund Fitzgerald*—whenever she pleases.

Growing up in Minnesota, I received abundant warnings about not swimming in the Great Lake. I decided to swim it anyway.

Donning my wet suit (I'm not completely crazy!), I entered the water. As I dove in, the icy water overwhelmed me. It felt breathtakingly, bone-achingly cold. In the first couple of minutes, I believed all the advice of my upbringing. I was sure I could not handle it. Then the water in my wet suit started to warm up and everything changed. I became intensely aware of being alone in the huge watery mass. As I swam near the shore, I watched spears of light passing through the gentle waves. When I swam further into its depth, the blackness of deep drop-offs appeared and revealed the lake's immensity. After a short distance, new underwater cliffs and rock formations came into view. Swimming from point to point, I met an odd mix of feelings. Ecstatic one moment and fearful the next, I sensed that all my emotions were possible and heightened.

The cold water kept my heart rate so slow I could go on and on without difficulty. As I progressed, I had the distinct sensation that the lake was choosing to be cooperative with me. Yet, I was aware of the tentativeness of the welcome. I was immersed in the body of the lake, and she was accepting my presence—for the moment. After about three quarters of a mile down the coast, I decided not to overstay my welcome and I turned back. As I feared, the lake grew impatient. Her waves, which moments ago swelled gently, now rolled harshly and threateningly. Because of the steep cliffs along the shoreline, there was no exit. An enjoyable swim was becoming a dangerous dilemma. All I could do was stay relaxed, tolerate the turbulent, changing waters, and keep my destination in sight. Fortunately I reached the shore minutes before the lake decided to “wake up.”

Uncovering the Learning and Growth Contained in Change

Our lives are much like swimming in Superior. We dive into the water, and we never really know what is going to happen next. We operate under the illusion that life remains constant, but in reality, everything is always changing. From breath to breath, we exchange so many atoms we change the makeup of our physiology in a moment. We aren't always aware of it, but our lives are an endless flow of change.

Although it may be true that we can't "step into the same river twice," as Heraclites said, once we step in, we are part of that river's flow. Since birth, we have been swept up in a raging, constantly changing, never-ending flow of experience. Some people love the flow of life; others hate it and resist it. But, because the flow of the river is a constant, we have no choice in the matter. We have to change. It is part of the price of admission to life. Every moment our atoms are changing, thoughts are changing, emotions are changing, and relationships, too. And as we've witnessed recently, our marketplace, our finances, our economy—maybe even our entire economic system—are in flux. Change is endless and constant. We have no choice in the matter except for one aspect—mastering our ability to adapt and to learn.

As Ken Brousseau of Decision Dynamics, an affiliate of Korn/Ferry International, pointed out to me, research shows that as we go up the executive ladder, we need to become increasingly comfortable with uncertainty and sudden change. As leaders, we require the "integrative ability" to weave together and make sense of apparently disjointed pieces, crafting novel and innovative solutions. At the same time, we need the self-confidence to make decisions on the spot, even in the absence of compelling, complete data. The qualities needed at the top—openness, authentic listening, adaptability—also indicate that leaders need to be comfortable with and able to embrace the "grayness" that comes from other people's ideas. In other words, we must master our adaptability mentally, emotionally, strategically and impersonally. Dr. Daniel Vasella, Chairman and CEO of Novartis, advised the graduates at Mumbai's Indian School of Business in 2005: "Be comfortable with seemingly contradic-

tory situations, feelings and actions. You will of course encounter many people who cannot deal with ambiguity, people who always want simplicity and clarity. So, you as leaders will have to create the clear direction for them.”

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) identified “Dealing with Complex Challenges” as the number one issue facing senior leadership today. This finding is similar to Lominger International’s research, which says that the most important competency in shortest supply today is “Dealing with Ambiguity.” Learning to be open to the potential learning contained in all change is no small task. Quite often we are dragged “kicking and screaming” to every lesson.

