

The Four Faces of Change
A Tool for Change Readiness
Kevin Allen

“Welcome to the club kid,” intoned Mike, my mad man boss, “You’re now dinner conversation.”

Dinner conversation? Even though I had fought my way into the mighty McCann Erickson, one of the world largest advertising agencies, I still thought of my internal age (still do) as 13. While my business card may have had a fancy title, inside I was terrified. What on earth would I say? What would I do?

The next day, I met my new “reports.” There were six of them, and two were old enough to be my parents. My mind raced. I assembled all of the collective learning that I could. I pored through the accepted wisdom set forth in management texts. What would Peter Drucker say? What about Theodore Levitt? Maybe I should throw out quotes from a general or two about “taking that hill,” or perhaps “closing ranks” or “ever into the breach!” Maybe I could borrow some words from a famous football coach.

Then again, I knew absolutely nothing about sports.

The answer came in the strangest form, from the most unlikely place. That weekend as I visited my family I shared my fears. My mother spoke up, “It’s simple, give them your love.” Ugh! I was exasperated by what seemed to be a perfectly ridiculous observation, a moment of momentary insanity.

Now, Mom is one of those people who doesn’t just see the glass as half full, she sees it as overflowing onto the table. She pursued her point, “It doesn’t matter what they’re doing for a living, all people are just like us—families—and every person in that family has a sense of belonging. You lead the family, and they need to know you’ll care for them. They’ll do things for you if they think you are genuine, and if they see that they’ll follow you anywhere.”

Drucker, watch out.

I don’t believe much in change “management.” That suggests we have the power to change forces much greater than we are. I do very much believe in change readiness—preparing yourself and your team for the opportunities that change affords.

“ You lead the family, and they need to know you’ll care for them. ... if they see that they’ll follow you anywhere.

The Gang of Four

As you move your organization forward in seizing these opportunities, you begin a process of enlistment. However, be prepared: not everyone will jump up and down and leap onto your bandwagon. Far from it, in fact.

Enlistment will be a bit of a lonely trek to start off with. It has been very handy for me, and at times quite comforting, to categorize people into four groupings: catalysts, followers, observers, and resisters.

Catalysts | This is the best way I can describe catalysts: when you are about to speak to a group of people and you scan the room and see one person's eyes light up and his body language say, "I'm with you"—that person is a catalyst. Catalysts are forward-leaning, glass-half-full people. They are optimists, and they're generous of spirit. These individuals will instinctively bond with you culturally and your message will resonate with them instantly.

So, when you hold your first management team meeting, scan the room and look at your new team's faces—your catalysts will raise their hands, often literally. This is true not only in small gatherings, but throughout the organization.

Catalysts will raise their hands and make it clear they are with you. Bring them close to you. Create “kitchen cabinets” and other work groups across organizational boundaries. This is especially helpful if you are in a position where you have a great deal of authority over large numbers of people who don’t work directly for you.

These catalysts will become your spokespeople, ambassadors, and stalwart defenders. Identify them, support them, and promote them. In all cases, make it clear to your organization that these are the people to be emulated.

Followers | Followers are timid catalysts. They are predisposed toward you and show interest in your efforts, but would not be the first to put their heads above the parapet. They like being part of the team, not leading a team. Identifying work teams with catalyst leadership will attract followers. When you set up tasks with catalyst leaders, the followers will very quickly “sign up,” and they will revel in the recognition of their team’s accomplishments.

Observers | Observers are on-the-fence people. They are wary and want to see which way the wind blows. They don’t actively work against you, but in the early stages they don’t work for you either. They will need more incentive and encouragement to move toward the gathering but if they see visible success they will eventually join in.

Resisters | Like catalysts, these people are vital keys to the enlistment process. They come in two forms: the vocal objector and the passive resister. The vocal objector makes concerns or opposition clear early on. The person's motivation for objecting might include a rivalry for your position. Often, the resistance is based on fear and a sense of self-preservation; vocal objectors may believe that the direction you are taking will do nothing other than threaten a comfortable status quo. The good news: they are easy to spot.

