



2010, Volume 13, Issue 2

Strategies for Leading through Times of Change

Fourteen Effective Patterns to Ease an Organization through Change

By Mary Lynn Manns, PhD and Linda Rising, PhD

Leading change is difficult. Therefore, much is written on the topic. This article is based on a study that took the unique approach of listening to stories from leaders in a variety of sizes and types of organizations and documenting their recurring, successful solutions to common problems found in change initiatives. Their strategies, or "patterns," provide a resource for anyone who struggles with introducing a new idea into an organization.

Introduction

We are living in a world in which the word "change" defines the new work order. Organizational leaders no longer have the luxury of contemplating if they will make changes, but rather must decide how they can transform their organization in order to survive a rapidly shifting environment. A recent issue of *Business Week* reports: "... there's no question that the game has changed for business. The tools managers once used with great success ... are being reevaluated." In this same issue, Cisco CEO John Chambers cautions, "Without exception, all my biggest mistakes occurred because I moved too slowly." [1]



The process of change can bring stress to even the strongest organization. Leaders will struggle and so will the people they are trying to convince. A recently published book, *Change or Die* [2] explains why the odds are nine to one that individuals will *not* alter behavior even when faced with the likelihood of dying prematurely as a result of bad habits. Business leaders who see this statistic might question their chances for success in leading less threatening initiatives in their organization. Surrounded by the pressure to respond to a rapidly shifting world, leaders need tools to address the many challenges in building and maintaining new initiatives, so that they are never caught off-guard. This study provides some of these tools.

The Study

There is much written about organizational change theory and the recommendations it yields. This study took the unique approach of documenting common problems and successful solutions in an array of change initiatives. To do this, numerous stories and experiences of facilitating change were gathered from people leading transformations in their organizations throughout the world. The leaders represented diverse backgrounds, ages, experiences, and job titles and came from a variety of sizes and types of organizations, both large and small, profit and not-for-profit. From their stories, observations were documented and merged with other research findings on the topics of change and influence. Accounts of successful change agents throughout history were also included. During this process, the findings were continually exposed for comment and feedback at conferences and with reviewers experienced in leading change.

When the investigation uncovered a recurring and effective strategy for leading change, it was documented as a "pattern." Just as the name suggests, a pattern captures a strategy that has occurred more than once. Christopher Alexander used this method of documenting patterns to record successful design practices in the architecture profession. His focus on proven solutions rather than new and unique ones was motivated by his observation that modern-day buildings and towns did not approach the beauty of the historical past. Unlike an idea or well-planned proposal that may or may not work, Alexander showed how a pattern describes a solution that has been applied successfully over the course of time in many different circumstances. [3] While an individual pattern documents a successful solution to one recurring problem, building relationships between them into what is known as a "pattern language" provides a resource to handle truly complex problems, such as leading change in an organization.

To date, this organizational change study has uncovered 58 effective strategies, or patterns, that anyone at any level within an organization can use for leading change. Each one takes its form from Alexander's work, containing the following sections: opening story, abstract, context, problem, forces, solution, resulting context, and known uses. Because each pattern is named, the collection provides a vocabulary for change agents to have constructive conversations about their problems and solutions. There are 14 patterns introduced in this article. Full descriptions of all the sections in 48 of the patterns can be found in *Fearless Change: Patterns for Introducing New Ideas* by Manns & Rising [4] and short summaries of all 58 are available in Table I.

Findings

Agents of change, whether the CEO or a young, new employee, often feel like "powerless leaders" because changing people's minds is rarely 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." Therefore, some leaders may think it is easier to demand that a change happens—they may drive it from the top without significant across-the-board participation. While this may appear to be faster than a grassroots, emergent effort, it's likely to result in disgruntled compliance, rather than involvement and satisfaction among the individuals the leader is attempting to change. [5] In contrast, this study shows how leaders who make use of patterns when encountering challenges along the way are more effective in engendering "buy-in," carrying out a change initiative that intrigues and interests others to the point that they want to change.

