

# 7 Things Leaders Do to Help People Change

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Ever tried to change anyone's behavior at work? It can be extremely frustrating. So often the effort produces an opposite result: rupturing the relationship, diminishing job performance, or causing the person to dig in their heels. Still, some approaches clearly work better than others.

We reviewed a dataset of 2,852 direct reports of 559 leaders. The direct reports rated their managers on 49 behaviors and also assessed the leaders on their effectiveness at leading change – specifically, the managers' ability to influence others to move in the direction the organization wanted to go. We then analyzed those who had the highest and lowest ratings on their ability to lead change, and compared that with the other behaviors we'd measured.

We found that some behaviors were less helpful in changing others. We found two that had little to no impact, thereby providing useful guidance on what not to do:

- **Being nice.** Sorry, but nice guys finish last in the change game. It might be easier if all it took to bring about change was to have a warm, positive relationship with others. But that isn't the case.
- **Giving others incessant requests, suggestions, and advice.** This is commonly called nagging. For most recipients this is highly annoying and only serves to irritate them rather than change them. (This is the approach many tend to adopt first, despite its lack of success.)

We then analyzed the behaviors that did correlate with an exceptional ability to drive change. We found seven that really help other people to change. Here they are, in order from most to least important:

**1. Inspiring others.** There are two common approaches that most of us default to when trying to motivate others to change. Broadly, we could label them "Push" and "Pull." Some people intuitively push others, forcefully telling them they need to change, providing frequent reminders and sometimes following these steps with a warning about consequences if they don't change. This is the classic "hand in your back" approach to motivating change. (We noted earlier that classic "Push" doesn't work well.)

The alternative approach is "Pull," which we can employ in a variety of ways. These include working with the individual to set an aspirational goal, exploring alternative avenues to reach an objective, and seeking other's ideas for the best methods to use going forward. This approach works best when you begin by identifying what the other person wants to achieve and making the link between that goal and the change you're

proposing. Inspiring leaders understand the need for making an emotional connection with colleagues. They want to provoke a sense of desire rather than fear. Another approach in many work situations is to make a compelling, rational connection with the individual in which we explain the logic for the change we want them to make.

**2. Noticing problems.** Lots of management advice focuses on the need for individuals to become better problem solvers; but there is an important step that comes even earlier. It is the ability to recognize problems (to see situations where change is needed and to anticipate potential snares in advance).

For example, in one company we worked with, it was common to hear people being praised for their heroic crisis management skills – rescuing projects on the brink of failure, or getting a delayed product to a client just in time. A new manager recognized this pattern as a serious problem. She correctly saw it not as a sign of hard work, but as a symptom of a broken process.

**3. Providing a clear goal.** The farmer attempting to plow straight furrows selects a point in the distance and then constantly aims in that direction. Change initiatives work best when everyone's sight is fixed on the same goal. Therefore, the most productive discussions about any change being proposed are those that start with the strategy that it serves.

**4. Challenging standard approaches.** Successful change efforts often require leaders to challenge standard approaches and find ways to maneuver around old practices and policies – even sacred cows. Leaders who excel at driving change will challenge even the rules that seem carved in stone.

**5. Building trust in your judgment.** This is both about actually improving your judgment, and improving others' perceptions of it. Good leaders make decisions carefully after collecting data from multiple sources and seeking opinions from those whom they know will have differing views. They recognize that asking others for advice is evidence of their confidence and strength, not a sign of weakness. Because of their ability to build trust in the decisions they make, their ability to change the organization skyrockets. If others do not trust your judgment it will be difficult to get them to make the changes you want them to make.

**6. Having courage.** Aristotle said, “You will never do anything in this world without courage. It is the greatest quality of the mind next to honor.” Indeed, every initiative you begin as a leader, every new hire you make, every change in process you implement, every new product idea you pursue, every reorganization you implement, every speech you deliver, every conversation in which you give difficult feedback to a colleague, and every investment in a new piece of equipment requires courage. The need for courage covers many realms.

We sometimes hear people say, “Oh, I'm not comfortable doing that.” Our observation is that a great deal of what leaders do, and especially their change efforts, demands willingness to live in discomfort.

**7. Making change a top priority.** One of Newton's Laws of Thermodynamics was that a body at rest tends to stay at rest. Slowing down, stopping, and staying at rest does not require effort. It happens very naturally. Many change efforts are not successful because they become one of a hundred priorities. To make a change effort successful you need to clear away the competing priorities and shine a spotlight on this one change effort. Leaders who do this well have a daily focus on the change effort, track its progress carefully and encourage others.

Becoming a change enabler will benefit every aspect of your life, both at home and in business. It will even help you to change yourself.