How Command and Control as a Change Leadership Style Causes Transformational Change Efforts to Fail

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Introduction

Command and control is by far the most common change leadership style. Most of today’s leaders were mentored themselves by command and control managers, and the culture of most organizations is still based on command and control norms. It is hard to escape this leadership style’s historic influence and dominance. But as a change leader, you must. Here’s why.

Command and control as a change leadership style destroys virtually any chance of success in nine out of ten transformational change efforts. For starters, command and control:

- Limits the engagement and commitment you must develop in your employees, and often actually promotes resistance
- Lessens your chances of creating a change process that will lead to success
- Keeps you from being able to make the real-time course corrections during implementation that are necessary for optimal results
- Minimizes attention to necessary people issues like consistent communications and emotional reactions to change

In this article, we will explore the limitations of command and control as a change leadership style, and introduce “co-creating” as an alternate way of leading transformation that delivers higher quality change results AND simultaneously establishes a foundation for a high performing culture.

As you read, recall the unique features of transformational change:

- The process of transformation usually begins long before a clear future state can be identified
- The sheer magnitude of transformational change demands a major shift in the leaders’ and employees’ mindsets and behavior and the organization’s culture
- The ultimate success of the transformational change process depends on how well the change leaders make real-time adjustments to their outcomes and process as new circumstances occur

We will delve into each of these key features shortly. But first, let’s explore what drives the command and control style.

Command and Control Is Based on a Number of Erroneous Assumptions

Command and control is based on establishing and maintaining power over, and control of, people and organizational processes. On the surface, this sounds like a good idea: you certainly don’t want people’s behavior or steps in your change process to be “out of control.” However, this notion of being able to command and control people and processes only goes so far.

A number of usually unspoken assumptions drive the use of command and control. As you read them, imagine the behavior of change leaders you know who believe in these assumptions:

- Leaders know best
- Leaders should know where they are going (goals, outcomes) and must predetermine the plan for how to get there (process)
- Controlling human behavior and action during implementation—so there is minimal variance from the predetermined plan—is a requirement of success
- The environment/marketplace won’t change enough to be a factor during implementation, and if it does, leaders can and must control its influence
- If leaders encounter unplanned variables, they must quickly control the negative impacts on the change effort through...
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problem solving and then return to the implementation of their current plan

• Employees won’t naturally contribute positively to the change effort, so leaders must “help” them by commanding and controlling their behavior and involvement. Leaders must force people’s cooperation.

• Needing to alter change plans connotes leadership failure and means that the change leaders did not plan thoroughly enough

You can argue that these assumptions are somewhat applicable for two types of organizational change—developmental and transitional change. However, they are completely false and inappropriate for transformational changes. (See Beyond Change Management: How to Achieve Breakthrough Results through Conscious Change Leadership, Dean Anderson and Linda Ackerman Anderson, pages 51–79, for a complete discussion of the different types of change.)

In projects that can be isolated from their environment (e.g., protected from outside influences) and for changes that do not require people to change beyond learning new technical or operational skills, command and control can work. In these cases, a predetermined outcome and project plan can be established and executed through a relatively stable set of circumstances. Employees won’t have to change much and won’t need to be fully committed to the effort to enable success. Keep in mind, however, that making command and control work in such developmental or transitional change projects is a far cry from making the projects extremely successful. Command and control seldom leads to optimal results in any type of change.

The above assumptions are erroneous regarding transformational changes for a number of reasons. First, transformation is usually catalyzed by major changes occurring in the environment/marketplace. These changes are not isolated events, but in this day and age, continuous. Consequently, change leaders can never be sure of their destination when they begin their change efforts. More often than not, circumstances are likely to arise that demand a change in direction. Since change leaders cannot protect their change efforts from the significant influences of the environment, they cannot create a plan and expect to control all of the dynamics that may impact its execution. They will need to continuously alter or course correct both their plan and their destination throughout the change.

Consequently, to have any level of success, change leaders need many eyes and ears tuned to the change effort, marketplace, and customer dynamics, as well as internal organizational forces. Whose eyes and ears do they need? Employees!

Employees frequently receive critical data for course correction long before leaders because employees are closer to the action. They are key to the early warning system for needed adjustments to both the goals of the transformation and the plans for getting there. Therefore, employees need to participate as full players, not coerced victims. They must emotionally “own” the change and understand its intent as much as the leaders do so they can contribute to moving it forward in a positive direction.

Furthermore, in transformation, the nature of the change is so profound that the organization’s culture and employees’ mindsets and behavior must change to succeed. Both leaders and employees must evolve their mindsets about how work gets done, their role in the work, and the way the organization functions. For instance, they might need to embrace new business models, develop partnership relationships with previously adversarial departments, design radically new work processes, take on more
responsibility, etc. Leaders can command and control employees to learn new technical skills, but they cannot coerce this level of personal change. That can only be accomplished by willing participants—willing because they see the value and necessity for both themselves and the organization. Therefore, a change leader’s mindset, style, and behavior, and the change process they design as a result of their orientation, must catalyze employees to want to participate, to choose to contribute, rather than force them to do so.

