

WHAT ARE YOU UNWILLING TO **CHANGE?**

BY KAREN DAWSON AND KELLEY MARKO

Change or Die challenges the reader in striking black letters on the cover of the May, 2005 issue of *Fast Company*.¹ It's a title that not only caught our attention but also immediately raised our anxiety, and undoubtedly that of many others. The article tells readers that even when faced with imminent death due to serious heart problems, only one in nine people actually change their behaviour.

As leadership coaches we see our clients struggling with this challenge consistently. In order to lead change, leaders must begin with themselves. Gandhi's powerful advice, "Be the change you wish

to see in the world," is a guiding premise of our coaching practice. Leading change always begins with a deeply personal journey. Change happens from the inside out.

The desire to change is often strong, but the commitment to follow through with actual changes in behaviour is where things start getting messy. The closing lines of the *Fast Company* article propose, "Mastering the ability to change isn't just a crucial strategy for business. It's a necessity for health. And it's possibly the one thing that's most worth learning."²



“Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Mahatma Gandhi

In today's world of increasing complexity and competition, few leaders would disagree with these assertions. The preponderance of change and the necessity to change is nothing new. The need to do more with less, meet the needs of an increasingly diverse workforce, and respond to a global marketplace are but a few challenges that demand ongoing change. William Bridges notes, “Business conditions change and yesterday's assumptions and practices no longer work. There must be innovation, and innovation means change.”³

The necessity for leaders to enable change within themselves in order to enable change elsewhere is clear, but “change or die”? In the midst of a sea of change this assertion raises an important question – what should leaders be unwilling to change?

Exploring what does not need to change is a powerful first step.

Curiosity

When we stay open to potential and possibility we allow the space that is required for us to consider different points of view – to challenge our paradigms, assumptions, and beliefs about the world, and the relationships we have with others. Staying curious and approaching leadership as a life-long learner is vital.

Healthy Boundaries

Being able to maintain a healthy boundary between self and others is a key leadership skill. If we are too connected with others we are likely to become emotionally hijacked by them. If we are too disconnected we simply cannot hear or understand others. By fostering healthy boundaries, leaders effectively manage their own anxiety which in turn impacts their team and organization.

Clear Values and Purpose

In a world of constant change our values and our sense of purpose

are the compass that guides our movement forward. When we establish what is not negotiable in our lives, we open up the possibility for everything else to be fluid and flexible.

Creativity and Playfulness

One of the first symptoms of a toxic system is its inability to be playful. Looking at situations with a creative mindset invites diverse points of view and innovative possibilities for movement forward. When change efforts seem stuck, leaders must tap into their imagination.

Change or die? Perhaps.

What is a leader to do? Throw hands up in despair, accepting that even when faced with death most people do not change their habits? Or, accepting that deep change always begins with oneself, should leaders plunge into personal change efforts ready to let go of all that is familiar, believing that their leadership needs to be an ever-changing phenomenon?

A better perspective is to establish what is not negotiable in your leadership, and what should not change. Then the rest of the world is open to possibilities.

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1. Accessed online August 13, 2005 http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/94/open_change-or-die.html
2. Ibid.
3. Bridges, W. 2003. As cited in *Business Leadership*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.