



ARTICLE

How to Be a Strong Leader in the Face of Uncertainty

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Introduction

A common assumption among leaders and managers is that their success is dependent on having the right answers at the right time and providing clear direction to their people amidst the clamor of day-to-day operations. This may have been historically true when the pace and complexity of change were moderate, but is far less so in times of large scale, high-pressured transformational change.

Transformation is a very uncertain and unpredictable process that requires a new leadership approach:

- (1) The outcome is unknown at the start and must be figured out as you proceed,

- (2) This “figuring it out” process requires constant course correction,
- (3) This journey is only semi-controllable and largely erratic, and
- (4) Given the magnitude of uncertainty, people get mentally and emotionally triggered with feelings of fear, anger, and confusion. Attempting to control the process and predetermine the outcome, while an admirable desire, is just not possible in transformation. And trying to do so makes things worse!

No control? No ready answers? No trust-worthy plan and timetable? What’s a leader to do? In this article we will help you answer these

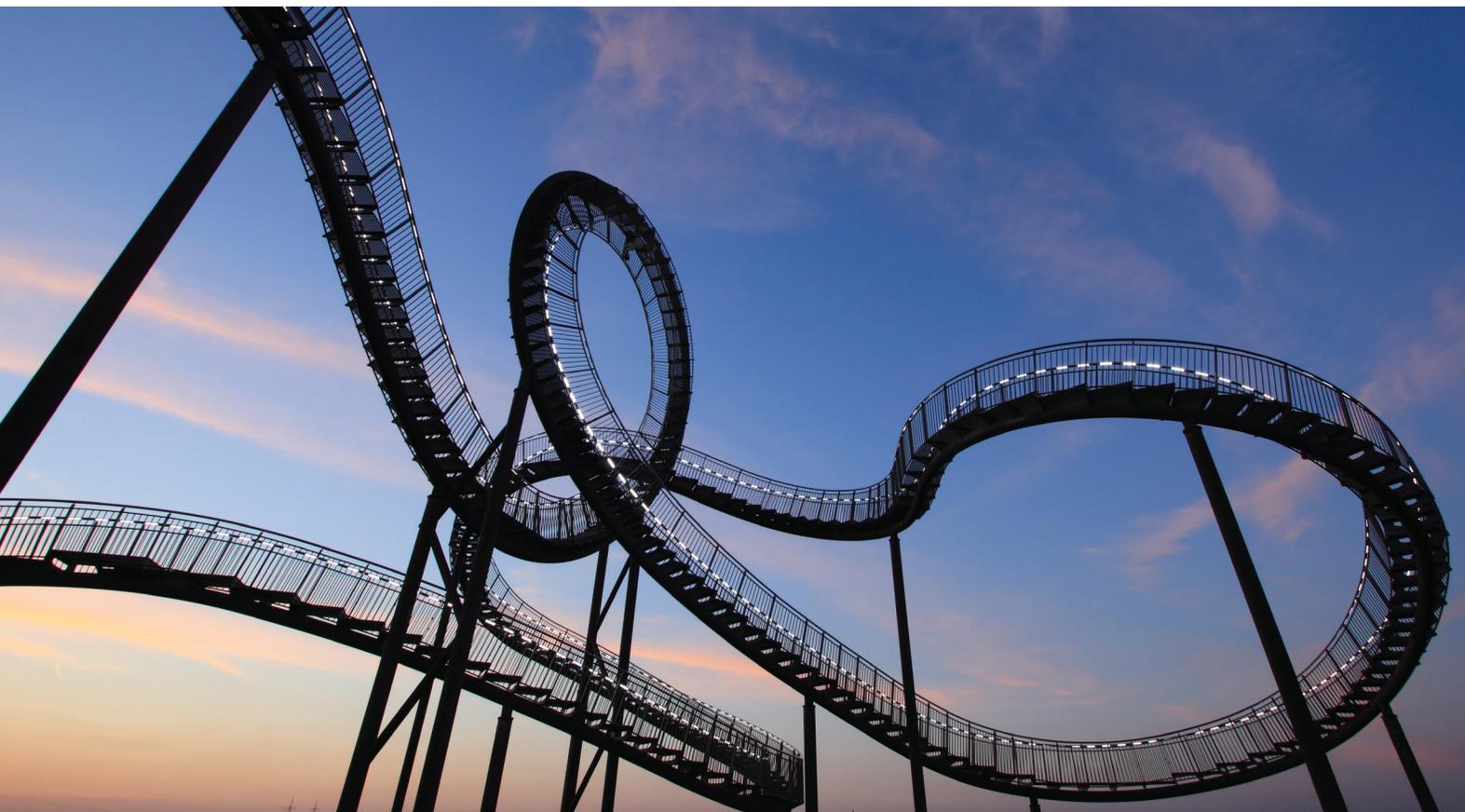
critical questions and find comfort, strength, and success in a new leadership style. We will outline six key actions that you can take to stay on top of the “bucking bronco” of change and continue to provide guidance and stability. We will demonstrate how these actions provide sound leadership in times of uncertainty, as well as debunk the faulty assumption that you, as the leader, should be all-knowing.

