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By Brian Brittain, John Swain and Janice Simpson

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Mobilize leaders to accelerate results

"True leadership is a dangerous act," these co-authors write, and a true leader is perhaps never more at risk than when he or she tries to speed up the pace of organizational change. But by becoming more personal and by personalizing the changes needed, especially through the use of storytelling, a leader can make the changes, and make them -- and the people -- stick. These authors have some excellent suggestions on how to do it.

By Brian Brittain, John Swain and Janice Simpson

Brian Brittain, John Swain and Janice Simpson are based in the Toronto office of Mercer Delta Consulting, a firm that works with CEOs and senior executives on the design and leadership of large-scale change.

"I think we've got the right strategy," said a CEO we recently began working with, "but I'm not seeing results quickly enough. How do I speed things up?"

We hear this question a lot. We hear it from CEOs and senior leaders who are facing a new competitive threat or significant changes in market and industry dynamics. We hear it from companies trying to fast-track a product innovation to be first to market, or to integrate an acquisition. We hear it from leaders in the public sector challenged with providing a broad range of services with limited tax dollars, or with advancing a new political agenda.

Each situation is unique, requiring an approach to accelerating results that's carefully tailored to the strategy. But in our diagnosis of what's getting in the way of rapid strategy implementation, we do see common issues that cut across sectors and

organizations. And invariably we find that the solution starts with the CEO deciding to take a much more prominent role in driving the change and to mobilize leaders in a new way.

In this article, we will outline three tactics that have succeeded in unleashing productive energy and accelerating business results for organizations that have used them in a conscious and disciplined manner.

When delegation is not the answer

Most of the CEOs we work with are facing new challenges or business performance issues requiring fast, discontinuous change. They quickly discover that delegation strategies that work for "business as usual" don't give them the agility and speed they need now. The leaders most likely to succeed in accelerating implementation of large-scale, complex change are those who stand back, look in the mirror and ask, "What do I really need to do to make this work and get results quickly?" The answer usually includes three challenges:

- **Go Beyond the Cascade:** Recognize the limitations of the traditional cascade process. While deepening top-team alignment around the strategy is important, you need to be personally involved in mobilizing the broader group of leaders who will deliver results.
- **Live the Story:** Personally lead the effort to communicate what needs to change, when, why, and what you expect to see happen. Role-model the type of leadership required to achieve results. Equip all leaders in the organization to both tell and live the

story.

- **Implement a Sustaining Leadership Strategy:** Invest now in a long-term leadership capability development strategy to make the change stick and sustain results.

1. Beyond the cascade

CEOs normally focus on ensuring that their direct reports have been engaged in creating the business strategy, and on getting buy-in on the major decisions. Having done that, they often delegate implementation of the strategy to individual direct reports. These people then take the lead on cascading messages and getting objectives aligned through layers of hierarchy to the front line.

This approach is fine if the work to be done is easy to break up into discrete tasks, if the change is fairly simple to understand and communicate, and if you can afford the time it will take to cascade the message through the leadership hierarchy, building understanding and securing commitment at each level.

If time is of the essence, a traditional cascade is too slow. By the time people on the front lines have started to understand what they need to do-if the message ever gets that far-the window of opportunity is closing or the business environment has changed again.

The second issue with traditional delegation approaches is that they tend to reinforce existing silos, focusing leaders on the piece of the strategy they "own" and are measured on. The result is often a series of disconnected initiatives that achieve some success but don't add up to the quick and total results the CEO wants to see at the enterprise level.

In one company we worked with that was embarking on a new growth strategy, one business unit was focused on expanding the market for their flagship product. Another was focused on driving sales of a service offering. It wasn't until they took an enterprise-wide view that they realized they had an opportunity to leverage the two in a different way to realize a benefit faster. With small adjustments and complementary additions to the product, they could bundle it with the service and dramatically increase sales with this integrated offer in an emerging growth market.

It's surprisingly easy in the midst of rapid change to optimize one business unit or process in a way that makes the organization as a whole underperform. This is because discontinuous

change cannot be easily broken up into stand-alone chunks. It requires a top team of change champions with an enterprise-wide view who understand how their work intersects with and impacts other aspects of the business. Throughout the change, there will be a need for quick and coordinated adjustments to keep the business system in sync and performing well. For some executive teams, this will require a new, collaborative style of working that may not come naturally. The CEO has a critical role to play in fostering collaboration and creating the right team dynamics on the top team to support the strategy change.

