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How to Get Senior Leaders to Change

by Scott Keller

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Most senior executives understand and generally buy into the famous aphorism, "Be the change you want to see in the world." Prompted by HR professionals or consultants, they often commit themselves to "being the change" by personally role-modeling the desired behaviors. And then, in practice, nothing significant changes.

In the research for our book, *Beyond Performance*, we found that the reason for this is that most executives don't see themselves as "part of the problem." Therefore, deep down, they do not believe that it is they who need to change, even though in principle they agree that leaders must model the desired changes. Take, for example, a team that reports that, as a group and as an organization, they are low in trust, not customer-focused and bureaucratic. How many executives when asked privately will say "no" to the questions "Do you consider yourself to be trustworthy?" and "Are you customer-focused?" and "yes" to the question "Are you a bureaucrat?" None, of course.

The fact is that most well-intentioned and hard-working people believe they *are* doing the right thing, or they wouldn't be doing it. However, most people also have an unwarranted optimism in relation to their own behavior. Consider that when around one million students were asked how good they were at getting along with others, 85% rated themselves above the median and 25% rated themselves in the top 1%. Of course this is mathematically impossible. This isn't only true for students getting along with one another — far more than 50% of people rank themselves in the top half of driving ability, although it is a statistical impossibility. When couples are asked to estimate their contribution to household work, the combined total routinely exceeds 100%. (And most men rank themselves in the top half of male athletic ability, even though that's statistically impossible.) In many behavior-related areas, human beings consistently think they are better than they are — a phenomenon referred to in psychology as a "self-serving bias." Whereas conventional change management approaches surmise that top team role modeling is a matter of will ("wanting to change") or skill ("knowing how to change"), the inconvenient truth is that the real bottleneck to role modeling is knowing *what* to change at a personal level.

Typically, insight into what to change can be created by concrete 360-degree feedback techniques, either via surveys, conversations or both. This 360-degree feedback should not be against generic HR leadership competency models, but should instead be against the specific behaviors related to the desired changes that will drive business performance. This style of feedback can be augmented by fact gathering such as third-party observation of senior executives going about their day-to-day work (e.g., "You say you are not bureaucratic, but every meeting you are in creates three additional meetings and no decisions are made.") and calendar analyses (e.g., "You say you are customer-focused but have spent 5% of your time reviewing customer-related data and no time meeting with customers or customer-facing employees.").

Consider Amgen CEO Kevin Sharer's approach of asking each of his top 75, "What should I do differently?" and sharing his development needs and commitment publicly with them. Consider the top team of a national insurance company who routinely employed what they called the "circle of feedback" during their change program: Every participant receives feedback live in the room, directly from their colleagues on "What are your strengths?" in relation to "being the change" as well as "Where can you improve?" Consider the leadership coalition (top 25) of a multi-regional bank who, after each major event in their change program, conducted a short, targeted 360-degree feedback survey regarding how well their behaviors role-modeled the desired behaviors during the event, ensuring that feedback was timely, relevant and practical.

While seemingly inconvenient, these types of techniques help break through the "self-serving bias" that inhibits well-meaning leaders from making a profound difference.

Note that some readers may be thinking, "But surely there are a few people who *are* fully role-modeling the desired behaviors — what does this mean for them?" If the purpose of senior executive role-modeling is to exhibit the behaviors required to ensure the success and sustainability of the company (e.g., collaboration, agility in decision making, empowerment), then the answer is "keep up the good work!" If the answer, however, is expanded to include role-modeling the process of personal behavioral change itself, there is more to do. Recall another famous aphorism: "For things to change, first I must change."

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