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Learning Agility, which has four dimensions—Mental Agility, People Agility, Results Agility and Change Agility—is a key to unlocking our change proficiency. In fact, research studies by CCL, Mike Lombardo of Lominger, Robert Sternberg and his colleagues at Yale University, and Daniel Goleman point to Learning Agility as more predictive of long-term potential than raw IQ. Learning Agility is a complex set of skills that allows us to learn something in one situation and apply it in a completely different situation. It is about gathering patterns from one context and using those patterns in a completely new context so that we can make sense and success out of something we have never seen or done before. In short, **Learning Agility is Change Mastery—the ability to learn, adapt, and apply ourselves in constantly changing conditions.**

Jim was a tough, crusty executive from the “old school.” He was extremely bright and got exceptional results, but he “bore holes” right through people in his drive for excellence. If someone didn’t meet his expectations, he would rant and rave. Fewer and fewer people wanted to work with him. His lack of People and Change Agility were starting to limit his career progression. When he was referred to us for executive coaching, I wasn’t hopeful. I knew his reputation and doubted he was open to learn or change. After several sessions at our *Executive to Leader Institute*®, he was peeling away layers of self-understanding. Surprisingly, he was eager and open to growth. He didn’t intend to impact people negatively. He just didn’t know how to get results differently. Underneath the surface was a caring, sensitive, character-driven person. His family life and personal life were clear evidence of his inner being. Once he found congruence between his inner life and outer life, he evolved as a leader.

Most executives measured do fine with Mental and Results Agility. Typically, the strongest areas in need of development are People Agility and Change Agility. The core skill need for People Agility? Listening. The core development need in Change Agility? Bringing clarity to ambiguity. As Bob Eichenger, Co-Founder of Lominger International, puts it, “There are ‘just’ two problems left to solve in business: PEOPLE and CHANGE!!”

Positive change requires letting go of old patterns and taking a fresh approach. It demands going beyond our preconceived ideas. A story about the relationship of a teacher and student illustrates this principle. A student who thought he had it “all figured out” would visit his teacher each day for personal lessons about life. Despite the teacher’s attempts to share her life experience, the student resisted. One day the teacher took a different approach. The teacher asked the student if he would like some tea. The teacher proceeded to set the tea table and brought in a huge pot of piping hot tea. She not only filled the student’s cup, but once the cup was full, she continued to pour. Tea overflowed, streaming onto the table and the beautiful carpet. Shocked, the student jumped up from his chair and started screaming at the teacher, “Stop! You must be crazy! You’re ruining everything! Can’t you see what you are doing?” The teacher continued her pouring as if the student weren’t

present until the entire pot was empty. Only then did she look calmly at the student and respond, “If you want to receive my tea, you must keep your cup empty.”

Like a wise student, we can gain insight only if we are open to change. How often have you taken a detour in traffic and discovered a new, better route? Perhaps you have lost a job or relationship, only to connect with a better situation later? How many times has your once-favorite restaurant closed and you discovered a wonderful, new restaurant to replace it? Maybe your company faced a loss of its market share, and the realization of potential future losses coerced you to redefine your mission, your products and services, thus giving your company a more sustainable future. How many difficult or unpleasant experiences end up being the most instructive? Change is always our teacher, pointing new directions, suggesting new options, testing our potentialities. Change challenges our current reality by forcing a new reality to rush in. If we’re open to it, if our cup is empty, new possibilities flow into our lives. If we’re not open to change, we respond to it like an enemy we have to fend off.

Unfortunately, resistance is a losing battle, because change is a relentless opponent. When we resist change, what is the hidden dynamic? We usually are attempting to defend ourselves from the fear of loss. We fear that we will not survive the change without something familiar being lost. This is a truly accurate perception. We will lose something. However, we also are going to gain something. It may be something better, if we are open to the purposeful learning present.

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One of the most lucid descriptions of how the change process feels comes from Danaan Parry in *Warriors of the Heart*:

Sometimes I feel that my life is a series of trapeze swings. I'm either hanging on to a trapeze bar swinging along or, for a few moments in my life, I'm hurtling across space in between trapeze bars.