The Starting Point

The pattern that describes the person who will lead the change is titled *Evangelist* because the change agent must have faith in the new idea and passion for the work it will take to convince others to follow. This attitude will carry the leader through the inevitable frustrations along the way. The change leaders who were interviewed revealed that a sincere belief in the value of their idea for their organizations is necessary before the leader will have the ability to convince others.

However, the *Evangelist* must understand that patterns are not "silver bullets." Using a pattern wisely means understanding the right context for its use and the consequences of application. All strategies have both positive outcomes as well as negative. The *Evangelist* pattern guards against being overzealous because, while passion will encourage people to take notice, fanaticism can turn people off.

Widening the Circle

Being an *Evangelist* for change takes time and energy, but it is even more difficult when the leader attempts to do it alone. Therefore, the pattern named *Ask for Help* can lighten the workload. In

addition, it can build support from people who provide the help and then begin to feel part of the change effort.

When asking for help, it is useful to start by finding people in the organization who get excited about new things. These types of people are described in the pattern *Innovator*. They can help test the new idea and provide early feedback. However, their strength can also be seen as a downside because their enthusiasm for new ideas often causes them to quickly move from one initiative to another.

The pattern named *Early Adopter* can help with this. Unlike an *Innovator*, the *Early Adopter* will respond to a new idea with more questions and careful consideration. This allows them to be viewed as sensible decision makers and, as a result, they can serve as effective opinion leaders.

The individuals an *Evangelist* identifies as *Innovators* and *Early Adopters* may be interested in helping to apply the *Just Do It* pattern—integrating the new idea into a current project in order to understand its benefits and limitations. Once there are some success stories, they can share their experiences in an informal, interactive session, or a *Hometown Story*. This pattern is effective because individuals are often convinced when they hear from others "just like them" who are having success with a new idea.^[6]

At the same time, the *Evangelist* must recognize that people take change personally. Presentations and e-mail messages will arouse curiosity and some interest, but old habits will not die without effort. The *Personal Touch* pattern recommends that change leaders look for opportunities to talk with individuals one-on-one about how the new idea can be personally useful and valuable to them. Therefore, rather than pushing the solution, *Personal Touch* allows the *Evangelist* to build relationships and encourage others to discuss the new idea in the context of their individual roles and problems.

Example: Evangelist, Just Do It, Hometown Story, Personal Touch, Step by Step

Charles, a contractor in a large media research company, is one *Evangelist* who shared his story for the study. His experience introducing a new programming language into an organization that had concerns about performance and scalability shows how he used the patterns to reach his goal. The vice president said the language choice could be a career-killing decision for Charles, 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 (*Just Do It*). They shared their results with others (*Hometown Story*) 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.

Charles also applied the *Just Do It* and *Hometown Story* patterns when introducing software testing tools a short time later. He utilized the tools in his own work and documented the benefits. Once there was something to show, Charles held an information session to explain what he had learned. He also kept his ears open for opportunities to help those who showed an interest in his work and was quick to lend a hand when he found individuals who were having a problem that his testing tools could solve (*Personal Touch*).

Charles and other change agents reported they had to recognize and accept that change starts slowly and evolves over time. This reality is implicit in the *Step by Step* pattern. Because life and people are unpredictable, a master plan for change is not going to be as effective as a vision with short-term goals and a willingness to adjust plans along the way. John Kotter, a widely published author on the topic of change leadership, agrees that new developments should spread quietly at first so that leaders can learn from failures and build on successes. [7]

Charles' use of these and other patterns in a *Step by Step* manner allowed him to gradually earn credibility. He stressed that this is vital in becoming a good change agent, noting that people may not always agree with you, but if you slowly and deliberately build credibility, most will be willing to listen and consider the merit in what you have to say.

However, not everyone will react this way. The study also examined what an *Evangelist* can do when people don't react with trust or a willingness to listen. All ideas, no matter how wonderful, will encounter a certain amount of resistance.

