

### “Change Is Good! You Go First!”

Dilbert

Many years ago, I needed to lead a major change management initiative including a complete overhaul of management, culture, business aspirations and business processes. Previous leadership of this very profitable business had not kept pace with changing technology, major shifts in customer consolidation and new purchasing practices. My challenge was to maintain profitability when gross margins were declining while simultaneously investing in new technology to maintain market leadership.

I've learned over the years that two of the most critical staff functions were finance and human resources. Therefore, I have always made it a practice to surround myself with the best CFO and VP of Human Resources I could find and fortunately, in this instance, I had both. My VP of HR at this business was exceptionally strong at assessing talent and providing strong, objective counsel and insight on people and organizational design.

We embarked on a major change initiative for the business to reinvent the business leadership team and organization structure. We also spent considerable time with this new leadership team to define what we wanted our new culture to be and then created detailed implementation plans to evolve rapidly to this new culture. During the process, as a joke, I was presented with a tee shirt based on the wisdom and insight that only a Dilbert cartoon can provide. Dilbert simply said:

*“Change Is Good! You Go First!”*

This essay explores two different implications of this simple line and looks at some of the complex issues every CEO faces as they try to drive any significant change in their company.

For now, let's explore Dilbert's ingenious phrase on two dimensions.

- The capability of individuals and organizations to change.
- The capability of the CEO to change and lead change.

Change can be very powerful and is needed continuously in our fast changing world. Successful CEOs are expert in leading and driving continuous change in their companies. This essay focuses on the impact on “You”, the CEO, as the driver and also the recipient of change. Let's explore each in more detail.

#### **The capability of individuals and organizations to change**

When I first received the tee shirt, I immediately thought of the reactions of individuals on my leadership team. Some enthusiastically supported the need to change and also the vision of what we wanted to become. These individuals embraced change, communicated well and worked effectively with their teams to make the changes needed. However, when we put the plans together to make the changes, other leaders posed all kinds of overt and covert resistance to change. Some

just simply refused to make the changes agreed upon and regretfully over time needed to be replaced. Others delayed implementing our plan and waited for their peers to go first.

Those who made the required changes grew very impatient with their colleagues who were laggards creating some major tensions. Everyone is different and reacts to change differently, particularly when it affects them personally. Actions, many times, are not consistent with words!

### The capability of the CEO to change and lead change

A second, and maybe not so obvious interpretation of Dilbert's statement is your behavior as CEO. To effectively lead change, you must be willing to change your behavior and interactions with others. You must also take the time to understand change management, its impact on others and learn new leadership techniques to successfully drive the change you desire.

One excellent resource is the book, Managing Transitions by William Bridges. I routinely refer to this excellent book for its insights and roadmap to lead successful change.

Many times during the change process, I questioned my own capability to drive the change and my process. Was I moving too fast or too slow? Was I being too demanding or too soft? Self-doubt and self-questioning are part of the process for every change leader.

These questions are perfectly normal and are best resolved by doing what you instinctively think is right. Get some good advice and counsel from your VP of HR, other trusted leaders or outside advisors who share your vision and continuously press forward. As I've reflected about what I would have done differently in major change initiatives, I've concluded that I have never moved too fast or too aggressively.

### Lead By Example

Executives who have been successful in multiple leadership roles have learned how to design and lead change. They relish the challenge of leading change to improve their organizations. When these CEOs are confronted with someone who says "you go first", they step up, provide the personal leadership and really do go first!