



**THE FUTURE-FOCUSED
LEADER**



LIBBY GILL & COMPANY

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The most effective future leaders are those who inspire people to follow them through change and challenge.

Whether you choose to embrace it or ignore it, the evidence of change is all around us. From smartphones to Starbucks and urbanization to Uber, phrases like digital connectivity and disruptive innovation have become as commonplace as the terms company man and assembly line were in days past.

So what does that mean for the leaders of tomorrow, particularly those in the areas of rapid change and growth, who must purposefully blend the best practices of people management with advances in processes if they wish to keep pace? How will they predict and prepare their workforce for the new normal of constant change?

As an executive coach and leadership expert working with organizations including AMC Networks, Avery Dennison, EY, Disney-ABC, Genentech, Honda, Intel, Microsoft, Sony, and Wells Fargo, I see several workplace shifts emerging. While the core principles of effective leadership such as vision, integrity, and accountability will always be foundational, following are five workplace trends of which future leaders must be mindful if they want to succeed in an increasingly complex and change-driven marketplace.

THE CHAOS NORM

The very nature of change in the workplace has changed. While there has always been an ebb and flow, organizational change today is constant, relentless, and continually accelerating. The sheer pace of change, let alone the volume, is dizzying. Employees often feel as though they've finally found a client solution that works or implemented a process improvement, only to be hit by the next wave. And they're right.

That's the new chaos norm, where, heightened competition, increasingly sophisticated (and demanding) consumers, and rapid advances in technology drive the need for and the pace of change. One of the best ways to get comfortable with all that discomfort is to create an environment where people feel safe and accepted. Simple, but not easy.

In my book *You Unstuck: Mastering the New Rules of Risk-taking in Work and Life*, I detail what I call the Immediate Negative Response (or INR), the knee-jerk resistance to change that is based on our biological survival instinct to avoid danger and seek familiarity. But it is the leader's role not only to overcome his or her own fear-based feelings, but to ensure that employees recognize that while change can be anxiety-provoking, every new obstacle is an opportunity to learn and improve.

FUNCTION FLUIDITY

Leaders and managers, especially those with hiring power, have long thought about employees in terms of track record. Not necessarily a bad way to judge, past behavior is often the best indication of future behavior. But tomorrow's leaders must begin to look at employees in terms of potential. Workers will be in a state of constant training as they are assigned to teams and projects based on their ability to learn, grow, problem solve and lead others. Tasks will be assigned on what a professional *can* do rather than what they *have* done.

THE LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP

The challenge for leadership is clear. Managers must come to know their team members' strengths and weaknesses on a deeper level than ever before, recognizing and rewarding traits such as flexibility, strategic thinking, and creativity. Professionals with a mindset for life-long learning will be the new currency. For some leaders as well as their employees, this will be incredibly frustrating. For others, it will be an exhilarating invitation to master new skills as they flow through the organization taking on new functions as needed.

While many leaders are excellent systems strategists, they must learn to give the same level of direction and care when it comes to communication. Here are some strategies for incorporating simple and straightforward leadership language into your everyday vocabulary.

“This is the vision.”

As a leader, you want to share your perspective on the competitive landscape of your industry with your team as often as possible. Yes, you're dealing with some proprietary and confidential matters that can't be discussed, but strive for transparency and inclusion in your communication. When you're an open book, people rightly feel that you have nothing to hide, that you trust them enough to confide in them, and that you want them on your team.

“Here's the plan.”

Because you're still the boss of the organization, division, or project team - despite the increasingly popular “we don't have titles, we're all equals here” mentality - people expect you to step up and have a plan.

Look one year ahead and start working backwards, quarter by quarter, month by month, week by week. What are the results you're looking for? Be clear and concise about anticipated outcomes - and don't overlook the obvious. Not everyone knows what you know.

Set your high-level objectives, critical tasks, milestone markers, and project ownership. Avoid ambiguity and corporate-speak - everything needs to be crystal clear to everyone on the team. Let your team or task leaders concern themselves with the details of the process and how to meet expectations while you stay focused on high-value activities. Most of all, remember to keep it simple!

“What do you need from me?”

Check in regularly - at least as often as the milestone markers you've established - to make sure everyone is on task and on time. Know what your people do well and tap into their talents. Find out what each team member needs, directly or through your managers if you're in a large organization, to get the job done effectively. Resolve conflicts quickly and give feedback frequently. Blend kindness with candor but don't waste time sugarcoating reactions or pussyfooting around problems. Not only will you make things worse, you'll teach others to follow your conflict-avoiding behavior.

“How can we improve?”

Keep a “we're good but we can always be better” attitude and encourage everyone to regularly contribute strategies and suggestions to improve the workplace. Take a page directly from kaizen (literally meaning “change for the good”) after the Japanese auto manufacturers' practice of encouraging workers at all levels to offer ideas for increased quality and productivity and you'll make ongoing people improvement part of your organizational DNA.

While you may be doing fine right now, if you aren't making ongoing enhancements to communication it won't be long until your competitors out-innovate you. As a leader, you need to get out, ask questions, and solicit creative ideas from people at every level of the company so that continuous improvement is a team sport and not a competition.