A third issue with delegation is that no matter how much time has been invested in getting executive-team alignment around the strategy, the messages about what is changing and where the company is headed quickly get garbled through a cascade process. CEOs who ask each of their direct reports to articulate assumptions about the future state are often astonished at how varied the pictures are. The

critical judgment call is whether there's enough alignment at the top to move forward, or whether it's important to cycle back and be clearer about expected outcomes.

In complex organizations run by smart and capable people, it's next to impossible to get 100 percent consensus on every nuance of a strategy or an implementation plan-and it's rarely a good investment of time. Every minute spent trying to nudge a 90 percent alignment up another notch before starting to implement is a window gained by the competition. There comes a time when the CEO must be clear on the non-negotiables, get a commitment from his or her leadership team that they will support the strategy direction (even if they don't fully understand or agree with every detail), and get on with implementation.

The road to alignment

Two years into an effort to position the company for cost-efficient growth, the CEO of a global life and health science company asked us for an audit to find out why he wasn't getting results. Three key findings: 1) The executive team was not sufficiently aligned on what the premise for the change and desired outcomes were; 2) The operating unit leadership was not sufficiently engaged-the project having been largely delegated to senior function staff; 3) The various change initiatives were not coordinated and integrated within a common vision and framework. The CEO quickly pulled together the executive team. They collectively established four enterprise-level strategic objectives from which all of the implementation work would flow. He publicly declared this his #1 personal priority, and set an aggressive 120-day timeline for the next phase of work that both challenged people and got their attention. The entire executive team and the CEO then went on a global road show to engage the top 250 leaders in the organization. They set the context for the change, helped people understand the enterprise-wide objectives as the umbrella under which all the activity would come together, and created a sense of urgency. The accelerated action that took place to deliver the

120-day results set a new precedent for speed of change that has now become the expected pace for subsequent activities.

Implementation, in our view, starts with the CEO actively working with his or her executive team to mobilize a much broader group of leaders to lead the change. These are people who have been identified by the top team as critical players in delivering the needed results. While this might be the next layer or two of leadership, in many cases this group is not defined by the organization chart. They are identified as change agents because they're high-energy doers, role models and opinion leaders. They are people with both the skill and the will to implement the strategy, comfortable with working across organizational boundaries to keep the change effort moving forward as an integrated whole.

The CEO's challenge is to engage personally with this group and lead them to understand and share his or her sense of urgency, passion and strategy for getting to the desired future state. This is not a one-time task. It's a highly visible, energetic, sustained coaching and cheerleading effort. It's about making this group feel personal accountability to the CEO and the organization as a whole to make the strategy work.

2. Live the story

A critical success factor in accelerating results is the CEO's ability to tell a compelling story about what the organization is trying to achieve and why, and to actually live this story in all his or her actions and decisions-walking the talk. We use the word "story" deliberately, because it's more than charts and numbers. It's a narrative-complete with plot, characters and vivid imagery-that acknowledges the group's history, makes a clear and simple case for change, and traces the path to a desirable future state. It focuses on people and the type of attitudes, characteristics, behaviour and action that will take the organization in the right direction. It's a story told not just to the top team but to every stakeholder

in the change, at every opportunity, and through every vehicle that's available or can be created. The symbolic value of the CEO personally conveying this message to people several levels down in the hierarchy cannot be underestimated. People really understand that this is a priority and they're part of it.

Making it personal

The CEO of a large, global high-tech company was trying to help employees see the great potential of a new technology that he believed would change the face of their industry. He told them the story of how he, as a young engineer in that same company, had had to face the reality that the particular type of equipment he designed was becoming obsolete. He vividly conveyed his despondency and fear for his future. Then he described the liberating moment when he realized that instead of thinking of himself as a designer of a piece of obsolete equipment, he should be thinking of himself as a designer—full stop. He could learn to design different things. Not only did he learn to design the next new technology, but he went on to lead the company through successive waves of technology innovation in a rapidly changing industry. With this personal story, the CEO showed that he understood and empathized with people's emotional response to change. He connected the current change with the company's history, showing how the company's success had resulted from making the right shifts at the right moment. He modelled the response to change that he felt would make the company's employees successful—a willingness to embrace the future and continue to learn.

