



THE THREE LEADER LITMUS TEST©

The Real Definition of Successful Organizational Change

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Efforts to evaluate, in an absolute sense, organizational change initiatives focus on quantitative metrics. A hard number states unequivocally that targets are exceeded, met or not met, relative to a specific time period. Engineers and financial professionals are especially enamored of this approach. Metrics are comfortable, convenient, and necessary, and do not even come close to effectively grading the value of any given change initiative.

After 35 years of working on organizational change initiatives, ranging from pilot approaches to full site transformations, that ran the gamut from vertical start up curves to phased startups, linked to equipment specifications and operating parameters, I rank such comfortable metrics as no better than a distant second choice. These numbers, good or bad, give only an initial impression, and miss by a wide margin getting at what is really important.

The real metric lies in the Three Leader Litmus Test©.

Capital projects, improvement projects, work redesigns or reorganizations are all inherently cultural change initiatives. Getting a group of people to do something in a different way, in concert with different people, often across siloed boundaries, with different equipment, in a different sequence for different/better results requires massive cultural change. Companies often say: “people are our most important asset”. This may be the case, but people are also emotional, opinionated and hard headed. They are not machines, do not behave like machines, and never will. Until there are no human beings in the workplace, change will always be chaotic and messy.

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I recently attended a meeting to discuss the factory of the future. It was a three-hour session. Within the first 15 minutes the speaker emphasized the human issues in such a factory. The next 2¼ hours were spent talking about Distributed Control Systems, Artificial Intelligence, remotely controlled operations, and never again were the people a part of the equation. People, and the teams they are a part of, are so difficult to create and adapt and lead, it is simpler to note this reality and move on to the technology. This is exactly what happens in real life projects.

So, let's talk about the Three Leader Litmus Test©.

The first leader is the **Initiating Leader**. If the project has any chance of success, it is because this individual is strong enough to shield the impacted organization from the insanities, stupidities, and vicissitudes that are legion in any major project. Assuming this leader is strong enough, and such strength and skill is very rare indeed, your project will likely survive first contact with the real world.



A Vision will be laid out that is believable and compelling. The Leader's Vision will be strong enough to break through the nearly impenetrable road block of the flavor of the month disease. A plan will be crafted that addresses critical skill gaps and makes the workforce believe that just maybe this time will be different. This Vision will be connected to the competitive reality in a way that enables people to believe that "we" are actually in this one together. This leader will be driven by doing what is right. This leader will be able to defend the project from the torrential storm of well intentioned, risk averse managers whose often, but not always, well-meaning questions, feedback and what ifs are the kiss of death of most projects.

If you are incredibly fortunate the second Leader will be the **Sustaining Leader**. This is generally someone who was a part of the original design/implementation team. They were present from conception to detailed planning, from the creation of a selection process to the onboarding of chosen team members, and on through implementation to the first, second and third course corrections. They get the Vision viscerally and are passionate about the work design in a blunt and aggressive manner. They know it is the best path for the facility, the company and the workforce. They believe this, down to the bone. They may not be able to create the Vision, but they will charge hell with a bucket of ice water to try and make the transition work.

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The third Leader is an **Adaptive Leader**. This individual can create survival level change while cleaving unto the framework of the original Vision, and you can count on it that there will be major alterations necessary for the survival of the installed work system. They can distinguish false steps from real adaptations. They are almost able to peak around the corner to the future and boldly and accurately predict what is necessary to survive and thrive. They may or may not have been a part of the original leadership team. They will have the intestinal fortitude and political acumen necessary to shield the team from assaults based on short term changes in upper management and business conditions. Again, this is a very rare capability.

However, finding and putting in place the **Adaptive Leader** almost never happens. Most often the **Narcissistic Leader** is installed, and this is where close to 90% of all projects move from a chance for success to the failure category – hence the *Three Leader Litmus Test*® name. This manager did not come of age in the new system. They believe that they have a better answer, and are desperately driven to achieve and prove their merit and worth. They want badly to climb the ladder. They are often put in place at a time when Corporate has forgotten the investment in and success achieved in this experimental endeavor. This leader wants immediate movement towards their new and improved Vision, and this will kill any chance of success.

At this point it is generally the shop floor workforce who are the keepers of the Vision. They have a clear grasp of what work was – a four letter word, and what it has become for such a brief, alive moment since implementation, and what the nearly inevitable coming destruction of hope and meaningful work



will mean. They will fight to keep it alive. I have advised team members in organizational change projects to beware that if they join and discover success, and leadership cannot stay the course, then they will forever be ruined. Returning to a regressed work environment is anathema. They will have had a taste of what can be and the loss of that reality is terribly painful. The workforce, both hourly and salaried, will be horribly disillusioned, once again. Nevertheless, more often than not a significant percentage of the workforce will sign up because in their hearts they know there is a better way.

What counts as a successful change? The only metric that counts is whether it survives past the third Leader.

Therefore, the time framework in this Litmus test is very long. Five to seven years is a minimum, and more likely it will be 10 years or longer. Are you willing to pay this price? Do you have the courage to outlast the naysayers, the climbers and the egomaniacs? Do you have the patience to survive the business cycles – the flush times and the constrained cost times?

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If the answer is no, then take a deep breath, step back, count to 100 and let's think about what can be done within the confines, conflicts and constraints of your organization. What can be done that will have a significant impact, with the opportunity for significant change, with a reasonable likelihood of sustaining some level of improvement? There are actually very good outcomes to be had. Not flavor of the month mush but real, achievable and bottom line advantaged change.

If the answer is yes, then I may ask you for a job, because working in that kind of an environment is something people who have experienced it will remember and strive to find again for the rest of their professional and personal lives! More importantly the hard metrics applied to such a transformation will prove that it was worth the time, money and energy. You will have a sustainable competitive advantage, with only one caveat – remember the Heraclitus quote: **“The Only Thing That Is Constant Is Change”**.

Post Script: by necessity there is much left unsaid in this article, not the least of which is it is a static picture of a dynamic process. However, I wanted to catch your attention and provide a spark for an ongoing dialogue, so it was very important to be brief. Few of us have the time or inclination to read long and academic journal articles that seem disconnected from the reality of change initiatives. Future commentary though will dive deeper into:

- Absolute metric of success comparative to a situational metric.
- Transformational leadership and its scarcity, and what to do in the real world, in a real change initiative.
- What your organization is ready for “now”, not some fantasy land picture where everything works the way it is supposed to?
- If you cannot get the Leadership that you need than what do you do with what you have?



Change That Works

- Letting go of control, responsibility, accountability; the organizational change step that almost never happens.
- Sustainability, with a focus on internalizing the principles of the work system.



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A results-oriented organizational effectiveness practitioner, with over 35 years of hands on experience in designing and implementing sustainable work system/cultural change initiatives. Intellectually knowledgeable enough to know what might work. Experienced enough to know what will work. Have coached and mentored leadership, from Front Line Supervisors to Superintendents to VPs. Have a real knack for quickly establishing, strong trust-based relationships.

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