

UNLOCKING HUMAN POTENTIAL THROUGH LEADING POSITIVE CHANGE (A Review of Enabling Framework and Behavioral Guidelines)

A. SURYANARAYANA

Dean (Academics)

Department of Business Management

R. G. Kedia College

Hyderabad-500027, INDIA

E-Mail: professorsuryanarayana@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Leading positive change is a management competency that focuses on unlocking positive human potential. It enables individuals to experience appreciation, collaboration, vitality, and meaningfulness in their work. It focuses on creating abundance and human well-being. It fosters positive deviance. It acknowledges that positive change engages the heart as well as the mind. Successful corporate leaders make concerted efforts to lead positive change in their organizations and not merely manage the required change when confronted with a legacy of turbulent, tumultuous, and antagonistic climate within their organizations. An attempt would be made in this literature-based Paper to review five key management competencies and activities required to effectively lead positive change. They include: (i) establishing a climate of positivity, (ii) creating readiness for change, (iii) articulating a vision of abundance, (iv) generating commitment to the vision, and (v) institutionalizing the positive change.

Keywords: Framework; Positive Change; Heliotrope Effect; Climate of Positivity, Vision of Abundance; and Behavioral Guidelines.

I. INTRODUCTION

Most approaches to change focus on overcoming challenges, addressing obstacles, and solving problems. However, there is an alternative approach to change in which the goal is to create abundance and extraordinary positive change. It provides techniques and hints designed to help organizations achieve the best of the human condition or the highest potential of teams and organizations. Leading positive change—that is, aiming for abundance-focused or positive targets rather than deficit-based or problem-centered targets—unlocks something called the *heliotropic effect*. To explain the heliotropic effect, let us pose this question: What happens over time when you put a plant in a window? The answer, of course, is that the plant begins to lean toward the light. That is, a natural inclination exists in every living system toward positive energy—toward light—and away from negative energy or from the dark. The reason is that light is life-giving and energy-creating and all living systems are inclined toward that which gives life.

When leaders are able to foster positive change in organizations, they unleash the heliotropic effect and achieve outcomes that would be impossible otherwise. Fostering virtuousness, positive energy, strengths, aspirational targets, and inspiring language, for example, are among the ways to unlock the heliotropic effect. This effect has been demonstrated in a variety of ways within organizations and individuals—physiologically, psychologically, emotionally, visually, and socially (Cooperrider, 1990; Cameron, 2003; Bright, Cameron, & Caza, 2006). It is also documented in a study by Cameron and Lavine (2006).

Leaders of positive change are not all CEOs, of course, nor are they in titled or powerful positions. On the contrary, the most important leadership demonstrated in organizations usually occurs in departments, divisions, and teams and by individuals who take it upon themselves to enter a temporary state of leadership (Meyerson, 2001; Quinn, 2004). Principles of leading Positive Change apply as much to the first-time manager, in other words, as to the experienced executive. An attempt would be made now to provide a simple and easily remembered framework for accomplishing positive change and unleashing the power of *heliotropic effect* in the succeeding paragraphs.

II. A FRAMEWORK FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

This section presents and reviews the five key management competencies required to effectively lead positive change. They include: (i) establishing a climate of positivity, (ii) creating readiness for change, (iii) articulating a vision of abundance, (iv) aptly generating commitment to the vision, and (v) institutionalizing the positive change (Cameron & Ulrich, 1986).

A. *Establishing a Climate of Positivity*

The first and most crucial step in leading positive change is to set the stage for positive change by establishing a climate of positivity. Because constant change is typical of all organizations, most managers most of the time focus on the negative or problematic aspects of change. A leader who will focus on positive change is both rare and valuable. Not everyone masters it, although everyone can. **Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs** pointed out that negative occurrences, bad events, and disapproving feedback are more influential and longer lasting in people than positive, encouraging, and upbeat occurrences. In order to establish such a climate, leaders must help establish at least three necessary conditions: (a) positive energy networks, (b) a climate of compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude, and (c) attention to strengths and the best self.