Most of the time, I spend my life hanging on for dear life to my trapeze-bar-of-the-moment. It carries me along at a certain steady rate of swing, and I have the feeling that I'm in control of my life. I know most of the right questions and even some of the right answers. But once in a while, as I'm merrily (or not-so-merrily) swinging along, I look out ahead of me into the distance, and what do I see? I see another trapeze bar swing towards me. It's empty, and I know, in that place in me that knows, that this new trapeze bar has my name on it. It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness coming to get me. In my heart-of-hearts, I know that for me to grow, I must release my grip on this present, well-known bar to move to the new one.

Every time it happens to me, I hope that I won't have to grab the new bar. But in my knowing place I know that I must totally release my grasp on my old bar, and for some moment in time, I must hurdle across space before I can grab onto the new bar. Each time I am filled with terror. It doesn't matter that in all my previous hurdles across the void of unknowing, I have always made it. Each time I am afraid that I will miss, that I will be crushed on unseen rocks in the bottomless chasm between the bars. But I do it anyway. Perhaps this is the essence of what the mystics call the faith experience. No guarantees, no net, no insurance policies, but you do it anyway because somehow, to keep hanging on to that old bar is no longer on the list of alternatives. And so for an eternity that can last a microsecond or a thousand lifetimes, I soar across the dark void of "the past is gone; the future is not yet here." It's called transition. I have come to believe that is the only place that real change occurs. I mean real change, not the pseudo change that only lasts until the next time my old buttons get punched.

So, if change is so great, why do we fear it? We fear it because change always involves both creation and destruction. As something new is created, something old is destroyed. The bud is destroyed as the flower blooms. The caterpillar is destroyed as the butterfly ascends. Our inhibition comes as we face the prospect of replacing the familiar with the unknown. An existing product fails, and a new one is conceived. A job is lost and a new career begins. At the junction of those two realities, most of us retreat. Usually it is only after change is thrust upon us that we accept it because we often realize our lives actually will be better.

Even though the only “place” we can handle change is in the present, most of us live our lives in the past or the future. Until we learn to live our lives in the flow of the present, we can never really deal with change effectively. At the most fundamental level of our lives, there is only the present moment. When we worry about keeping things like they were in the past and avoiding some new, unknown future, we limit our ability to impact our success in the present. If our awareness is cluttered by the “static” of the past and future, we can never focus deeply on the now. As a result, we can never perform to the height of our abilities, particularly in the midst of dynamic change. We need to become now-focused like a professional athlete with single-minded devotion to a task in the midst of very dynamic circumstances. As we build our focus in the present, we begin to gain confidence that we can handle the endless chain of present moments throughout our lives. Change Mastery is about developing an unshakable inner confidence that we can handle and can learn from whatever comes our way. It’s an inner confidence, a sense of self-trust that we can deal with real change—unexpected change—not just the run-of-the-mill type of anticipated change. In *Head, Heart and Guts: How the World’s Best Companies Develop Leaders*, David Dotlich, Peter Cairo and Stephen Rhinesmith quote Bill Weldon, Chairman and CEO of Johnson & Johnson, “Sometimes a leader must be able to endure chaos and appreciate it in order to discover the right thing to do.”

The most effective people I've coached over the years have been able to straddle an important paradox. They could sustain a sharp, localized focus in the present moment, while at the same time maintaining a broad, visionary context. Being able to maintain a sharp focus and broad comprehension simultaneously is one of the most important qualities for both leadership effectiveness and dealing with change.

Change is usually seen as something happening “out there:” the world changes, products change, competition changes, systems and processes change, technology changes. While I was coaching a CEO on a major change initiative, he hesitantly said to me, “Let me get this straight: You mean to say that I’m going to have to change?” All significant change begins with self-change. As Peter Block writes in *Stewardship*, “If there is no transformation inside each of us, all the structural change in the world will have no impact on our institutions.”