Engaging People in the Uncertainty You Face

For your transformation to succeed, you must engage your people in the change in ways that empower them to respond in real-time to their chaotic reality. They cannot wait for you to figure things out individually; they must do so on their feet in real-time—collectively. The constant course corrections required in transformation are most successful when you have accurate information, and the more eyes you have on the ball, the better. Engaging your people to gather information and strategize with you will increase the speed of your change because your course corrections will be far less severe and more directly related to your target.

This requires a far different leadership style than relying solely on you, the leader, for the answers. Your leadership strength will need to come from a different place. Instead of providing the answers, you will need to develop the correct questions. Instead of directing the outcome, you will need to guide the process. Instead of being the hero, you will need to become the supporter of others. This is not to suggest that you hold back when you do know the answer or have clear guidance. However, when things are unclear, turn to the preceding actions.

Personally, you will need to become very comfortable with uncertainty. You will have to learn to sit in your own fear without automatically jumping into action in an attempt to get rid of it. You will need to develop great trust in the ability of others to come through in times of stress and challenge. And you will have to develop inner satisfaction in “holding the space” for your people to collectively generate the desired outcome, rather than being the one individual who provides it. In other words, you will have to demonstrate great strength as a human being.





How to Address Uncertainty with Your People

Where you once felt responsible to your people for taking uncertainty away, your new role is to engage others with you in the uncertainty. This will produce a better “answer” for your organization’s transformation, and your people will build their commitment to the change at the same time.

When you face uncertainty, use the following six steps for successfully navigating it:

1. Tell the truth about the change: what is happening and what is known. Of equal importance, share what is NOT happening or is NOT known about the change.

The operative words here are “tell the truth.” People usually know when things are afoot, or amiss. Since you are without a clear future state or rock solid plan, you can only communicate

what you know to be true at this point in time. This will inevitably trigger a conversation about what can and cannot be shared at this time, what is politically safe to share, and what the repercussions will be for leadership credibility. This last point is especially important if you have cultural norms like, “The leader knows all,” or, “People should depend on the leader for clear next steps.” You can begin to impact these limiting norms by how you deal with uncertainty!

When facing uncertainty, fill in the blanks you can for people, or at least name the blanks so that people will not create destructive rumors about their worst fears. Sometimes the most powerful communication is telling people what the change is NOT, and what is NOT occurring in the change. The last thing you should do is not communicate at all, for the lack of clear answers. Leaders who are uncomfortable demonstrating their lack of answers do more harm by keeping people in the dark for too long. People will too easily fill this void with fear-based stories. Instead, show your leadership, compassion, and courage by sharing truthfully what you know and do not know!

2. Share your own reactions to the uncertainty, and make it OK for people to express their real feelings about what is going on.

Imagine the impact of a leader who says, “I wish I had all of the answers figured out, but I don’t. I fear that we don’t have all of the information or the right information yet, and, honestly, I am concerned about rushing ahead because getting it wrong would be too costly for all of us. I need your help. Collectively, I believe we can do it. When I think about what is possible when we put our collective brains together, I get excited. So, right now I am both nervous and excited. How about you? What are your reactions to what is going on?”

This set-up can be followed with discussion about how people are feeling, and how their reactions are helping or hindering getting the change figured out. Emotional sharing, done in a safe and productive atmosphere, can serve to clear the air and open up creative juices. It sets the stage for learning and innovation.

3. Frame the key question(s) you have to answer.

Identify and communicate the “question of the day.” Transformational change will never roll out the way you plan it. You will be getting more intelligent by the day, if you are open to it. Knowing the right question is more than half the battle, and can have the same effect as having the right answer.

Consider these examples of framing key questions:

- ▶ “What we need to figure out now is which technology platform can best suit our complex set of requirements. We thought we had a clear solution, but we have come to realize that our needs are not that simple. We are reviewing our requirements and should have a conclusion next month.”
- ▶ “We need to design the best structure to deliver our business strategy before we can name the next round of leaders and their staff. We started to think about people before we knew what roles we need to be successful, and so now we will get our structure clear first, and then fit the best people to the right jobs.”
- ▶ “Although our proposed structure looks good on paper, we cannot finalize it until we fully understand the scope and cost of the changes it triggers. Our 'eyes were bigger than our stomachs' around the initial structure. So, now we know that if we don’t have the revenues and skills to support it, we will have to redesign it so that we do.”

In the absence of answers, these statements intelligently and realistically present the key issue at hand. When you frame the current key





question, be sure to include any information you have learned that is enabling you to be more precise or realistic. Declaring your learning is powerful modeling, especially since you need everyone to keep getting more and more intelligent as things proceed.

