



Leading Successful Change Initiatives: Why We Need a High-Involvement, Collaborative Approach to Making It Work

Each day we are having to invent new ways of working, new ways of interacting, new ways of living. We are having to be courageous, curious, agile, and gritty. We have to react almost hourly, on the fly, to new policies or rules that often were implemented without consideration of the impact they would have on us, without our voice at the table.

High involvement is at the core of Blanchard's approach to Leading People Through Change. We believe change leaders need to hear the voices of those impacted by the change as we make the change. If that is unrealistic, we need to anticipate the questions and concerns of those impacted by the change. We also need to develop a change mindset that demonstrates to others what is needed to be resilient in the face of change.

Leading Change Successfully: The Leadership Mindset

In their 2020 academic paper, Nancy Lorenzi, PhD and Robert Riley, PhD, argue that effective change leadership can sharply reduce the behavioural resistance to change, especially when the leadership approach involves a high-involvement mindset.

In a high-involvement change mindset, leaders who demonstrate courage, curiosity, agility, and grit are more likely to embrace and be comfortable with change. These leaders in turn nurture these abilities in others. The result is a more open organisation that is flexible and adaptive to change. The nuances of each characteristic include:

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If you want to go fast,
go alone. If you want
to go far, go together.
—Unknown

Courage – Strength in the face of challenge and uncertainty

- Move toward things that are uncomfortable and that create vulnerability
- Tell your truth about what is and what needs to change
- Change your approach to change and involve others in change-making

Curiosity – A strong desire to know, learn, or understand

- Ask about what is not fully understood
- Express interest in others' experiences, opinions, feelings, and well-being
- Demonstrate that you value others by involving them in the change process and hearing their voices

Agility – The ability to think, understand, and move quickly

- Respond quickly and flexibly
- Remain open-minded when things don't go as planned
- Anticipate and flexibly respond to others' concerns

Grit – The ability to withstand discomfort and demonstrate resilience

- Demonstrate passion for achieving long-term results
- Persevere in the face of discomfort and challenges
- Demonstrate resolve in seeing things through

Leading Change Is Important, and Yet We're Failing at It

When change initiatives go well, they improve innovation, creativity, productivity, engagement, and employee retention. When they don't, time, energy, resources, and morale can all be lost.

Gartner Research, Gallup, and Harvard Business Review continue to estimate that about 60–70 percent of change initiatives fail. If the need to manage change effectively is critical to organisational success, why aren't we getting better at it?

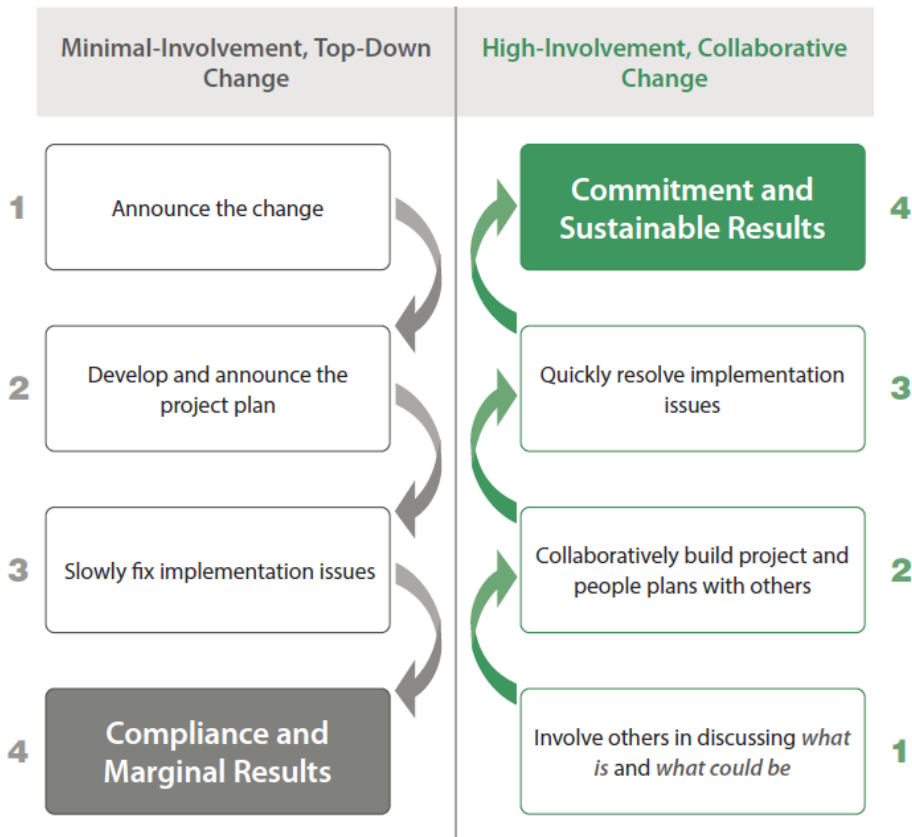
A recent study from Gartner showed that 66 percent of CHROs are dissatisfied with the speed of change implementation in their organisations. One reason for failure, according to Gartner, is that more than 80 percent of organisations still manage change from the top down. In this scenario, senior leaders make strategic decisions on their own, create implementation plans, and then roll these plans out via organisation-wide communications to try to gain workforce buy-in. In today's matrixed organisations, where information that can inform strategy and implementation is widely distributed, top-down change doesn't work.