Passive resisters are the real threat. They look like observers, but while smiling in assent, they quietly sow the seeds of discord. This makes observers and followers very nervous and prevents them from moving toward catalysts.

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Catalyzing Your Team

The key to creating your cohesive team and beginning the enlistment process is this: identify and celebrate your catalysts; recruit and neutralize your resisters. I strongly believe, as you are finding out here, in a management principle that is not based on coercion but rather on igniting people emotionally. However, this is not a “Kumbaya” zone. You must act swiftly and without hesitation to enlist your team in rallying your catalysts and take action against resisters. Resisters are your most potent threat and, left unaddressed, can derail your entire agenda and swing the tide of observers and followers their way.

Many leaders have told me that if they had a magic wand they would make an organization catalyze in an instant. Start by identifying each of these typologies in your organization. First, rally your catalysts. Meet with them individually to get them excited about the future. Tell them you need their help. At the same time, identify and meet with your resisters. Let them know you need their support and give them a chance to air their apprehensions—their concerns may well be valid, and if you address them, these resisters might just become catalysts. In many instances, they are simply testing your mettle. The fact is, a converted resister is worth their weight in gold, as they can swing the tide of followers and observers in your direction.

If you perceive no change in the resisters you have attempted to persuade to your side, they must go. There is nothing more dangerous and corrosive than an active resister who will work against your agenda. And, by the way, such action makes it clear that you are firm and decisive about the steps necessary to ensure your real ambition. (Getting rid of such a negative force will also, dare I say, have that “Ding dong, the witch is dead” effect.)

You Set the Tone

How do you keep tabs on who is who? It can be found in the advice given to me by one of my very first bosses, a wonderful man named Charlie. He was a shift manager at Newark airport’s Marriott (they were in the airline catering business years back), who would take me on his morning rounds on the production floor. He was as cool as a cucumber. He and I would be sitting in the little glass manager’s office in the middle of the production floor, when he would spontaneously announce, “Oh, time to tour the orchestra.”

I’d follow like a puppy as this incredibly thoughtful man glided smoothly from department to department, methodically engaging with each of the people in and around various workstations.

Whether he shared a joke, asked about a granddaughter, or made small talk, he also brought, as I discovered, his eagle eye for detail, pointing out something askew or reminding the employee of something important.

All in all, he was surveying the landscape of his organization to gain an intuitive feel for how each and every one of his people was feeling and performing. One thing is for sure, while all this was happening, Charlie made each of the employees feel special. Sometimes he would say to me, “Oh my, my string section is waaaay out of tune.” By sheer intuition, he would know that something was troubling the folks in one of his departments, requiring him to return at a later stage.

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This lesson made a big impression that I took well into my later years as I roamed the worldwide global network of McCann Erickson. Charlie’s greatest comment came one morning as we came across a real screw-up at one of the workstations. I was quick to point out to him what I thought the problem was and who was responsible. “Now Kevin,” he told me, “you may be right, but before you go pointing a finger at them, remember that three of your fingers point directly at you.

Before you go after them, ask yourself, ‘What did we do, or create—or not—that contributed to these problems?’ ”

He was so right. There was not one person among them who purposefully created a disaster; there was no one who wanted to go home and, at the six o’clock conversation, say, “Guess what I did today... I failed.”

So while your first instinct might be to punish or accuse, it is vital to step back, to understand and empathize. In doing so, you’ll become clear about the conditions that have been set for your people to either succeed or fail.

Cultural Permission

The other thing I admired most about Charlie is how carefully and thoughtfully he chose his words. Ever encouraging, kind, and spirited—people just seemed to light up when they spoke with him. Remember “dinner conversation?” My madman boss let me know in no uncertain terms that what I said, and how I said it, would be discussed at every dinner table of every employee in the place. He taught me that I had a vital duty to be certain that the language I used and the themes I shared would result in a positive, constructive, and motivating force, mindful always that what I said, however offhanded, would be seen as a directive—interpreted and acted upon. I call this Cultural Permission.