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Moving our concept of change from an *outside-in* paradigm to an *inside-out* paradigm has profound implications. When viewed from this perspective, we see change as an internal dynamic—an internal process of learning and development. Change is perceived as something to be mastered from within versus something only going on outside of us. Ultimately, people resist, adapt, or learn from it. In this regard, all change fundamentally takes place within the person. In his book, *Servant Leadership*,

Robert Greenleaf expresses it like this: “To the servant leader, the process of change starts in here, in the servant, not out there.”

David Prosser, chairman of RTW, shared his story of change and “re-inventing himself”:

Twelve years ago, I was 60 years old, and by all external measures I was very successful. I was standing outside my lake home in suburban Minneapolis, and I happened to notice my huge home with my expensive Mercedes parked in front. In a moment, it dawned on me that despite all this external stuff and success, I wasn’t happy. I knew then and there that I needed to transform myself to transform my life. Over the next few years, I committed myself to personal growth. My personal work culminated in the realization that I wanted to serve people by making a difference in the world. This reinvention of myself eventually led me to found RTW, which is committed to transforming the Workers Compensation system in the United States. If you want to change the world, start by changing yourself—then go out and change the world.”

Terry Neil wrote, “Change is a door that can only be opened from the inside.” Yet, I know many leaders who, despite enormous competencies and skills, do not make the connection between their own growth and transformation and that of their organization. Transformation is not an event but an ongoing process of knowing who we are, maintaining a clear vision of what we want to create, and then going for it. The same holds true for organizations. All real fundamental development and change begins with self-change.

Change Initiatives Rarely Succeed

Most research on personal or organizational change is not pretty. Indeed, most initiatives—between 50–75%—do not succeed. Just look at these arguments for failure.

- 58% of all mergers failed to reach their goals; 77% added no value (AT Kearney).
- 70% of all strategic alliances failed (Vantage Partners).
- 67% of the Fortune 500 quality initiatives yielded no significant quality improvements (Arthur D. Little).
- 66% of venture capital start-ups failed to return the original investment (Hoover Institute).

The picture doesn't get any brighter on the individual level.

- 50–75% of smoking cessation and weight-loss programs don't succeed either.

The conclusion? Change is tough. The critical follow-up question is “Why do 25% work?”

Learning Agility is a core factor. In addition, the underlying architecture of agility—our neurophysiology—is fundamental. David Rock, author of *Quiet Leadership: Six Steps to Transforming Performance at Work*, and Jeffrey Schwartz, research scientist, co-authored the article “The Neuroscience of Leadership” published in *strategy + business* magazine. The article sharply connects the latest research on the brain with leadership imperatives, especially effecting successful change initiatives. In fact, Rock and Schwartz go so far as to tell us, “Managers who understand the recent breakthroughs in cognitive science can lead and influence mindful change: organizational transformation that takes into account the physiological nature of the brain, and the ways in which it predisposes people to resist some forms of leadership and accept others.”

The authors identify three reasons change initiatives fail:

1. Change resistance is real; it makes people physiologically uncomfortable and “amplifies stress;”
2. Typical, outside-in behaviorist models don’t work for the long term because they rely on external rather than internal drivers;
3. Trying to persuade people to embrace change through outside-in communication initiatives or presentations is not compelling and engaging enough for people.

The authors identify four key elements for successful change:

1. Focus people’s attention on the new idea and help them to map a clear vision of what their world will look like from the inside-out;
2. Create an environment in which talking about and sharing this vision is part of the everyday experience;
3. Give people space for reflection and insight to digest the change possibilities from the inside-out.
4. Keep reminding people what is important; leave problems in the past and focus on identifying and creating new behaviors and solutions.

If you lead change in this manner, moving from outside-in approaches to inside-out ones, the “brain of leadership” will keep intrinsically engaged with vision, possibilities, and solutions.

Through 30 years of helping leaders, teams and organizations to navigate change, we have codified Seven Change Mastery Shifts that can increase our chances of success:

Seven Change Mastery Shifts

CHANGE MASTERY SHIFT #1: From Problem Focus to Opportunity Focus.

Effective leaders tend to perceive and to innovate on the opportunities inherent in change.