(i) Research has discovered recently that people can be identified as “positive energizers” or “negative energizers” in their relationships with others (**Baker, Cross, & Wooten, 2003**). Positive energizers are those who strengthen and create vitality and liveliness in others. Negative energizers are people who deplete the good feelings and enthusiasm. Research shows that positive energizers are higher performers, enable others to perform better, and help their own organizations succeed more than negative energizers (**Baker et al., 2003**). Research by **Wayne Baker (2001)** has investigated two kinds of networks—information networks and influence networks. Recent research has discovered, however, that positive energy networks are far more powerful in predicting success than information or influence networks.

(ii) A second aspect of a climate of positivity is the appropriate display of compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude in organizations. These terms may sound a bit saccharine and soft—even out of place in a serious discussion of developing managerial competencies for the competitive world of business. Yet recent research has found them to be very important predictors of organizational success. Companies that scored higher on these attributes performed significantly better than others (**Cameron, 2003b**).

Kanov and colleagues (2003) found that compassion is built in organizations when managers foster three things: Collective noticing, collective feeling, and collective responding. Most managers assume that forgiveness has no place in the work setting. Forgiveness and high standards are not incompatible as forgiveness is not the same as pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, denying, minimizing, or trusting (**Enright & Coyle, 1998**). Here, the memory of the offence need not be erased for forgiveness to occur. Instead, forgiveness in an organization involves the capacity to abandon justified resentment, bitterness, and blame, and, instead to adopt positive, forward looking approaches in response to harm or damage (**Cameron & Caza, 2002**).

(iii) Observing acts of compassion and forgiveness—not to mention being the recipient of them—creates a sense of gratitude in people. Feelings of gratitude have been found to have dramatic effects on individual and organizational performance. Managers engender gratitude in an organization simply by expressing gratitude frequently and conspicuously themselves, even for small acts and small successes, and by keeping track of things that go right and expressing gratitude for them. Elaborate programs are not needed, just frequent thank you.

Pay Attention to Strengths and the Best Self: Identifying people's strengths and then building on them creates more benefit than identifying weaknesses and trying to correct them. The results of the research study carried out by **Losada and Heaphy (2003)** involving 60 teams of senior executives revealed that high-performing teams have an abundance of positive comments compared to negative comments. Obviously, the management competence demonstrated by effective leaders of positive change is to bias their communication toward positive, supportive comments rather than negative and corrective comments.

(iv) **Reflected Best-self Feedback:** This technique is developed by **Quinn, Dutton, & Spreitzer, 2003**. This is designed to provide people with feedback on their strengths and unique capabilities. This kind of information is not frequently given to people, if ever, but receiving it allows individuals to build on their unique strengths in a positive way.

B. Creating Readiness for Change

Creating readiness is a step designed to mobilize individuals in the organization to actively engage in the positive change process. It involves more than merely unfreezing people. Making people uncomfortable is a frequent prescription for getting people ready for change, and it often works. Making people uncomfortable, however, usually involves creating fear, crisis, or negative conditions. There is no doubt, of course, that change also creates its own discomfort. Interpersonal relationships, power and status, and routine ways of behaving are disrupted by change, so change is usually interpreted as anything but a positive condition. Leading positive change, on the other hand, focuses on ways to create readiness in ways that unlock positive motivations rather than resistance, and provide optimistic alternatives rather than fear. Benchmarking best practice, positive symbols, and new language are three practical ways to do it. Establishing a climate of positivity and creating readiness for change does little good, of course, if there is not a clear idea of where the positive change is heading.

That is why we need to articulate a clear, motivating vision of abundance.