“Woohoo. Let's celebrate!”

Celebrate success along the way. Not just the big scores, but also the small wins, including meeting your milestones. Institutionalize celebrations that fit your unique culture. A great example is the Sacred Boomerang Award that innovative design firm Kahler Slater uses to welcome back former employees who've returned to the company after time away. Or the FANATI Award, given to a partner business by web hosting company Rackspace for outstanding customer service. Even a good old Friday afternoon beer bash just for the heck of it can increase collaboration and camaraderie.

CORPORATION AS COMMUNITY

Paradoxically, as changes are implemented more and more swiftly, leaders will need to loosen their hold on the workforce. Through transparency of mission and constant communication, effective future leaders will foster trust and collaboration, encouraging co-workers to create deep and meaningful relationships, even fast friendships. With the right mindset, these relationships can flourish in shared physical space or virtually as improved technical connectivity continues to place us face-to-face across the hall or across the globe.

With flextime policies (and changing attitudes about people using them without penalty) global teams, and 24/7 accountability, future leaders will need to create avenues for engagement, replacing bureaucracy with flexibility and hierarchy with collaboration. Engagement tools such as intranet portals, company-supported volunteer activities, and free-flowing information will turn the workplace into an environment where employees *want* to be, rather than *have* to be.

THE HOPE-DRIVEN CULTURE

If the enormity of these workplace changes leaves you reeling, you're not alone. But there's hope for the leaders of tomorrow. *Literally*. One of the hallmarks of my coaching work has been to adapt principles of *hope theory*, based on an emerging body of research pioneered by clinicians from the medical and positive psychology communities, to the corporate world. The research shows that among the advantages of having a high level of hope (not to be confused with optimism which is a generalized outlook on life independent of one's actions and circumstances), hopeful people are more likely than non-hopeful people to:

- Set a great number of goals
- Have goals that may be more difficult to attain
- Be more successful at reaching their goals
- Have less distress and greater happiness than low-hope people

Yet, even when we recognize the benefits of hopefully embracing change, most of us will go to great lengths to avoid shaking up our lives. Don't we all know someone who claims to be dissatisfied with her job, boss, or co-workers, yet never seems to do anything about it? Or a company that has gone through massive change management initiatives only to have employees backslide into old behaviors as soon as they experience the least bit of discomfort?

Understanding *why* people resist change is the first step in figuring out *how* to get them to change. Here are some of the common resistance scenarios I see in the workplace:

Biological hardwiring. Change triggers our "fear center," the primitive area of our brain known as the amygdala. As part of our biological early warning system, fear puts us on high alert so we can fight or flee when faced with danger. But if we don't understand that our brains may perceive the unfamiliar as danger, our anxiety may cause us to back down from changes that are not only harmless, but actually beneficial. *Why do I feel so stressed?*

Feeling out of control. When faced with change, whether that's new people, systems, or technology, we often feel out of control. Everything we're used to is taken away - at least, that's what it feels like - and we're given a new set of expectations that requires us to shift our mindset and wade into a whole new reality. *Who needs all that ambiguity?*

Misplaced loyalty. Changing our beliefs can make us feel as though we're leaving our trusted colleagues behind. When a new system is put in place or a new manager brings a different perspective, it can make us feel (even unconsciously) that we have to abandon the people or training we relied on in the past. *Was my old boss really that bad?*

Fear of failure. Some people fear that a changed workplace may mean they're no longer relevant, that they've suddenly become part of the old guard and may not cut it in this brave new world. Employees often feel challenged that they might not have the proper skills or attitude to embrace the culture shift. *Am I really up to the challenge?*

Old habits die hard. Most of us love our same old routines. We want to cling to the comfort of familiarity and may need some convincing that all this change actually adds up to improvement or if it's just change for change's sake. Isn't the world complex enough already?

But when leaders take the time and effort to clarify the benefits of change - explaining clearly why the change is needed and how things will be better once the changes are implemented - they'll begin to rally support. Roll out your change initiative throughout the company with a communication program customized for your culture. Involve people at all levels of the organization, including the "naysayers," who may have contrarian but nonetheless productive solutions.

Take consistent action, using strategic triggers including visual reminders, accountability buddies, and touch-base meetings to stay on track. Above all, be realistic about timeframes and remember that change takes place over time, not overnight. If you drop the ball (which you will) pick it up and get rolling again right away.

Light years beyond the old adage, "hope is not a strategy," hope theory comprises both the belief that change is possible and the expectation that specific and future-focused behaviors, starting with the individual, can create a positive outcome. Now, it's up to leaders to feed - rather than starve - that sense of hope within their cultures!



Libby Gill is an executive coach, leadership expert, and international speaker. She is the former head of communications and PR for Sony, Universal, and Turner Broadcasting, and author of award-winning "You Unstuck: Mastering the New Rules of Risk-taking in Work and Life" and "Capture the Mindshare and the Market Share Will Follow."

Learn more about Libby's work at LibbyGill.com or take her career assessment at www.YourCareerQuiz.com.