Dealing with Resistance

In order to make progress, an *Evangelist* will often have to put some effort into dealing with skepticism from others. One of the more interesting findings in this study was the realization that it is not efficient to spend a great amount of time trying to convince the resistors, but listening to them is highly advised. It is not easy to hear about potential shortcomings, so one common reaction is to fear the criticism and avoid the person who is delivering it. Although it may seem more comfortable for ideas to be welcomed without examination, there are penalties in this attitude, especially in the beginning when there is still much to learn. The *Fear Less* pattern suggests that the change leader *Ask for Help* from the skeptics by listening to them with the intent of learning more about the idea, about how it will fit into the organization and about the change initiative. The aim is not to convert resistors but rather to respect their opinions and bring to light the limitations in the innovation so that these issues can be addressed frankly and honestly.

Another type of resistance can occur when the opposition is not as much against the idea as it is against the *Evangelist*. In this case, the *Bridge-BUILDER* pattern recommends finding someone who has credibility in the eyes of the resistors and can make the case for the innovation. By letting others do the speaking, the skeptic is likely to become more open to change because the message comes from someone who is viewed with more trust.

When the *Evangelist* encounters a skeptic that is also a strong opinion leader in the organization, the pattern *Champion Skeptic* describes a special role that allows this person to be the official "finder of faults" and "sounder of warnings." For example, the *Champion Skeptic* can be given a few minutes at the end of each appropriate meeting to summarize negative observations and keep others from moving ahead too hastily. This strategy will honor the resistance and give it a proper place in the planning.

The study also found that it is important to anticipate resistance when entering a gathering where a decision will be made about the new idea. If the *Evangelist* does not anticipate what the resistors are thinking, the meeting can become consumed with questions and conclude with an unfavorable outcome that may be impossible to remedy later. Therefore, the pattern named *Corridor Politics* recommends that, before everyone gathers for the vote, the *Evangelist* and other supporters speak privately with the "fence-sitters" to answer questions and address their concerns. As they are won over, their support can be used to convince others who might be more challenging to influence.

Finally, the *Whisper in the General's Ear* pattern addresses resistance at the executive level. High-level decision makers are often uncomfortable about admitting they don't understand something in front of others and are sometimes hard to convince in a group setting. Therefore, it is helpful to arrange a short meeting with an executive to answer questions and address any concerns over the innovation and the effort to introduce it. This will maintain the executive's dignity while giving the *Evangelist* a chance to get the case heard.

Implications for Leading Change

The interviews with the change leaders in this study support the observation that leading change is not a science. Rather, it is a gradual process of discovery that prompts the leaders to react to problems, setbacks, and small successes along the way. Therefore, it is not possible to prescribe one specific way to apply the patterns introduced in this article. Even though each one captures one valuable strategy, the collection of 58 is a powerful resource to use in the appropriate context of the change initiative. For example, some of the *Evangelists* began with the *Ask for Help* pattern while others initially worked alone with *Just Do It*, followed by a *Hometown Story* to capture more interest. Still others immediately encountered vocal skeptics and had to begin with *Fear Less* and other patterns for handling resistance.



Therefore, to make use of the patterns in the most appropriate way for an individual organization, the specific problems within the change initiative must first be identified. The patterns then supply solutions that have been shown to work for other leaders of change.

The prevailing observation is that a leader of change needs at least three things to introduce a new idea into an organization: a belief in the idea, the determination to act on the belief, and some information on how to bring the idea into the organization. The leader must supply the first two, while the patterns uncovered and documented in this study can assist in implementing the third.

Additional information about these patterns for leading change can be found at:

<http://www.fearlesschangepatterns.com>

Name	Summary
<i>Ask for Help</i>	Since the task of introducing a new idea into an organization is a big job, look for people and resources to help your efforts.
<i>Big Jolt</i>	To provide more visibility for the change effort, invite a high-profile person into your organization to talk about the new idea.
<i>Bridge-BUILDER</i>	Pair those who have accepted the new idea with those who have not.
<i>Brown Bag</i>	Use the time when people normally eat lunch to provide a convenient and relaxed setting for talking about the new idea.
<i>Champion Skeptic</i>	When a strong opinion leader is skeptical of your new idea, ask them to play the role of "official skeptic." Use their comments to improve your effort, even if you don't change their minds.
<i>Concrete Action Plan</i>	To make real progress toward your goal, take the time at each implementation step to say what you will do and where