C. Articulating a Vision of Abundance

Positive change seldom occurs without a leader articulating a vision of abundance. By abundance we mean of vision of positive future, a flourishing condition, and a legacy about which people care passionately. This kind of vision helps unleash human wellsprings of potential since it addresses a basic human desire—to do something that makes a difference, something that outlasts one's own life, and something that has enduring impact. Visions of abundance are different from visions of goal achievement or effectiveness—such as earning a certain percent profit, becoming number one in the market place, or receiving personal recognition. Rather, these are visions that speak to the heart as well as the head. The most motivating vision statements all contain both left-brained and right-brained elements. Leaders of positive change pay attention to both in articulating their vision statements. Murray Davis (1971) published a now-classic article on what causes some kinds of information to be judged interesting or uninteresting. Inspiring vision statements are interesting. They contain challenge and prods that confront and alter the ways people think about the past and the future. They are not outlandish or cavalier in their message, just provocative. Effective visions are grounded in core values that organization members believe in, and about which they feel passionate. Such vision statements increase people's desire to affiliate with the organization if they care deeply about the company's core principles. Before articulating inspiring, passionate, and principle-centered visions, one should ensure that the vision statement reinforces core values about which one feels strongly and it must be straightforward and simple. Moreover, vision statements are associated with a symbol. This is more than symbolic event that helps create readiness for change. Rather, people must associate the vision with something tangible they see or hear. Not only does the vision identify expectations and direction for individuals in their day-to-day activities, but they should be reminded of it regularly by the presence of a

symbol. There are some specific behaviors that one can use in articulating a high-impact vision of abundance.

They are: (i) focus on creating positive deviance rather than correcting negative deviance, (ii) include left-brain images and right-brain images by asking the most pertinent questions, (iii) make the vision interesting by challenging weakly held assumptions, (iv) ensure credibility of the vision through demonstration, and (v) attach the vision to a symbol to constantly remind people of the vision by creating visual images such as logos, flags, or signs and also by making certain that the visual symbol is closely associated with the vision so it remains a constant reminder.

D. Generating Commitment to the Vision

Once this vision of abundance has been articulated, it is necessary for leaders to help organization members commit to that vision, to sign up, to adopt the vision as their own, and to work toward its accomplishment. The entire intent of a vision is to mobilize the energy and human potential of individuals who are to implement and be affected by it. Like commitment to recreation, commitment to visions, if based on similar principles, will become strong and long-lasting.

One way for leaders to generate commitment to the vision is (i) to identify clear, consistent goals associated with the vision, (ii) identify the criteria that will indicate progress toward reaching the vision which each organization member can monitor, (iii) provide mechanisms for frequent feedback to organization members, (iv) give individuals personal choice and the maximum discretion possible, (v) maintain a consistency and stability of the rules of game and expectations, and (vi) identify a competitive standard against which performance can be evaluated.

Another well-documented way to enhance commitment to a vision is to have people state their commitments aloud, in public. Individuals are motivated to behave consistently with their public declarations (**Salancik, 1977**). The internal need for congruence ensures that public statements will be followed by consistent actions. People become committed to change when they see progress being made or success being achieved. Leaders of positive change create this kind of support by identifying small wins. A small-wins strategy is designed to create a sense of momentum by creating minor, quick changes. The basic rule of thumb for small wins is: *Find something that is easy to change. Change it. Publicize it, or recognize it publicly. Then, find a second thing that's easy to change, and repeat the process.*

E. Institutionalizing the Positive Change

The final challenge for leaders of positive change is to make the change a part of ongoing organizational life i.e., creating irreversible momentum. This is to ensure that positive change gathers such momentum that it cannot be thwarted. The most effective leaders provide an opportunity for everyone in the organization to articulate the vision, or to teach others about the desired positive change. This process requires that every person develop "a teachable point of view" (**Tichy, 1997**).

For positive change to have staying power, for it to last beyond the lifetime of the leader, people throughout the organization must have developed the capability to lead the vision themselves, to institute positive change, and to carry on under their own initiative. In other words, well-developed human capital is always the chief predictor of growth in financial capital. The skill set of the people is the bedrock upon which organizational success is built. The point is, a key to ensuring that positive change continues is to have capable people in place. Leaders need to provide organization members with developmental opportunities.