Let's compare a top-down, minimal involvement approach to leading change to a high-involvement, collaborative approach. We believe that, although it looks faster, top-down change often results in short-term compliance, slower implementation, and marginal results.

In contrast, when people at all levels of an organisation are involved in discussing what is and what could be, and when they are actively involved in building the change plan, implementation issues are resolved more quickly, commitment to and advocacy for the change are increased, and the results are often more sustainable.

Graphic 1 Two Approaches to Leading Change

Two Approaches to Leading Change



A high-involvement, high-collaboration approach is the best way to increase people’s commitment to change.

Those beliefs are shared when you look at findings in Gartner’s 2019 study of 6,500 leaders and 100 CHROs around the globe. Gartner concluded that change-adaptive organisations rely on their workforce—not just executives—to lead change, and they encourage open and honest communication about the change initiative. Those organisations were far more effective and successful than those that didn’t take this approach. In fact, their data indicated that organisations that promoted open conversation and information about the change process found

- Implementation time can decrease by 33%
- Employee engagement can increase by 34–58%
- Intent to stay can increase by 38%

Researchers Yaqun Yi, Meng Gu, and Zelong Wei suggest the same effect of bottom-up information and learning on the speed of strategic change. When employees provide information and opinions to top managers for strategic decisions, and timely customer information and competitive intelligence are shared, the change process speeds up. High involvement reduces anxiety about the change process and lowers resistance to the change.

When It Comes to Leading and Supporting Change Initiatives, What Do Leaders and Individual Contributors Need?

In a 2018 study, Blanchard found that change leaders and individual contributors have similar needs during change. Their needs, reflected in Table 1, validate the Concerns Model at the heart of Blanchard's Leading People Through Change® solution.

Table 1 – Manager and Individual Contributor Needs during Change

Initiatives	Managers	Individuals
To see that change is supported by leaders	86%	77%
To understand how the change will impact them personally	82%	72%
To understand how the change supports organisational goals	79%	66%
To understand the scope of the change	75%	68%
To have a voice in how changes get implemented	62%	56%
To have additional support or access to additional resources	59%	59%
To know how long the change will take to implement	53%	51%
To have enough time to adjust	51%	45%

Stages of Concern

In her research, Susan Loucks-Horsley noted that these Stages of Concern are predictable and sequential. These concerns shouldn't be viewed as resistance; rather, they are unanswered questions that reflect what people are thinking and feeling about the change. High-involvement change, rich in dialogue, is the best way to lower resistance, build advocacy, and achieve sustainable results. The dialogue starts with leaders anticipating, surfacing, and addressing people's concerns. If surfaced and addressed through high-involvement change, they can be lowered or resolved. If not surfaced and addressed, they become formidable roadblocks to sustainable change. One of the best ways to surface and address people's concerns is through the intentional use of advocates for the change. Leveraging peer advocacy is critical because people going through change are often influenced more by their peers than senior leaders.