	and when you will do it.
<i>Connector</i>	To help you spread the word about the innovation, ask for help from people who have connections with many others in the organization.
<i>Corporate Angel</i>	To help align the innovation with the goals of the organization, get support from a high-level executive.
<i>Corridor Politics</i>	Informally work on decision makers and key influencers before an important vote to ensure they understand the consequences of the decision.
<i>Dedicated Champion</i>	To increase your effectiveness in introducing your new idea, make a case for having the work become part of your job description.
<i>Do Food</i>	Make an ordinary gathering a special event by including food.
<i>e-Forum</i>	Set up an electronic bulletin board, distribution list, listserve, or writeable website for those who want to hear more.
<i>Early Adopter</i>	Win the support of the people who can be opinion leaders for the new idea.
<i>Early Majority</i>	To create commitment to the new idea in the organization, you must convince the majority.
<i>Elevator Pitch</i>	Prepare a couple of sentences that you have ready to introduce others to your new idea.
<i>Emotional Connection</i>	Connecting with the emotional needs of your audience is more effective in persuading them than just presenting facts.
<i>Evangelist</i>	When beginning to introduce the new idea into your organization, do everything you can to share your passion for it.
<i>External Validation</i>	To increase the credibility of the new idea, bring in information from sources external to the organization.
<i>Fear Less</i>	Turn resistance to the new idea to your advantage.
<i>Go-To Person</i>	Identify key people who can help at critical points in your change initiative.
<i>Group Identity</i>	Give the change effort an identity to help people recognize that it exists.
<i>Guru on Your Side</i>	Enlist the support of senior-level people who are esteemed by members of the organization.

<i>Guru Review</i>	Gather anyone who is a <i>Guru on Your Side</i> and other interested colleagues to evaluate the new idea for managers and other developers.
<i>Hometown Story</i>	To help people see the usefulness of the new idea, encourage those who have had success with it to share their stories.
<i>Imagine That!</i>	To move your change initiative forward, engage people in an exercise to imagine future possibilities.
<i>In Your Space</i>	Keep the new idea visible by placing reminders throughout the organization.
<i>Innovator</i>	When you begin the change initiative, ask for help from colleagues who like new ideas.
<i>Involve Everyone</i>	For a new idea to be successful across an organization, everyone should have an opportunity to support the innovation and make a unique contribution.
<i>Just Do It</i>	Prior to spreading the word about the new idea, work with the new idea on your own to discover what the benefits and limitations are.
<i>Just Enough</i>	To ease learners into the more difficult concepts of a new idea, give a brief introduction and make more information available when they are ready.
<i>Just Say Thanks</i>	To make people feel appreciated, say "thanks" in the most sincere way you can to everyone who helps you.
<i>Local Sponsor</i>	Ask for help from first-line management. When your boss supports the work you are doing to introduce the new idea, you can be more effective.
<i>Location, Location, Location</i>	To avoid interruptions that disrupt the flow of an event, try to hold significant events off site.
<i>Mentor</i>	When a team wants to get started with the new idea, have someone around who understands it and can help them throughout the project.
<i>Myth Buster</i>	There are always myths around every change initiative. Document those and address them in a timely and forthright manner.
<i>Next Steps</i>	Take time near the end of an event related to the new idea to identify what participants can do next.
<i>Personal Touch</i>	To convince people of the value in a new idea, show how it can be <i>personally</i> useful and valuable to them.

