Leading Fearless Change

By Mary Lynn Manns, Ph.D. and Linda Rising, Ph.D

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An article titled "Change or Die" in a recent issue of *FastCompany* explains why the odds are nine to one that you will not change your behavior even when you face the likelihood of dying prematurely as a result of your bad habits. Readers who see this information might question their chances for success in leading less threatening changes in their organization. But yet, the article stresses that "All leadership comes down to this: changing people's behavior."

Even though change is difficult, leaders can't avoid it. So wouldn't it be wonderful if people who have successfully introduced a new idea into an organization could share their stories with you? Our book, *Fearless Change: Patterns for Introducing New Ideas* is the next best thing. We have gathered proven strategies for leading a change initiative. To do this, we heard numerous experiences from people leading change in a variety of sizes and types of organizations throughout the world. While doing this, we documented our observations, read publications on the topics of change and influence, studied how change agents throughout history have tackled the problems they faced, and exposed our work for comment and feedback.

Patterns

When our investigations uncovered a recurring and effective strategy for leading change, we documented it as a "pattern." Just as the name suggests, a pattern captures something that has happened more than once. Unlike a good idea that may or may not work, a pattern describes a solution that has been applied successfully in many different circumstances.

Our work allowed us to identify 48 successful strategies or patterns that anyone at any level within an organization can use for leading change. Each pattern is named so the collection provides a vocabulary for change agents to have conversations about problems and their solutions. We introduce twelve of the 48 patterns in this article. You can find more details in the book and summaries of the patterns at: www.cs.unca. edu/~manns/intropatterns.html.

Powerless Leaders

All change agents, whether the CEO or a young, new employee, feel like "powerless leaders." Changing people's minds is not easy. As Machiavelli has pointed out, "… there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle than to initiate a new order of things." You might think it is easier to demand that change happen, to drive it from the top without significant across-the-board participation. While this may appear to be faster than a grassroots effort, it's likely to result in disgruntled compliance rather than involvement and satisfaction among those you are trying to change.

Our approach in *Fearless Change* is to help you as a powerless leader achieve your goal by encouraging others to become so intrigued and interested that they want to become involved in the change.

The Starting Point

First, let's consider the person who will lead the change. Our first pattern is called Evangelist because the change agent must have faith in the new idea and passion for the work it will take to convince others to

"Don't agonize, organize."

—Florence R. Kennedy

follow. This attitude will serve to carry the leader through the inevitable frustrations along the way. We often say that the first person you must convince is yourself. If you don't have a sincere belief that your idea is good for your organization, you will not be able to convince others.

We are careful to caution that patterns are not "silver bullets." Using a pattern wisely means understanding the right context for use and the consequences of application. All patterns (and all strategies) have downsides. We advise Evangelists to guard against being overzealous. While passion will encourage people to take notice, fanaticism will turn people off.

Widening the Circle

Being an Evangelist for change takes time and energy, but it is even more difficult when you attempt to do it alone. If you use the pattern Ask for Help, you will lighten your workload and increase the support for the new idea. You can start by finding people in your organization who get excited about new things. We describe these people in the pattern Innovators; they can help you test the new idea.

Innovators may be interested in helping you apply the pattern Just Do It, by integrating the new idea into a current project in order to understand its benefits and limitations. Once you have some success stories, Innovators may be willing to share their experiences in an informal, interactive session we call a Hometown Story. This pattern is especially useful since many in a given organization are convinced when they hear from others "just like us" who are having success.

At the same time, the Evangelist must recognize that people take change personally. Presentations will arouse curiosity and some interest but old habits will not die without effort. Use the Personal Touch pattern. Look for opportunities to talk with individuals one-on-one about how

the new idea can be personally useful and valuable to them. This builds a relationship with individuals, encouraging them to discuss their problems that your new idea may address.

Chuck, a contractor in a large media research company, is one Evangelist who shared his story with us. His experience with these patterns shows how he reached his goal of introducing a new programming language into an organization that had concerns about performance and scalability. The vice president said the language choice could be a career-killing decision for Chuck but his passion caused him to believe it was worth the risk. He needed more than faith so he built a team that was willing to help gather data. They built two similar systems, one in an older language used throughout the organization and one in the new language. They shared their results with others and demonstrated that the new language was better able to meet the performance and scalability requirements and could therefore be used in an upcoming two-year development project.

Chuck also applied the patterns Evangelist, Just Do It, Hometown Story, and Personal Touch when introducing software testing tools a short time later. He included the tools in his own work and documented the benefits. Once there was something to show, Chuck held an information session to explain what had been learned. But he also kept his ear open for opportunities to help those who were interested and was quick to lend a hand when he found individuals who were having a problem the testing tools could solve.

