



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

Do Your Leaders Have the Mindset to Succeed at Transformation?

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During a four day leadership retreat, the CEO of a large client of ours spontaneously blurted out, “I get it! We have based our entire business strategy on the assumption that we need to take a defensive posture in our market. What would our strategy look like if we assumed instead that we could aggressively *grow* our market rather than have to deal with it shrinking?” That “aha” was the beginning of a five year change effort that produced over 100 million dollars of net income from *new* business ventures. Quite the opposite of a shrinking market!

The turning point for that company was the CEO’s shift of mindset. When he and the other executives altered the way they perceived their circumstances, they found the road to success. It was in front of them all along; they just couldn’t see it.

Most transformational change efforts fail because the leaders do not have the mindset required to see what is necessary to succeed. Their beliefs, worldviews and assumptions about people, organizations and change keep them from accurately perceiving and understanding the dynamics they face. Consequently, they respond with strategies and tactics that do not match the transformational reality that challenges them. They make poor decisions, rush headlong into the unknown, skip necessary change tasks, or trigger resistance in employees without ever knowing they are doing so. When their change efforts flounder, and they cannot figure out how to right the ship because they do not understand the storm they are in.

Many traditional leadership beliefs and assumptions limit success in change. The belief that “speed is paramount” causes leaders to push change faster than employees can assimilate it, thereby making it actually go slower. The belief that “there are not enough resources” causes leaders to skimp on change, or overlay the change on top of people’s overflowing plates, which impairs

their ROI. The assumption that they must “control the change at all costs” often causes leaders to request and rigidly follow a predetermined project plan, when success requires frequent course correcting of the plan as circumstances shift. The belief that “my primary responsibility is to ensure that my part (department, region, process) excels” causes turf battles and competition across boundaries that hurt the overall enterprise. This orientation to the “part over the whole” also keeps leaders from integrating their change initiatives, causing redundancies and chaos that waste enterprise resources and slow the change. Does any of this sound familiar?

The CEO in the example above made assumptions about his changing market and his organization’s skills to deal with it. When he became conscious of the beliefs and assumptions he used to formulate his conclusion, e.g., to take a defensive market strategy, he realized that they were not founded on truth, but rather on fear. With this awareness, he was able to move beyond his fear and do what his organization needed to succeed.

This example is a powerful illustration of one of the most fundamental change leadership skills: *introspection*. Leaders must have the ability—and willingness—to look in the mirror at their own mindsets to discover why they see things the way they do. Only then can they assess whether their perceptions accurately portray reality and what is needed to transform their organizations successfully.

Jim Kouzes, friend and author of the [Leadership Challenge](#), and one of the foremost researchers on leadership issues, recently told us that among the lowest scoring dimensions in his leadership assessment are “self-reflection” and “requests for feedback from others.” In other words, leaders don’t look inward very often. They are too busy looking outward.

The problem lies in the fact that leaders, like all people, process the concrete information they acquire about their external world through the “invisible” lenses of their values, beliefs and worldviews. Their internal world, or mindset, determines what they see in their external world, and how they respond to it.

Most of this internal “processing” occurs unconsciously, behind the scenes of one’s own mind. Consequently, most people are not aware of these internal filters or the profound impact they have on how they perceive and evaluate the changes they face.

Quite frankly, however, misguided assumptions are never the real problem. Being *unconscious* of them is the true culprit. And because leaders possess such power and authority, their “unconsciousness” can have far reaching negative impacts.

Human resource executives can play a critical role in assisting leaders to develop the necessary self awareness. Make self mastery and personal change a center stone in all your executive and change leadership development programs. Formally help your leaders become *conscious* of their mindsets so they, and your organization, do not get blind-sided by their unconscious assumptions.

What new level of success could your organization achieve if your leaders were more skilled at self awareness, and open to addressing their mindsets to produce breakthrough results from change? The leverage for transforming your organization, and its performance, just might hinge on the leadership mindset factor.