CHANGE MASTERY SHIFT #2: From Short-Term Focus to Long-Term Focus.

Effective leaders don't lose sight of their long-term vision in the midst of change.

CHANGE MASTERY SHIFT #3: From Circumstance Focus to Purpose Focus.

Effective leaders maintain a clear sense of purpose, value and meaning to rise above immediate circumstances.

CHANGE MASTERY SHIFT #4: From Control Focus to Agility Focus.

Effective leaders understand that control is a management principle that yields a certain degree of results. However, agility, flexibility and innovation are leadership principles that sustain results over the long haul.

CHANGE MASTERY SHIFT #5: From Self-Focus to Service.

Effective leaders buffer their teams and organizations from the stress of change by managing, neutralizing, and/or transcending their own stress.

CHANGE MASTERY SHIFT #6: From Expertise Focus to Listening Focus.

Effective leaders stay open and practice authentic listening to stay connected with others and to consider multiple, innovative solutions.

CHANGE MASTERY SHIFT #7: From Doubt Focus to Trust Focus.

Effective leaders are more secure in themselves; they possess a sense that they can handle whatever may come their way; their self-awareness and self-trust are bigger than the circumstances of change.

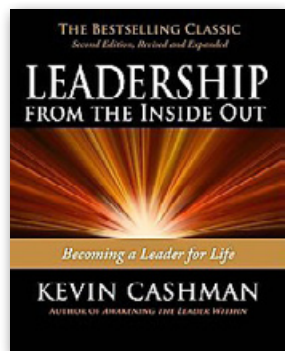
Measuring Our Ability to Deal with Change

Dealing with change is a hot topic today. Leaders at all levels are being challenged to perform like no other time in business history. How well do we prepare our talent to be up to the task? Certainly most of the training in change management and process improvement is valuable. But are we really preparing leaders and all employees to thrive in change? Are we helping people to develop the inner resilience required, or are we throwing them into the lion's den of change and hoping they will somehow survive?

With the rapid change in our information age, the old-world “survival of the fittest” mentality is rapidly becoming obsolete. The whole idea of “fittest” needs to be redefined. No longer a measure of physical prowess or power, it needs to be re-thought in terms of survival of the most aware, or survival of the most flexible—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The emerging paradigm for success will convert the concept of external exertion to one of internal mastery. Survival of the most aware and most adaptable is becoming the true underlying foundation for lasting effectiveness. Are we gaining mastery from the inside-out to withstand the tumult of change, or are we reacting and defending ourselves against every change that comes our way?

Are we helping people to develop the inner resilience required, or are we throwing them into the lion's den of change and hoping they will somehow survive?

If our fear of loss exceeds our personal coping strategies, we will be overwhelmed, and therefore ineffective, in dealing with change. It all boils down to accessing the *Learning Agility* within us. Imagine how bold and wonderful our lives would be if our purpose, vision, and resilience were so strong that fear would not have a hold over us. Outstanding leaders like Franklin Delano Roosevelt understood this dynamic: “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” These words are spoken from a place of true character— a place of unshakable inner conviction, strength, and awareness. They are not merely a cleverly crafted phrase but an expression of a deep, internally driven leader. Imagine your life totally free of fear. You would harbor no financial fear, no fear of failure, and no fear of loss—no fear whatsoever. How would you live? How would you change? If you could not fail, what would you change in yourself? If you could not fail, what would you change in your organization? If you could not fail, what would you change in the world? 🌍



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Kevin Cashman is a Senior Partner with Korn/Ferry Leadership and Talent Consulting and is based in Minneapolis. He is also author of the bestselling *Leadership from the Inside Out*, second edition published by Berrett-Koehler in September 2008. He is an accomplished executive coach, consultant and thought leader focused on optimizing executive, team and organizational performance. He and his team have coached thousands of senior executives and senior teams in more than 50 countries worldwide. He is the founder of *Executive to Leader Institute*®, a globally validated and unique interdisciplinary coaching approach, referred to as the “Mayo Clinic” of leadership development by *Fast Company*.

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