

# How to Get Your Team on Board with a Major Change

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**Summary.** Most change management has shifted from a simplistic, top-down, “create a vision, change the structure, roll out the new program, and get buy-in” approach to more emergent, empowered, and purpose-led approaches. But leading big, complex change is still a... [more](#)

George, head of the Asia Pacific region for a global industry leader, was running the annual meeting of his group’s 300 executives and managers. After reviewing the year to date and addressing the changing context for the coming year, he was heading for the usual wrap up. This time, however, he had a key decision to share with his people, a decision he told us he felt both

resolute in and nervous to share. Their operating model — the model that everybody knew and understood and that guided every interaction — needed to change.

George backed up his decision by explaining that the model wasn't working well in supporting increased customer centricity: "The model that has served us well will not serve us well moving forward, and it's dead," he told his team. He could immediately see the reactions, ranging from curious interest to mild and more severe shock. "What do you mean it's dead? Who do we interface with now? You're disconnecting us from each other! What will that mean for our roles?"

George's story, one of 77 harvested from our recent round of global research into the effective leadership of change, was not atypical. Moreover, the anticipation of significant economic downturn resulting from post-pandemic developments and geopolitical conflict suggest that many executives will find themselves in restructuring situations over the next 12 to 18 months. Clearly, organizations will continue to face disruptive, complex, and (probably at least in part) painful change. Has this turbulent era taught us anything about how such change should be led?

## **How Change Threatens Our Need to Belong**

Most change management has shifted from a simplistic, top-down, "create a vision, change the structure, roll out the new program, and get buy-in" approach to more emergent, empowered, and purpose-led approaches. But leading big, complex change is still a struggle — the rate of failure for transformation projects remains stubbornly high.

Notwithstanding new Agile methods, many of our clients still wish that their change efforts could go a little faster, encounter less pushback, and produce more novel and sustainable outcomes. So, what's missing?

We've seen both in our research and our work with clients that the missing ingredient is the ability to look for and work with deeper systemic forces. In every organization, unconscious dynamics

exert a powerful pull on organizational behavior and effectiveness. Just as gravity invisibly propels matter, these forces drive collective behavior and therefore change effectiveness. And we've found the force that has the greatest impact on change outcomes is our primary need to belong.

While “belonging” in the diversity, equity, and inclusion context — the desired emotional outcome in an organization in which each individual is invited to be fully themselves in community with others, with no parts of themselves hidden — is essential to making change happen, in the context of our research, “belonging” refers to the survival-based belonging that enables any human infant to make it to adulthood and any human adult to fully function in collective settings they give loyalty to and receive identity from. Change will always threaten this kind of belonging and challenge its dearly held loyalties.

In our research, the top 12% of effective change stories featured leaders who paid significant attention to belonging. What does such attention mean? Intriguingly, we found it meant leading with two counterintuitive moves. On the one hand, these leaders took great care and time to make others feel secure, involved, and attached to meaningful work (think, “In this transformation, no one gets left behind,” “You are important to me; I need you in order to make this work”). On the other hand, these leaders also recognized that change requires “un-belonging,” which means two things:

- Building others' capacity to detach from past loyalties (to ways of working, to team configurations, to assumptions that no longer suit new contexts).
- Being able to stand at a distance from any strong belief group in order to allow novel solutions to emerge.

So, excessive belonging impedes new futures.

### **Four Ways to Drive Change Through Belonging**

George not only needed to persuade his team to belong to a new organizational model — he also had to foster un-belonging by unhooking them sensitively yet firmly from its existing setup while resisting any temptation to side with points of view he used to hold dear himself, which at times felt as strong as betrayal.

So how, exactly, can change leaders walk this belonging/un-belonging tight rope and skillfully attend to people's most primal need to feel secure in disruptive contexts? How can they foster both loyalty and the capacity to walk away from what no longer serves? Here are four strategies.

### **Be mindful of your own emotions.**

Amid the turmoil, George took the time to look inside himself and realized that he, too, was feeling bitter about having to give up a model that had worked well for him — in other words, his own sense of belonging was threatened. This physiologically impacts the prefrontal cortex as the seat of decision making and the ability to move from reactive impulse (“I’m betraying their trust!”) to intentional and creative response (“This is what I know is needed to ensure our future”).

This neurochemical disruption influences executive function: our capacity to make decisions, process information, and plan. That’s why it’s vital for leaders to master a skill we call “being before doing”: tuning into and regulating one’s own mental and emotional reactions to experiences. When we intentionally bring our attention to the present moment — for example, by focusing on our breathing — we increase our awareness of all that is going on in and around us without immediate judgement. This preserves our thinking and decision-making abilities, stops our brains from reacting impulsively, and opens the opportunity to assess different options.

### **Identify what people are seeking to preserve — and why.**

George had also learned about the vital skill of systemic perception — understanding that what you see is a symptom of deeper issues — and listened closely to the regionally structured

team. He told us, “I had three teams come to me independently wanting to present and essentially, they were presenting all the good stuff they had been doing, how they’re working, all their successes. The underlying message was ‘we’re a really neat little team, and don’t break us up.’” He realized that his people couldn’t come up with the required alternative organizational design because they were almost as attached to their old teams as to family, and breaking them up seemed too painful.

Look beyond what seems like resistance to or an inability to change and perceive what people treasure and protect. It will enable you to address and challenge deep loyalties with insight and respect.

### **Lead difficult conversations.**

Once George noticed this dynamic, he addressed it in conversations with his employees: “Rather than saying ‘don’t break us up,’ why don’t we have a conversation about why you feel uncomfortable about being broken up?” This was a powerful intervention that enabled people to see their loyalty for what it was: a sentiment that was impeding the company’s successful step into a more viable, product-based, global organization. Despite the difficulty of the conversation, once these attachments were named, his team felt able to “un-belong” and move into a different future. In George’s words: “There was energy, enthusiasm; people settled in their new space and so it really got going. They had moved from their old roles into the new roles and then they were working out what stuff gets done where in the new world.” Truth-telling had set them free.

To help your team see not only what needs to change, but why it needs to change, you have to lead conversations that explore their discomfort and help them see that as a necessary change companion.

### **Consider the prize and the price of change.**

No big change comes without a price tag. And because they're human, leaders tend to overestimate the benefits and downplay the costs. When you name and work with both, you can build true belonging, not false loyalty.

By setting the context of the organizational redesign and its impact on the whole business and vulnerably admitting to his own sense of loss and bitterness, George enabled the team to see that while for them it meant losing valued intimate connections, their sacrifice would benefit the business as a whole.

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Attending to un-belonging — both your own as well as your employees' — is a key element of successfully stewarding change. This will be a critical skill in the coming months as the dynamic global environment forces businesses to adapt.

**Deborah Rowland** is the co-author of *Sustaining Change: Leadership That Works*, *Still Moving: How to Lead Mindful Change*, and the *Still Moving Field Guide: Change Vitality at Your Fingertips*. She has personally led change at Shell, Gucci Group, BBC Worldwide, and PepsiCo and pioneered original research in the field, accepted as a paper at the 2016 Academy of Management and the 2019 European Academy of Management. Thinkers50 Radar named as one of the generation of management thinkers changing the world of business in 2017, and she's on the 2021 HR Most Influential Thinker list. She is Cambridge University 1st Class Archaeology & Anthropology Graduate.

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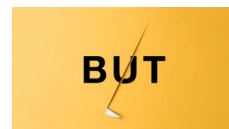
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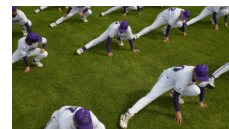
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