The Key Is to Co-Create with Employees and Circumstances, Not Exercise Power or Control Over Them

Co-creating implies working with. It means operating as a team, aligned across hierarchical and functional boundaries in pursuit of what is best for the overall organization. A change leader operating in a co-creative style views employees as strategic partners in the change, not just “targets” of it. Pragmatically, this means:

- Providing employees all the marketplace information about why the change is necessary (the case for change)
- Asking for and using employee input about the vision or direction of the change (its intended outcomes)
- Involving employees in the design of what needs to change (the content of the change)
- Putting employees on teams critical to making the change happen, such as the communication team, the design team, even the change leadership team itself
- Giving employees decision authority about the change as it pertains to their “local” environment
- Providing employees with a clear structure and process for reporting information and issues pertinent to the success of the change, including potential course corrections to it

Regarding the actual change process, working with (co-creating) means not trying to stamp out problems—those “negative” outside influences that were not planned for, but instead, letting those forces influence your plan and direction. Where a command and control leader will try to eradicate problems so his or her rigid plan can continue, a co-creative leader will “listen to the messages” embedded in problems to discover if course corrections are necessary. A co-creative leader assumes variance will occur and perceives problems as “gifts” revealing needed course correction so they can achieve the best result. Where change leaders operating in a command and control orientation often miss wake-up calls for alteration and march down paths doomed for failure, co-creative change leaders hear these wake-up calls and engage with employees to figure out how to handle them successfully (i.e., they co-create solutions.)

Transformational Change Success Requires Change Leaders to Transform Themselves to Embrace and Model a Co-Creative Style

In the late 1980’s and early 90’s, Being First, Inc. found out the hard way that an organization that attempts to design and implement transformation without addressing personal transformation in its leaders is doomed for failure. Back then, we accepted, albeit reluctantly, clients who wanted our cutting-edge change methodology (see The Change Leader’s Roadmap: How to Navigate Your Organization’s Transformation, Linda Ackerman Anderson and Dean Anderson) but were unwilling to engage in the critical personal transformation work of the leaders. These clients loved The Change Leader’s Roadmap, but would consistently run into
predictable problems we could help them see, but not overcome. The reason, ALWAYS, was a lack of insight caused by the blinders of their command and control orientation. From their worldview, these leaders could not see simple solutions to their people and process implementation problems, and would not accept our input about critical change strategies; they just did not think what we offered was necessary or valid. We learned then that the key to successful transformation was evolving leaders’ mindsets about change. Over time, we decided as a firm to no longer engage in long-term consulting relationships unless the client, after some initial change education, agreed that co-creating was critical to their success, and that they would provide The Breakthrough to Change Leadership program to their leaders (CEO included). This program is our method for experientially introducing leaders to co-creating and demonstrating the profound benefits and tangible change results this orientation can deliver to their bottom line.

Case In Point

One of our early client “pioneers” in this regard was Daryl Sabin, the Vice President of Manufacturing for a large food company in San Francisco, California. Daryl knew that implementing change was critical to his organization’s success, but rather than ask us to simply teach our change methodology and tools to his change leaders, he instead insisted that we support their “breakthrough” to new ways of thinking and behaving. We devised a strategy for Daryl that included training, coaching, and numerous follow-up sessions doing real-time change strategy development with him and his team.

The net result was a substantial increase in performance and change leadership effectiveness for his team and organization. The leaders increased the pace and quality of their decision-making and collaboration, and were able to positively engage their employees in the needed changes in their organization as never before.

Since this time, we have experienced many client interventions where breakthroughs in change leadership style have catalyzed significant increases in change results, even without the use of The Change Leader’s Roadmap and its resources. Our consistent findings over the past twenty years suggest:

1. The greatest determinant of a change initiative’s success is the mindset and style of the change leaders.

2. Using a comprehensive change process methodology in a command and control way limits the benefits the methodology would otherwise produce.

3. If you have to choose, put mindset and style first, methodology and tools second.

4. The best formula for success is combining the two; include the personal transformation and change leadership breakthrough work as an early part of the overall change plan.

Summary

Every day there are more decent change tools available on the market. Using these tools can be extremely helpful and can increase the chances of your organization implementing its change efforts successfully. However, no change tool or methodology, Being First’s included, is an adequate substitute for change leaders and consultants evolving their mindsets and style to embrace the required co-creative approach. However, today’s changes are just too complicated and dynamic to put the burden solely on leaders to succeed. The only way we know to maximize the results you get from transformation is an entire enterprise of awake and responsible people working together, across boundaries, in pursuit of what is best for the overall organization.