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Compass: Igniting the Burning Platform

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2009 is a year most of us would like to forget. Many of the pundits and prognosticators are waxing poetic about the future being full of opportunity, while others continue to wring their hands over the “never-ending” recession, citing high unemployment and continuing economic weakness.

In spite of all that uncertainty, however, there’s one thing we do know: 2010 will be full of change. And the survivors will be the firms (and the individuals) who know how to “ride the tide” and turn a crisis into an opportunity.

Last month, in anticipation of a roiling, turbulent future, we revisited the essence of what change management is all about (“[Back to Basics: Change Management 101](#)”).

You may recall that we described a simple (though profound) overarching framework for understanding what it takes to accomplish major organizational change. There are three factors present in any successful organizational transformation:

1. Widespread ***Dissatisfaction*** with the status quo;
2. A powerful ***Vision*** of the future; and
3. A structured ***Process*** for getting there.

This month we’re going to dig in a little deeper and explore what a leader of change can do to generate that widespread dissatisfaction. That’s the first step in preparing an organization to change.

As a side note, we recently had an opportunity to participate in a two-day project planning session with a large organization that has adopted John Kotter’s 8-step change model (as described first in his book [Leading Change](#), and then in the highly compelling fable [Our Iceberg is Melting](#)).

We’ve been familiar with Kotter’s work for many years (Jim was a colleague of John’s at Harvard Business School long, long ago). But, candidly, we didn’t appreciate just how powerful his model is until we applied it directly to the project we’ve now working on with our client.

In brief, Kotter’s eight steps (the sequence is critically important) are:

1. Create a sense of urgency
2. Pull together the guiding team
3. Develop the change vision and strategy
4. Communicate for understanding and buy-in

5. Empower others to act
6. Produce short-term wins
7. Don't let up
8. Make it stick by creating a new culture

We think his “sense of urgency” is essentially similar to our “dissatisfaction with the status quo.” In the vernacular, it’s about identifying the “burning platform” (referring to an oil rig in the middle of the ocean where you either put out the fire immediately or perish).

But the core management question is, “How do you do that without creating widespread panic or counterproductive fear?” It may seem obvious in 2010 that there’s an urgent need for change, but how you go about developing a common sense of urgency will make all the difference in the world.

In our minds there are three core principles for creating “productive urgency.”

First, as we say all the time, **design from data**. In other words, be observant, be objective, and compile the relevant data (about the company’s performance, its competition, the economic conditions, the labor market, internal employee morale—whatever is relevant to the situation). Don’t just wave your arms and claim the sky is falling. Come to the party with a briefcase full of facts.

And make it a point to spend more time listening than talking at this stage. You need to understand what the people who matter to your future are seeing, hearing, thinking, and feeling (and what they’re *feeling* may be the most important data of all).

Second, **get outside your own organization** and **question all your assumptions**. It’s really, really hard to see things from others’ perspectives, but it’s absolutely essential. One of the best (or worst) examples of “groupthink” was the way John F. Kennedy’s advisors approached what we now know as the “Bay of Pigs Fiasco” back in the early 1960’s.

Those so-called “experts” in Kennedy’s inner circle spent all their time talking to each other, almost willfully ignoring all the evidence that was right there in front of them that Cuba was ready, willing, and able to fight back.

And for a wonderful corporate perspective on the value of getting outside your own comfort zone, see [“Spend a Day in the Life of Your Customer”](#) (*Harvard Business Review*, 1994)

Third, **connect the data to the stakeholders’ interests—and their emotions**. Talk about the issues and challenges openly, candidly, and widely. Make it all directly relevant to them—in their guts.

At this point, it’s more effective to risk scaring people than to let them remain ignorant or complacent about the need for change. Most people are actually pretty perceptive, even if they are afraid of the facts or in denial. Once you describe the elephant in the room,

most people will admit they've sensed all along it was there, but they were hoping it would go away.

But the most important thing you can do is to talk about the need for change in ways that connect with people's feelings. Whether you are intensifying their anxieties about negative realities (which can be very effective, up to a point), or attempting to inspire them with ideas about how much better things could be, you'll get a much stronger response if you're tapping the right side of their brains than the left.

Again, though, remember that in the early stages of orchestrating change you should be focusing on heightening the sense of urgency, not on what the future will be like. It's all right to talk about problems and the need to do *something*, even if you don't have a solution yet.

We once knew a CEO who led a highly successful, widely participative organizational renewal effort. As he put it, "I woke up one day and realized that 5,000 people in total were a whole lot smarter than the five of us on the executive committee."

Remember that whenever you start thinking all the wisdom you need to get back on track in 2010 resides in the executive suite.

[Please send your comments directly to us.](#) We look forward to learning from you.

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