The leader selected for my interview is a retiree, now working as an independent consultant. During his career employment of more than 30 years, Ron managed engineering teams in various technical areas. His current assignment is supporting the restructuring of an existing risk management process. One of the Integrated Product Teams (IPTs) that manages risk in the process is dealing with extremely poor performance currently, both from internal processes that are difficult and unwieldy, as well as execution failures by a key supplier. Ron’s assignment to this project was due in part to the fact that he held senior leadership positions in the IPTs prior to his retirement, so he understands the behaviors and tendencies of the IPTs most involved. The process is being redesigned because either the process or the people involved in the process have failed to provide adequate visibility of the risk to allow appropriate mitigation. The employees involved are frustrated and tired of the poor performance. Everyone wants a change to improve things, but disagreement exists on how to get there.

A cornerstone to Ron’s philosophy on introducing change in the organization is to listen to people. If empathy isn’t the emotion that comes from listening to the team, fake it. To engage people in the change, listen to what they have to say, good or bad. By sharing their opinions, people feel connected. Oftentimes, leaders fail to put themselves in the place of the employees and do not understand what it takes to have people buy in and embrace change. To counter this, Ron believes that it is necessary to explain the reason for change, the benefits of making the change, as well as helping to assess other work priorities. When considering team members, akin to Collins’ (2001) philosophy that once the right people are on the bus, the team will head in the right direction, Ron looks for people who listen, who have controlled passion, and get the job done with few bodies left behind. He looks for patterns of good leadership, including whether other people will follow them.

The basic description of successful leaders that I have identified is the ability to demonstrate patience and be the calm in the eye of a storm. Collins (2001) points out that great leaders often focus on getting the right people on the team and worrying about the vision and plan later. Ron and I concur on our perception that getting the right people on the team is the first step to making any change. A sense of selflessness and lack of ego was another characteristic that I associated with leadership. Ron’s perception is that confidence or internal ego is a good and necessary thing. However, there is a fine line between confidence and arrogance. Big egos can be detrimental because people will not listen to them. Confident leaders look outward at their teams and customers and have greater confidence in the capability of their teams.

The redesign of the risk management process has been fraught with challenges. Fundamental to the challenges is the team that is on the bus, as Collins describes. Several of the team members who are in key roles are arrogant and if they even present the impression that they are listening, they tend not to hear what people are saying. They are trying to lead, but the team isn’t following does not have a personal commitment to the success of the team. The priority and importance of the team’s activity is not understood.

The interview reinforced many of the beliefs I already held about leading change, most importantly, that you have to care about the people and engage with them to make things successful in the long term. Challenging people is appropriate and keeping the goals in front of them will help drive execution. That said, listening to the people is part of the engagement. Communicating requirements and expectations continually so the team doesn’t lose perspective on priority is important as well.

Recommendations to improve the leader’s success with implementing change on the risk management team:
1. Get the right people on the bus.
2. Explain (or explain again) the reason and objective for the change.
3. Once the reasoning is clear, set the priorities against all the other work the team has to do.
4. Listen to the team, particularly their feedback on the change and priorities.
5. Align team members’ performance management objectives with the objectives of the team. Make it personal for them.

References

Collins, J. (2001). Good to Great. New York: Harper Collins.
Kotter, J. P. (1996). Leading Change. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.