They act as chances to increase their own skill set and become an investment in the long-term future of the organization and in the continuing success of positive change. Institutionalization requires

establishment of metrics (or specific indicators of success), measures (or methods for assessing levels of success), and milestones (or benchmarks to determine when detectable progress will have occurred). These three factors help ensure accountability for change, make it clear whether or not progress is being made, and provide visible indicators that the change is successful. Leaders of positive change have to (i) identify two or three metrics or indicators that specify the result that is to be achieved, (ii) determine a measurement system to collect data at certain time intervals in particular ways, and (iii) specify milestones meaning that a certain point in time, a measurable amount of progress will have been achieved.

These are the three keys to establishing effective metrics, measures, and milestones for positive change. Institutionalizing a vision of abundance and positive change, in sum, depend on making it a part of daily life and the habitual behavior displayed by individuals throughout the organization. No positive change can survive if it depends solely on the leader. Therefore, helping people develop a teachable point of view about the positive change and providing opportunities for them to teach, building human capital through developing others' leadership skills, and instituting metrics, measurements, and milestones to ensure accountability all are actions that can help ensure successful institutionalization of positive change. However, we need to keep in mind the specific behaviors associated with these strategies to make them effective and successful.

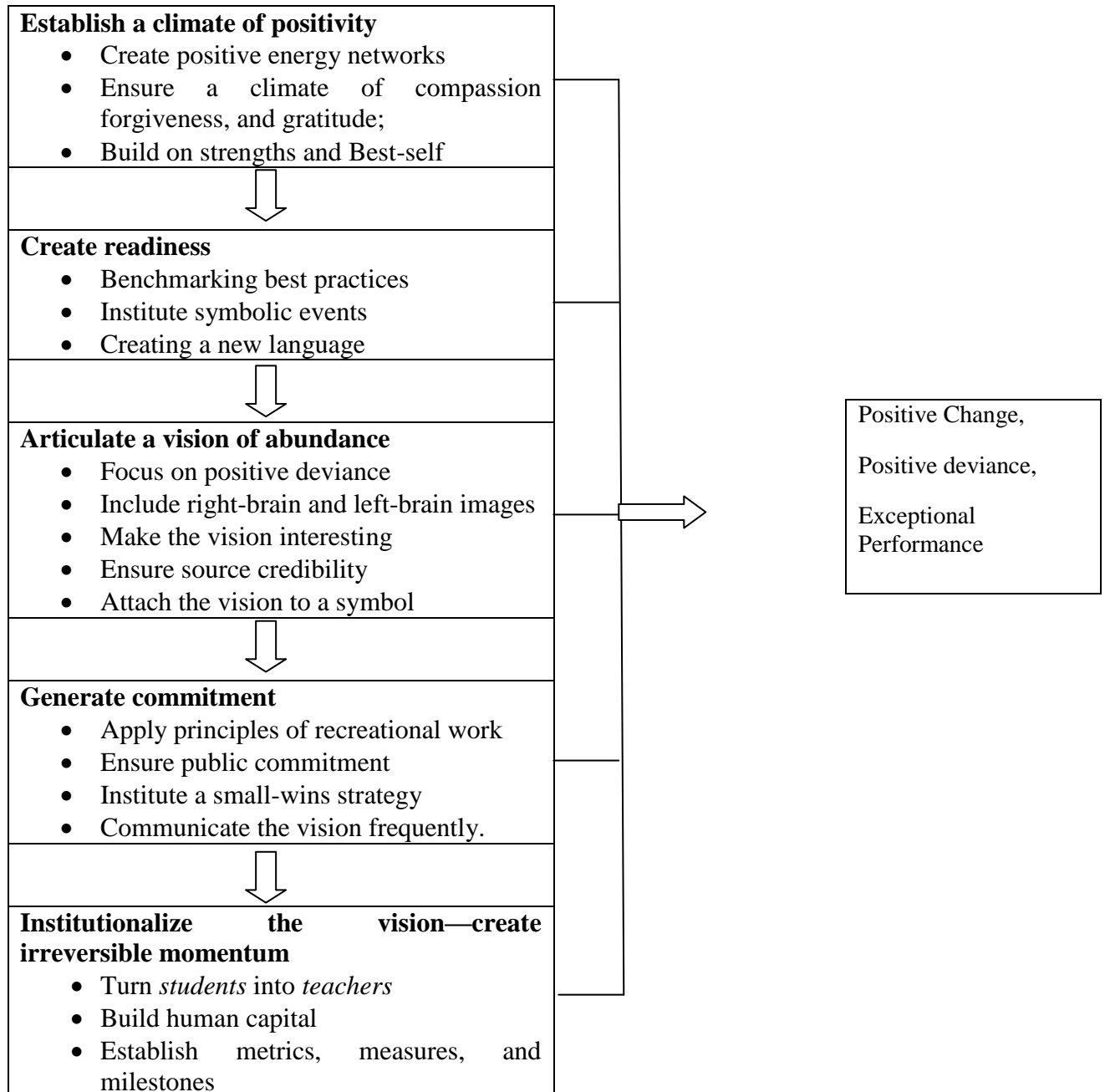
Figure-1, given at the end, summarizes the competencies set involved in leading positive change. As change is so pervasive in organizations, every leader must manage change much of the time. However, positive change cuts across the grain and goes against the tendencies of most leaders. Negative, problem-focused concerns consume most leaders and managers. Leading positive change requires a different set of competencies. Some of the behavioral guidelines for achieving positive change are given below:

- Establish a climate of positivity by creating positive energy networks; ensuring a climate of compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude; and identifying and giving feedback to people on their strengths and unique competencies.
- Create readiness in others to pursue positive change by benchmarking best practice, and comparing current performance to the highest standards; instituting symbolic events to signal positive change; and creating a new language that illustrates the positive change.
- Articulate a vision of abundance by focusing on creating positive deviance rather than correcting negative deviance; including right-brain as well as left-brain images; making the vision interesting by challenging weakly held assumptions; and ensuring credibility of the vision and the visionary.
- Generate commitment to the vision by applying principles of recreational work associated with the vision; providing opportunities for people to publicly commit to the vision; instituting a strategy of small wins; and communicating the vision frequently.
- Institutionalize the vision, or create irreversible momentum by turning *students* into *teachers*, helping people develop teachable points of view, and articulating the vision themselves; building human capital among others; and identifying metrics, measures, and milestones for success.

III. CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND SUMMARY

Frameworks or theories help provide stability and order in the midst of constant change. Frameworks guide managers in their decisions. They clarify complex or ambiguous situations. Leaders who are familiar with frameworks can manage complex situations effectively as they can respond to fewer exceptions. Managers without frameworks are left to react to every piece of information as a unique event or an exception. The best leaders possess the most, and the most useful, frameworks. When they encounter a new situation, they do not become overwhelmed or stressed because they have frameworks that can help simplify and clarify the unfamiliar.

Figure-1: A FRAMEWORK FOR LEADING POSITIVE CHANGE





Leaders involved in leading positive change in their organizations are required to institutionalize forgiveness, optimism, trust, and integrity. They should indulge in compassionate acts of kindness and virtue to make them almost a routine fare. When such super personal leadership prevails, even the language that gets used throughout the organization commonly includes words such as love, hope, compassion, forgiveness, and humility. In such settings, even the physical architecture of the organization reflects its positive approach to change, being designed to foster a more human climate for the stakeholders to communicate the virtuousness of the organization. Special language, activities, and processes generally mark organizational renewal.

In this Paper, an attempt was made to provide a simple and easily remembered framework for accomplishing positive change and unleashing the power of the heliotropic effect. Five sets of competencies were explained. They include: (i) establishing a climate of positivity, (ii) creating readiness for change, (iii) articulating a vision of abundance, (iv) generating commitment to the vision, and (v) institutionalizing the positive change. Specific behavioral guidelines for implementing this approach to change are provided next.

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