4. Describe the process to address the question at hand, including the specific steps being planned, the people directly involved, and the timetable for this piece of work.

If there is a plan already in place to answer the question at hand, give that information to the people who are either waiting or involved. Be as specific as possible. If there is not yet a plan, describe how it will be created and communicated. When you share the timetable, stick with it, or when necessary, communicate that you are extending it, and why. You may need to alter your process a number of times. Just keep

telling people the status, what you are learning, and why you need to proceed differently than previously planned. Keep celebrating what you are learning and how it will produce a better outcome!

5. If desired, engage your people to provide input to the question at hand. Set clear expectations from the beginning about what will be done with their input.

Request people's clear-headed reactions, ideas, and out-of-the-box thinking. Communicate what input you need, how it will be gathered, who will consider the data, and how it will be used to shape key decisions.

Be sure to make the decision-making process overt (i.e., leader decides, majority vote, consensus, etc.) You do not need to respond to or act on everyone's individual ideas directly.

Simply give people the opportunity to have a say, then communicate how you will take their ideas into account.

6. Commit to communicating back to your people at a specific time (or regularly) about what is happening, whether or not the “answer” has been found, or which steps are now required to move the inquiry further along.

Announce the process going forward so that everyone knows how the answers will be generated. It is also very important to “close the loop” when you invite input. Let people know what you did with their input, what impact it had, and how you will proceed. These respectful gestures will demonstrate your sincerity and encourage people to continue to contribute in the future.

Increase Your Credibility with Your People

You might worry that people will think that you are a bad leader if you reveal that you do not know what to do next and involve them in figuring it out instead of doing so yourself; this is usually not the case. If you have an entrenched cultural expectation that leaders must direct and employees can only act when the leaders tell them to, people may have some

initial doubt. Stay with it. On a personal level, you will find that people respond favorably to you when you tell them the truth about the uncertainty you face, which is inherent in transformation. They will trust you more and find you more credible.

Summary

These actions can be very powerful mindset and culture changing strategies. When you are facing critical unknowns in your organization’s transformation, be it early or late in the journey, you have a great opportunity to engage your people by inviting them into the uncertainty with you to figure out the best course of action. The alternative, keeping them out of the process and determining the next steps yourself, actually causes less than optimal solutions. It also makes for uninvolved, resistant, and resentful employees.

By being authentic and telling the truth about the uncertainty you face, you will engage the desire of your people to contribute like never before. You will find them being a part of the solutions, not makers of the problems, and far more committed to your change effort’s success.

These six steps will assist you to engage your people in this journey with you, in a way that everybody wins.



About The Authors

Linda Ackerman Anderson, Ed.D.

Dr. Linda Ackerman Anderson, Co-Founder of Being First, Inc., specializes in facilitating transformational change in Fortune 1000 businesses, governments, the military, and large not-for-profit organizations. Industry experts regard Linda as a founding leader of Organization Transformation and a godparent to the Organizational Development community.

As one of the pioneers of Conscious Change Leadership, Dr. Ackerman Anderson brings decades of expertise in developing conscious change consultants and equipping them with the insights and methods to become experts in their fields. She specializes in assisting leaders to sort through the chaos of transformation, develop change processes that produce extraordinary business outcomes, transform organizational mindset and culture, and personally model the changes they seek to create. Linda speaks about leading conscious transformation at international conferences, co-wrote two best-selling books, created the renowned 9-phase change model; The Change Leader's Roadmap™, and published over 50 articles.

Dean Anderson, Ed.D.

Dr. Dean Anderson, Co-Founder and CEO of Being First, Inc., is an international speaker and bestselling author with over forty years of experience in developing executives of Fortune 1000 companies, government agencies, and large non-profit organizations to design and implement transformational change, deliver breakthrough results, increase organizational change capacity, and establish a high performing, co-creative corporate culture that unleashes human potential.

As one of the pioneers of Conscious Change Leadership, Dean is passionate about co-creation—the high-performance way of being and working that produces results for one's self, the other individuals involved, and the whole enterprise. Dr. Anderson's comprehensive understanding of human motivation and performance, vertical leadership development, and the process of transforming mindset, behavior and culture gives him a unique perspective that has established him as a thought-leader in the field of Organization Transformation. Dr. Anderson co-wrote two best-selling books, published over fifty articles, and has been featured in leading publications such as Business Week.



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About Being First

Being First is a breakthrough company, providing advanced expertise in personal and organizational transformation.

We guide visionary leaders to transform themselves and their organizations to Achieve Breakthrough in business results, culture, leadership, and executive team performance, while building world-class change leadership capability. We are pioneers teaching Conscious Change Leadership, and provide a complete System of Transformation to our executive clients.