Cultural permission is the tone, attitude, and language that emanates from the executive suite. It is a mantra, expressed in oft-used catchphrases and philosophies that move like waves through the organization. They get adopted and interpreted as actions to be followed. They become part of everyday lexicon and cultural idioms that people hear coming from the highest levels, and form a platform for what the organization believes and expects of its people. They can be harmful and corrosive, or like Charlie, encouraging and buoyancy-fueled.

There's an opportunity for you to craft your unique language to inspire and mobilize your people. This language, carefully articulated and shared, offers rich opportunities to codify and crystallize the sum and substance of your real ambition, your beliefs, and positive sentiments toward your people. It's buoyancy rocket fuel!

Catalysts are the key to igniting your following. Identify them, and you'll create a chain reaction toward buoyancy. Remember, at the same time you have to do the hard work of addressing and converting your resisters. When you convert resisters, others will follow gladly.

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Yes, We Can

Finally, there's you. The opportunity of change is exciting but also white knuckle terrifying. I've lead huge company movements and been at the starting gates of entrepreneurship and boy, at times I am a 13-year-old that just wants to run away! Of course, we can't. We have to show our people that change, whether in the form of something great, or a difficult setback—all afford opportunity. Your task is to lead them through it fearlessly. Your people will look carefully at you and gauge how they should react. The best way I can share this is for a story from my youth.

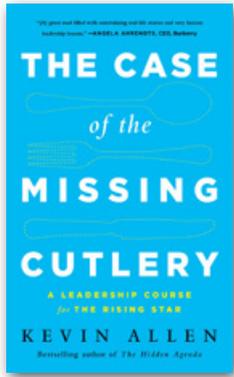
Hurricane Donna

It was September, 1960. A special bulletin appeared on the black-and-white television set. Kevin Kennedy, our nightly news telecaster, came on the screen. A hurricane with winds in excess of 115 mph was working its way toward the coast of Long Island, New York. I, all of six years old, interpreted this in one way and one way only: it was headed straight for our house. I was terrified. We had what we called a "picture window," a large window frame about four by five feet with a single sheet of plate glass: food for hurricanes. In preparation, my mom, with a few ten-penny nails protruding from her mouth, boarded up the window, assisted by my older brother David. At this point, I was no longer scared, I was petrified.

The storm hit Long Island hard. We were huddled in the center of the house, the creaks inside and the crashes outside deafening. The knocking of my knees added to the cacophony. Then, at a point where we were beginning to lose it all, Mom looked at all four of us, me in particular. She said very calmly, “Look at me,” pointing to her face. “Do I look worried?” We all studied Mom’s usual sunny demeanor and replied, “No.” She then went on, “Good. Tell you what, then. I’ll make you a deal. If I start to look worried then you can. What do you think?” We all nodded immediately and she added, “I have an idea. We may not have lights, but we’ve got gas so we can cook. We’ve got candles too, so... let’s have a hurricane party!” In short order, with the blue glow of propane illuminating the kitchen, our giggles and the howl of winds as our backdrop, we had ourselves a ball.

A buoyant leader, as I call it, is one who connects with the hearts of their people, letting them know they believe in them, and can show them an amazing future. 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Kevin Allen is Founder & Chairman of employee engagement company Planet Jockey, which specializes in gamified learning and collaborative mentorship platforms, and re:kap, a business transformation company which counts Burberry, Smythson, Swedbank, and Verizon among its clients. He is recognized as one of the world's most accomplished growth professionals. With decades at the top of advertising giants McCann-WorldGroup, the Interpublic Group and Lowe and Partners Worldwide, Kevin worked with such brands as MasterCard—developing the famous “Priceless” campaign—Microsoft, Marriott, Smith Barney, Nestle, L’Oreal, Lufthansa, and Johnson & Johnson.

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