

Leadership in the Face of Change

By John Baker

“The only constant in the universe is change.”
Greek philosopher, Heraclitus – 2,500 years ago

Considering society’s bottomless access to information, our non-stop exposure to stimuli beamed from around the world, and the unsettling aspects of a modern life lived in a global village, Heraclitus’ observation rings truer than ever. Everyday we do our best to manage as much uncertainty out of our lives as possible, but in the end, we can only control so much.

The “constant of change” is what generates the unrelenting stress in our lives. It gives us the sense that our well-being is under constant threat. When you feel this threat, the hypothalamus area of your brain revs like a hot rod; hormones secrete, the nervous system engages. Adrenaline hits the bloodstream like a fuel injection. Excessive cortisol is discharged into the body producing – if the infomercials are true – stubborn extra pounds. We never hit the “off” button and our “flight or fight” reactions become unremitting, resulting in the inability to cope with trivial matters and limiting our effectiveness to deal with change, re-igniting the cycle.

But why is it some people act consistently strong in times of inconsistency? Why do some remain resilient despite negative odds? Why do some emerge as leaders despite the pressure?

Some people seem to be more “ready” to both avail themselves of change and grasp opportunity amidst chaos, while others – equally affected by circumstances – are left paralyzed and diminished.

Great leaders throughout history, and spiritual and intellectual thinkers throughout time, speak to a type of thinking that transforms the soul into one of peace, courage, purpose, and bearing. Privilege and adversity strike indiscriminately, but those who face it using core beliefs and thought-patterns motivate themselves to win and succeed.

READY Thinking is a framework that produces influential action and enables an individual – or an entire organization – to get motivated and take action in the face of both challenge and opportunity. With this model, you are able to tackle tough problems, flourish in times of turmoil and to be more capable of moving through change rapidly. READY is an acronym that outlines a five-step process to bring leadership into times of uncertainty:

R – Reality

Reality requires you to define the situation in uncompromisingly clear and concise terms for yourself and the people around you; the most essential step in READY Thinking, and the hardest. Why? Very few people like reality. Governing your life is about choosing, but the old adage is true: People want their cake and to eat it, too. Yet, the common practice of expending emotions and energy on things that aren’t real is the direct opposite of being ready. The philosopher Santayana said it best, “One real world is enough.” First step in defining reality: Stop playing the “what if” game. When you hear yourself – or someone else – say things like “What if...” or “If only...” or “I should have, would have, or could have...” you’re wasting time and emotion on things that aren’t real. Stop!

E – Enlarging

Enlarging is about giving yourself, and those you lead, an inspirational energy-inducing vision much larger than the task at hand, and much bolder than the situation warrants. Human beings want to feel part of something bigger than themselves. They want their work to be important, valued and make a difference. First step in enlarging: Ask the question, “What’s in it for me?” While this may sound self-centered, it actually helps to frame your “self talk” and to fully appreciate the larger purpose of your effort.

A – Accountability

Accountability requires authentically taking responsibility for your actions and for the leadership you give to others. People will want to join your team when they believe the journey you lead them on will be worthwhile, the destination you take them to will be important and that your leadership can get them there. Blow the accountability bond, and don’t look back; your team will be long gone. First step in accountability: admit, apologize and acknowledge. Admit you caused the problem, apologize for it, and acknowledge your role in finding a solution.

D – Durability

Durability allows you to persist through tough times, finish the job and value the benefit of sweat and toil. Durability is the ability to stick with something through good times and bad, victory and heartbreak, happy emotions and sad ones – this is the most powerful attribute of a READY Thinker. Durability is stronger than talent, better than luck, more real than potential, and more valuable than intellect. Durability is the value that has delivered every good thing in your life. First step in durability: When faced with what appears to be a daunting task or major setback, focus on one small action that moves you forward. Then focus on the next small action. Small steps allow you to surmount what initially appears to be insurmountable.

Y – “Yes” Attitude

A “Yes” attitude means you take what you do seriously, but you don’t take yourself seriously. Having fun and enjoying your work pays dividends, and people – friends, co-workers, and clients – want to be part of the energy. How do you get people to join you on the “Yes” attitude bandwagon? Attract them with optimism and confidence. First step in “Yes” Attitude: Nourish your brain with a positive diet. Instead of that firebrand talk show, listen to motivational music instead. Read an inspirational book before going to sleep instead of watching the morbid nightly news. Learn a foreign language on the way into work; when someone asks about your commute simply say: “Magnifico, grazi!”

Do you remember a time when you felt READY? In all likelihood, there were many unknowns when you went through the change. But despite a nervous energy, you were inclined to do something, to move forward, to take the lead. You were confident and resolute. Chances are, you are a leader in some aspect of your life – at work, at home, at school, or wherever you hold influence – so wouldn’t it be worth it to be READY more

often? Being READY is facing down obstacles and changing events with influential action.

John Baker is a speaker and founder of READY Thinking, LLC, a leadership development firm, and has helped hundreds of organizations achieve success by adopting a practical framework of thinking during times of change and opportunity. His experience includes over 20 years with companies including American Express and Ameriprise Financial as a senior executive specializing in sales, client loyalty and customer service. John is the author of the forthcoming book, "READY Thinking – A Framework for Action in Times of Change." For more information, contact John at JohnBaker@ReadyThinking.com or visit ReadyThinking.com.