In the **Information Concerns** stage, people ask questions to get information about the change. For example, they will ask questions about *what* and *why*. People want to understand what the change is and why it needs to happen. They may ask: What's wrong with the way things are now? What do we hope to accomplish? People at this stage don't want to be sold on the change; they need to understand it and have opportunities to ask questions.

Five Stages of Concern

1. Information Concerns
2. Personal Concerns
3. Implementation Concerns
4. Impact Concerns
5. Refinement Concerns

People with Information Concerns will commonly ask these questions:

- What is the change?
- What's wrong with the way things are now?
- What do we hope to accomplish?
- Why now?
- What opportunity will I have to raise questions and voice my concerns?
- How do people I respect feel about this change?

People with Information Concerns need to know **what** the change is, **why** it is important, **what success looks like**, and whether it will be worth the effort.

In the **Personal Concerns** stage, people ask questions to figure out how the change will play out for them and impact them personally. This is often the most ignored stage of concern and the primary reason so many change initiatives fail. People at this stage need to be inspired and excited about the future and reassured they can successfully make the change.

People with Personal Concerns will commonly ask these questions:

- How will the change impact me personally?
- Will I win or lose?
- Will I be able to learn how to do this?
- How do I find the time?
- How are my relationships going to be impacted?

People with Personal Concerns need to be inspired and excited about the future, need reassurance they can make the change, and need a voice in planning and change-making. If leaders do not take the time to address Information and Personal Concerns, people may comply with the proposed change but not commit the effort required to successfully implement and sustain the change.

People with **Implementation Concerns** want to know who is involved in the planning, if the change will be tested, how to find information and resources, and whether the organisation's infrastructure will support the change. People at this stage want to know that obstacles to success will be surfaced and addressed. They need to develop confidence in their own and the organisation's abilities to successfully implement the change.

People with Implementation Concerns will commonly ask these questions:

- How are we going to do this?
- How will people being asked to change be involved in planning for it?
- How realistic is the change plan?
- How could this change get derailed? Is there a Plan B?
- Who can help me?
- Have enough resources been allocated to this change?
- How important is this change compared to other priorities?
- How will we measure success?
- Are we going to test this change before we roll it out?
- How and when will we fix what's not working?

The quieter you
become, the more you
will be able to hear.
—Rumi

People with Implementation Concerns need to be involved in planning the change; to know that challenges, obstacles, and barriers to successful implementation will be surfaced and addressed; to know they will have the time, support, and resources they need, and to develop confidence in their own ability and the organisation's ability to successfully implement the change.

Leaders need to address Implementation Concerns with a detailed change plan about how and when the change will be launched, what the available resources are, who will test the change, and how the change will be measured and supported.

If people's concerns—especially those of the first three stages—aren't heard and addressed, it leads to resistance, rumours, anxiety, confusion, mistakes, frustration, cynicism, impatience, doubt, sabotage, speculation, stress, and time spent off task. If leaders have done a good job addressing the first three Stages of Concern, this is the point in the process where people will sell themselves on the benefits of the change.

Impact Concerns arise after the change has gone live. People with Impact Concerns are focused on results and on coordinating and cooperating with others. People at this stage want proof the change is making things better and opportunities to learn from others' successes.

People with Impact Concerns will ask these questions:

- Is the change working for me, my team, the organisation, and our customers?
- Is the change effort worth it?
- Has anyone figured this out? What can we learn from their success?
- How do we get everyone who is still undecided on board?
- How are we dealing with resistance?
- Are we going to be able to sustain this?