<i>Pick Your Battles</i>	Spend your energy in conflict only when it's important. Fight for the things you believe in, but don't fight if it's not worth it.
<i>Piggyback</i>	Look for a way to piggyback your change initiative on an existing practice in your organization.
<i>Plant the Seeds</i>	To spark interest, carry materials (seeds) and display (plant) them when the opportunity arises.
<i>The Right Time</i>	Consider timing when you initiate the change, schedule events, and/or ask others for help.
<i>Royal Audience</i>	Arrange for management and members of the organization to spend time with a special "Big Jolt" visitor.
<i>Shoulder to Cry On</i>	To avoid becoming too discouraged when the going gets tough, find opportunities to talk with others struggling to introduce a new idea.
<i>Small Concession</i>	To address the concerns of someone who is resistant to your cause and making a lot of noise, consider a small concession that will show you acknowledge their point of view and contribution.
<i>Small Successes</i>	To avoid becoming overwhelmed by the challenges and all the things you have to do when you're involved in an organizational change effort, celebrate even small success.
<i>Smell of Success</i>	When your efforts produce a visible positive result, people will come out of the woodwork to talk to you. Treat this opportunity as a teaching moment.
<i>Stay in Touch</i>	Once you've sparked some interest in people, don't forget about them and make sure they don't forget about you.
<i>Step by Step</i>	Relieve your frustration at the enormous task of changing an organization by taking one small step at a time toward your goal.
<i>Study Group</i>	Form a small group of colleagues who are interested in exploring or continuing to learn about a specific topic.
<i>Sustained Momentum</i>	Take a proactive approach to the ongoing work of sustaining the interest in the new idea in your organization.
<i>Tailor Made</i>	To convince people in the organization of the value they can gain from the new idea, tailor your message to the needs of your audience.
<i>Test the Waters</i>	When a new opportunity presents itself, see if there is any interest by using it and then evaluating the result.

<i>Time For Reflection</i>	To learn from the past, take time at regular intervals to evaluate what is working well and what should be done differently.
<i>Token</i>	To keep a new idea alive in a person's memory, hand out tokens that can be identified with the topic being introduced.
<i>Town Meeting</i>	As early as possible in your change effort and regularly throughout, gather as many participants as possible to solicit feedback, build support, get new ideas, and bring in newcomers.
<i>Trial Run</i>	When the organization is not willing to commit to the new idea, suggest that they experiment with it for a short period and study the results.
<i>Wake-up Call</i>	To encourage people to pay attention to your idea, point out the problem that you believe has created a pressing need for change.
<i>Whisper in the General's Ear</i>	Managers are sometimes hard to convince in a group setting, so meet with them privately to address any concerns.

Table I: Short summary of 58 patterns

Mary Lynn Manns, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Management and Accountancy at the University of North Carolina – Asheville where she teaches courses in management information systems, quantitative analysis, and change leadership. She earned her master's degree from the University of Colorado and her PhD from De Montfort University in England. She is co-author of *Fearless Change: Patterns for Introducing New Ideas*, which documents successful strategies used by leaders of change in many different types of organizations throughout the world. Published in 2005 by Addison Wesley Publishing Co, the book continues to receive outstanding reviews with a "best book" award and a place on the Amazon.com "12 Books that Changed My Career" list. Manns does numerous presentations and consultations on the topic of leading change in organizations in and outside the U.S.

Linda Rising, has a PhD from Arizona State University in the area of object-based design metrics. Her background includes university teaching as well as work in the industries of telecommunications, avionics, and strategic weapons systems. She is an internationally known presenter on topics related to patterns, project retrospectives, and the change process. Rising is the author of numerous articles and has published four books: *Design Patterns in Communications*; *The Pattern Almanac 2000*; *A Patterns Handbook*, and her most recent, *Fearless Change: Patterns for Introducing New Ideas*.

[1] McGregor, Jena, "Smart Management for Tough Times: Breakthrough Management Ideas for a World in which the Game Will Never be the Same," *BusinessWeek*, March 23, 2009. 30-34.

[2] Deutschman, Alan, *Change or Die*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007).

[3] Alexander, Christopher, et al, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[4] Manns, M.L., L. Rising, *Fearless Change: Patterns for Introducing New Ideas*. (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2005).

[5] Green, G.C., A.R. Hevner, "The Successful Diffusion of Innovations: Guidance for Software Development Organizations," *IEEE Software* 17, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2000): 96-103.

[6] Rogers, E.M., *Diffusion of Innovations*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2003).

[7] Kotter, J.P., "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail," *Harvard Business Review* (March-April 1995): 1-10.

Copyright of Graziadio Business Report is the property of Pepperdine University, Graziadio School of Business & Management and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.