Chuck and other change agents have told us that change starts slowly and evolves over time. We capture this important information in the Step by Step pattern. Because life and people are unpredictable, a master plan is not going to be as effective as a vision with short-term goals and a willingness to adjust your plans along the way.

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—Machiavelli

New developments should spread quietly at first so that leaders can learn from failures and build on successes.

Chuck's use of these patterns allowed him to earn credibility. He claims that this is the most important thing in being a good change agent. People may not always agree with you, but they will trust what you say. But what do you do when people don't trust you or like what you say? All ideas, no matter how wonderful, will meet a certain amount of resistance. We don't advocate spending a lot of time trying to convince the resistors. However, in order to make progress, you will always have to face a certain amount of skepticism before you can move forward.

Dealing with Resistance

The title of the book, *Fearless Change*, reflects the name of one of the most important patterns in the collection: Fear Less. The usual reaction to criticism when we have a great idea is avoidance. We don't want to hear the pitfalls. We want our suggestions to be welcomed without examination. However, there are penalties for this attitude, especially in the beginning when we ourselves are just learning about the new idea. The Fear Less pattern advocates listening to skeptics with the intent of learning more about the idea, about how it will fit into the organization and about the change effort. The aim is not to get resistors on your side but rather to respect their opinions and bring to light the limitations

in the new idea so that the issues can be addressed frankly and honestly.

Sometimes we learn that it's not the idea so much as it is the Evangelist. In the Bridge-Builder pattern we see that it may be wise to let others speak for us. When a skeptic won't listen to your arguments, find someone with credibility for the skeptic who can make the case for the innovation. We all are more open to change if it comes from someone we trust.

It's like the wise man said: You can't win 'em all! And you shouldn't try. Rather, use resistance to your advantage. The pattern Champion Skeptic describes a special role for a strong opinion leader who refuses to accept the change. Let that person be the official nay-sayer, the finder of faults, the sounder of warnings. For example, you can give the Champion Skeptic a few minutes at the end of each appropriate meeting to summarize negative observations and make sure the others listen. This strategy will honor the resistance and give it a proper place in the planning.

It is also important to anticipate resistance when facing a meeting where a decision will be made affecting the new idea. If you go into a vote without having a notion of what your resistors are thinking, you risk an unfavorable outcome that may be impossible to remedy later. Therefore, the pattern Corridor Politics recommends that you speak privately, first with the "fence-sitters" to address their concerns before the meeting. As they are won over, use their support to convince others who might be more challenging to influence.

Finally, Whisper in the General's Ear is a pattern about resistance at the executive level. We have learned that high-level decision-makers are often uncomfortable about admitting to something they don't understand in front of others and are sometimes

hard to convince in a group setting. Therefore, it is helpful to arrange a short meeting with a manager to address any concerns over the innovation and the effort to introduce it. This will maintain the executive's dignity while giving you the chance to get your story heard.

Here's a story from Jane, another Evangelist who is an engineer in a medium-sized telecommunications company. She used this collection of five patterns for dealing with resistance.

"I like the way these patterns for skeptics all fit together. Here's how I use them on my team when I want to bring in something new. I talk with Brian and Don one-on-one. I use Fear Less—I listen and work their suggestions into my plan. When they're satisfied, I use Bridge-Builder because Brian is a good buddy of Tom and Paul, and Roger respects Don. This is also a bit of Corridor Politics because now I can bring up the idea in a team meeting and it flies. It's never unanimous because there's always Steve. Nothing much works with him but he really likes being the Champion Skeptic. If he gets too rowdy, we let him have it, but it's amazing how many good ideas he comes up with when he knows we will take him seriously rather than treating him like a bozo. And Whisper in the General's Ear—I save that for when we really need our team lead to back us up. He's a good guy, but he doesn't always understand the technical details. I just have a quiet minute with him and I never mention it to the rest of the guys. It works."

Summary/Conclusion

Both of our evangelists, Chuck and Jane,would agree that leading change is not a science. Rather, it is a gradual process of discovery that prompts you to react to the setbacks and small successes along the way. Therefore, Fearless Change does not

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prescribe one hard and fast way to apply the patterns in the book. Even though each pattern characterizes one valuable strategy, the collection of 48 is a powerful resource to use as your environment suggests.

Change is hard. Leaders will struggle and so will the people they are trying to convince. But the stories of success we have heard show that there is hope. You need three things to introduce your idea: your belief in it, the determination to act on your belief, and some information on how to bring the idea into your organization. You supply the first two; the patterns in Fearless Change provide the third.

Manns, Mary Lynn, and Linda Rising. *Fearless Change: Patterns for Introducing New Ideas.*Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2005.

"Leadership is a combination of strategy and character. If you must be without one, be without the strategy."

—General H. Norman Schwarzkopf