People with Impact Concerns need impact data/proof to know the change is reducing the gap between what is and what could be and is worth the effort, they need opportunities to learn from others' successes, and they need to believe the change is sustainable.

When people have **Refinement Concerns**, they are focused on results *and* on continuous improvement. They want to be entrusted with the refinement process and they want to lead the change going forward.

At this stage, people will ask questions such as

- How can we do this better or faster?
- What have we learned that we can leverage?
- Do you trust us to lead this change going forward?

People with Refinement Concerns need to know a tipping point has been reached and that most people are on board and succeeding with the change; they also need to know continuous refinement of the change is valued. The leader's role at this stage is to encourage refinement, support further innovation, and invite others to leverage what they've learned in other change initiatives.

Frame, Build, Strengthen, Entrust: Four Strategies for Leading High-Involvement Change

Effective change leaders resolve concerns and build advocacy throughout the change process by using a series of change leadership strategies that provide additional insight about what leaders need to do at each stage of the change process. By creating a compelling case for change, an inspiring vision, a clear and compelling plan, and allocating the appropriate resources, your organisation can more successfully navigate the process of change.

Frame the Case for Change and Create an Inspiring Vision

The frame strategy addresses Information and Personal Concerns. Leaders need to present a compelling case for change and an inspiring vision of the future. Framing the change is describing the gap between *what is* and *what could be*. When leaders paint a picture of the future in which people can see themselves succeeding, people generally support the change and contribute their good ideas and energy to help make it happen.

Creating a clear vision is essential for getting people on board with the change and enabling them to see where they fit once the change has been implemented. Faced with change, people tend to focus on what they are going to lose. An inspiring vision allows people to lower their concerns because they see themselves succeeding in the picture of the future.

Build the Change Plan and Infrastructure

Build addresses Personal and Implementation Concerns. Leaders need to involve others to surface potential implementation barriers and to co-create a realistic change plan. By building the change plan collaboratively, those being asked to change feel they have influence and a voice in change-making and feel reassured the right resources are in place for successful implementation.

Strengthen the Change

Strengthen addresses Implementation and Impact Concerns. Leaders need to help resolve implementation issues as well as share evidence the change is working.

The key to success at this stage is the quick resolution of implementation problems. Change leaders need to share impact data/proof that the change is working. Leaders should collect success stories and widely share information about early wins. They need to model the mindset and behaviours expected of others. Everyone must be held accountable for implementing the change. Unwarranted resistance must be addressed.

Entrust the Change Leadership to Others

Entrust addresses Impact and Refinement Concerns. When the majority of people's Impact Concerns are resolved, the change reaches a tipping point and leaders can begin to rely on others to own and lead the change. Entrusting the change means delegating day-to-day change-making responsibilities while staying connected.

The goal of any change effort is successful, sustainable realisation of the desired outcomes. Once the goal has been reached, leaders should find ways to anchor the change into the organisation and look for ways to replicate successes and share lessons learned with other parts of the organisation.

Conclusion

Getting your organisation focused on using a high-involvement, collaborative approach to change can make an immense difference: it could be the deciding factor between failure and success. First, acknowledge that people go through predictable and sequential stages of concern that can be anticipated and addressed to accelerate change. Involve as many people as possible who are impacted by the change in conversations about the change to reduce resistance and build advocacy. Invest time early to gain clarity and alignment about why the change is needed and what success looks like. Collaboratively craft a clear and concise case for the change and a compelling vision of what success looks like. Once the change is framed, collaboratively build the change plan. Then share successes and impact data to address Impact Concerns and to strengthen the change. Once a Tipping Point is reached and there are more Impact Concerns than Implementation Concerns, entrust change leadership to a smaller team that can focus on refinement concerns.

What we know from the times we are living through right now is that people's voices need to be heard. Their questions need to be answered and their concerns addressed if each of the many changes we are making are going to succeed.

About the Researchers

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