

# Harnessing The Winds Of Change

by Kevin Cashman



Since the beginning of the 2008 presidential election cycle, America has been swept over with countless calls for ... you guessed it ... change!

Barack Obama supporters rally behind the mantra of “*change we can believe in*,” while Hillary Clinton has offered “*ready for change, ready to lead*” and “*working for change, working for you*.” In the GOP, former Bain Capital CEO Mitt Romney pronounced, “*change begins with us*,” while Ron Paul aims to “*change the world*.”

For a city so tied to tradition, Washington certainly has no shortage of change revelations! Yet long-time, successful leaders know what matters most is not who drew up the most radical blueprint for change. Rather, it's who can steadily navigate us through the change, frequent and far ranging as it is.

The wisdom imparted 3,000 years ago by Greek philosopher Heraclitis--“You can never step into the same river twice”--comes to mind. Eons later, it's still too easy to operate under the illusion that life remains more or less a constant. And even when we're cognizant of change's ever-present nature, there's a tendency to resist or at least ignore it.

A study by the Center for Creative Leadership found that the No. 1 issue facing senior management today is dealing with complexity and change. Years earlier, the Center also discovered, as did Daniel Goleman, Mike Lombardo of Lominger International and Robert Sternberg and his colleagues at Yale, that learning agility--the complex set of skills that allows us to learn something from one situation and apply it in another--is quantifiably more predictive of long-term leadership potential than raw IQ.

In today's frenetic, high-change business environment, nimble, adaptable leadership outperforms leadership that is single-mindedly smart. Yet many companies first look to intelligence when choosing their potential leaders.

**Novartis** (nyse: NVS - news - people ) Chairman and CEO Daniel Vasella, who was recently named by separate business magazines as “the most influential European business leader of the last 25 years” and among the “100 most influential people in the world,” gave sage advice to Mumbai's Indian School of Business Class of 2005: “Be comfortable with seemingly contradictory situations, feelings and actions. You will of course encounter many people who cannot deal with ambiguity, people who always want simplicity and clarity. You as leaders will have to create the clear direction for them.”

Unfortunately, multiple research studies on change paint a somewhat bleak picture. Initiatives ranging from corporate mergers to new venture funding to weight loss all share similar statistical findings: 50% to 75% fail.

So here's the big question: Why do 25% succeed? Our research and experience in personal and organizational change point to seven key shifts as it relates to thinking about and leading through change:

**-- Shifting from a focus on problems to a focus on opportunities:** Effective leaders tend to perceive and to innovate on the opportunities inherent in change.

**-- Shifting focus from the short term to the long term:** Effective leaders don't lose sight of their big picture vision in the midst of change.

**-- Shifting from a focus on circumstances to one on purpose:** Effective leaders maintain a clear sense of purpose, value and meaning to rise above challenging, immediate circumstances.

**-- Shifting from a focus on control to one on agility:** Effective leaders understand that controlling management yields limited results, but that being flexible and adaptable to internal and external needs sustains results over the long haul.

**-- Shifting from a focus on self to service:** Effective leaders buffer their teams and organizations from the stress of change by managing, neutralizing and/or transcending their own stress.

**-- Shifting from expertise focus to listening focus:** Effective leaders stay open and practice authentic listening to stay connected with the pulse of organizational and marketplace needs. They listen, synthesize and act--then listen some more!

**-- Shifting from a focus on doubt to one on trust:** Effective leaders are aware of the risks and downsides yet possess a depth of self trust that they can handle most anything that may come their way.

Below I respond to a few questions related to how change is impacting your leadership:

**Vice President, Natural Resources Industry:**  
**Without my forcing it upon them, the team members I lead have set an aggressive new strategy, but our follow-through has been slower than I'd like. At the risk of blowing us backward, how I do I effectively tell them to pick up the pace?**

Cashman: The trick is not just to tell them, but also to show them. Imagine you joined your team members in performing manual labor outside of the office and similarly felt that work pace wasn't quick enough. You'd probably start finding tasks that require others to work alongside you at an increased pace, thereby showing which gear everyone needed to be in, right? Nothing conveys the message better than a little sweat on your own brow.

Change, at its best, is more like a contagious virus than an order you give or a baton you pass forward. In order to advance the team, be the development you want to see in others. All meaningful change begins with self change. Managers attempt to bring order to change while leaders inspire energy to change.

**President and CEO, Media Organization:**  
**Our business has more than doubled in the past eight years and expanded into a second country, requiring me to work many more hours. We recently hired a great chief operating officer who is better enabling me to focus more on overall strategy and direction, but I still struggle with letting go of the day-to-day operations. How do I adjust and move on?**

By coming to grips with the fact that all of your hard work is not lost. Rather, it's prepared you and your organization for bigger and better things.

Furthermore, focusing on strategy and following operational successes aren't mutually exclusive and don't have to fully come at one another's expense. You will have to give up the degree of depth and detail related to daily activities, but that's different than abandoning it altogether. I like to think of the mindset necessary for a long swim. In order to cope, you must relax and focus on the quality of your stroke while at the same time keeping the end destination and goal in mind. Too much attention on one or the other, and the results can be treacherous.

As you are about to let go of responsibilities and control, just remember the people that--thank goodness--trusted you to take on new responsibilities long before you were really prepared to do so!

**Owner, Specialty Health Care Business: I work in a market segment that can be highly exciting, but is in dire need of a culture change. What are some tips for bringing about the grass-roots culture change needed?**

It might have occurred to you that innovation requires breaking down old thinking patterns that you see (or better yet that research shows) as being out of tune with the opportunities of your industry. But have you given thought to how important and difficult accelerating those breakdowns can be?

Change is always tough. Something familiar is destroyed. Something unknown is coming. Genuine leadership must aggressively step into the unknown or risk the certainty of being destroyed by the status quo. Accelerating the destructive-creative process is at the heart of genuine, innovative leadership.