While we stress that the CEO cannot delegate the telling of this story, we equally stress the importance

of engaging all leaders in telling and living the same story. Each leader has an important role to play in making it meaningful for his or her own team—getting down to specifics of actions, outcomes and measures. A good measure of progress is hearing employees begin to tell the story using their own words, placing themselves in it, and explaining what they must do to help the organization get fast results.

Realizing that this change would require different leadership skills, actions and behaviours, they launched a leadership development initiative built around executive storytelling, large-group learning forums, and action learning.

3. A sustaining leadership strategy

Mobilizing leaders around the strategic priorities, engaging them in telling and living the story, and getting a few quick wins to build momentum—these are all important activities in the initial stages. But very quickly part of the CEO's attention must turn to putting in place a leadership strategy that will sustain the change over the long term and continue delivering results. He or she will need to decide:

- What new leadership skills, attitudes and behaviours will be required to sustain the change
- How to assess current leaders against these requirements
- What action to take when there's a significant mismatch between the leadership requirements and the assessment of an individual's capabilities, or when a leader refuses to accept the new strategic direction
- How best to leverage the strengths of the leadership team
- How to deal with gaps and areas where the team as a whole is weak
- How to develop the next generation of leaders.

The idea of putting a long-term leadership strategy in place at the beginning of a major change initiative

that must deliver results quickly can feel like a daunting task that risks making the team lose focus. On the contrary, some of our clients have found that by planning both efforts at the same time, they've created opportunities to integrate the agendas in a way that moves both forward faster.

For example, they've included high-potential employees outside the top leadership ranks on change teams. These talented individuals bring a unique energy to the team because they see this as an opportunity to stretch themselves and show what they can do. They may find it easier than some of the senior leaders to sign up to the new vision and new kinds of leadership behaviour because they're not as entrenched in old patterns and norms, and they're not as worried about protecting turf. They can serve as a conscience to the team. At the same time, this approach provides an opportunity for senior leaders to guide and mentor the next generation of leaders, while actively working with them to deliver priority outcomes.

Using learning to accelerate action and build a sustainable leadership capability

A telecommunications enterprise facing increased competition and market disruption due to the introduction of Voice-Over-Internet technology has recognized the urgent need to transform themselves into a different kind of company. Realizing that this change would require different leadership skills, actions and behaviours, they launched a leadership development initiative built around executive storytelling, large-group learning forums, and action learning. The initiative simultaneously educates leaders on the new expectations and puts them to work on applying new skills and approaches (with coaching) to the practical business issues of their organizational transformation. The result: The learning is applied to real-life experience and is much more likely to be sustained by leaders who "get it!", while the critical change work of the organization is accelerated. With an eye to the longer term, the company is also using this initiative to engage their high-potential leaders in

developing other leaders, by making them learning coaches to the action learning teams.

Because the CEO is much more engaged with the leadership team than he or she normally would be, it's also an opportunity to watch people in action, see who's "getting it" and who's not, identify leaders who seem to be stepping up to new challenges and demonstrating the behaviours that will sustain long-term success. It's wise to be careful with this: If people believe that the CEO is on the lookout for mistakes and making quick judgments, this can cause paralysis and shut down progress. In the early stages, the focus should be on getting to know the leadership team better, getting the best from them, and coaching and supporting them to move the strategy forward.

Unleashing productive energy

The bad news for a CEO who thinks his or her hardest work is done once the direction is set and communicated to the senior team is that you've hardly started. You will need to invest a tremendous amount of personal energy into mobilizing action and building capability to create and sustain the change. Your relationships with the people who report to you may change as your view of what kind of leadership you will need to sustain results changes. You may have to confront or even fire loyal colleagues who have historically been productive and reliable but who either won't accept the new direction or can't step up to the new leadership challenge. It will take courage. True leadership is a dangerous act.

The good news is that if this is done well, it can tap and unleash productive energy from sources you never knew were present in your organization. It can introduce you to the next generation of leaders and provide you with an opportunity to see them in action. It can give you new clarity on what kind of leaders you need, and start you on the path of building the right leadership capability to accelerate results now and sustain success in the future. ■