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Leading Organizational Change Is Like Climbing a Mountain

by Judith Zimmerman

Abstract

Leading organizational change is like climbing a mountain. Transformational leaders must prepare to lead change, understand the process and nature of change, and provide the essential gear so that those involved can be successful. The author draws on the literature and personal experiences as a hiker and change leader to provide a guide for leading organizational change.

My husband Bill and I have had the thrill of climbing some of the highest mountains east of the Mississippi River, including Mt. LeConte in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Mt. Mitchell in North Carolina, and Mt. Washington in New Hampshire. Last summer on a camping trip to Vermont, we climbed Mt. Mansfield, the highest mountain in that state. As an avid hiker and a student of organizational change, I was recently drawn to Kouzes and Posner's (2000, 24) statement that climbing a mountain is a "wonderful metaphor for organizational change leadership."

With this metaphor of mountain climbing in mind, I studied my well-worn and crumpled copy of the *Great Smoky Mountains Trail Map* (National Parks Service 1993) with the notion that it might provide me with some new insights into being a change leader. This trail map certainly addresses the preparation, process, nature, and safety components of hiking. Could it also be a guide for leading organizational change?

Preparation

"A smart and safe hiker is a prepared hiker" (Great Smoky Mountains Trail Map 1993).

Training is very important in preparing yourself for both hiking and organizational change. Hiking is a highly aerobic sport; it is not an activity for couch potatoes. To get in shape for a strenuous hike, I cross-train—run, bicycle, and work out on a stair-stepper to

simulate climbing. My husband even has carried weights in his backpack while mowing our lawn to get in shape!

A leader also must get in shape to lead change in an organization. "Surviving and thriving in the face of constant change has much in common with sports. There are rules, training regimens, mental conditioning, [and] goal setting" (Conner 1998, 37). A leader prepares to lead change by understanding the change process, both personally and as it relates to members of the organization (Calabrese 2002).

> *"Carry a good map and know how to use it" (Great Smoky Mountains Trail Map 1993).*

Having the right equipment and gear not only helps keep hikers safe, but also makes the hike more enjoyable. Bill and I have discovered through our experiences (some pleasant; some not so pleasant) that the following gear is essential: hiking boots, rain gear, multiple layers of clothing, backpack with hydration system, and hat.

To reach one's destination safely and in a timely fashion, it also is necessary for the hiker to bring a compass and know how to use it. An organization's compass includes its values and beliefs. The change leader knows how these two components impact the culture of an organization. Most importantly, both hikers and change leaders must carry a map. "Without better maps, it is extremely unlikely that organizational change efforts will ever sustain themselves" (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth, and B. Smith 1999, 5). An essential criterion for establishing and providing psychologically safe organizational environments discussed by Calabrese (2002, 146) is that "the leader provides a map as to what needs to be done and how it is to be done."

Organizational leaders should not be deceived by thinking that small changes will be easy to implement. In reality, the leader may have to work harder to gain less altitude.

> *"Let someone know beforehand your schedule and your route" (Great Smoky Mountains Trail Map 1993).*

Bill and I have embarked on many hikes where the park and/or forest service requires hikers to file their names before departing. Hikers should know and agree on their destination, the routes/trails they plan to take to reach it, and the estimated amount of time that they will be on the trail. This information is important for organizations, as well. Bennis (1984) and Senge et al. (1999) stressed the importance of the leader involving others in developing a shared vision and in communicating that vision to others. Having a vision, and goals for reaching that vision, give meaning, challenge, motiva-

tion, and a common purpose to everyone in the organization (Bass and Avolio 1994; Burns 1978; Schmoker 1999).

Process (On the Trail)

"Know your physical and mental limitations" (Great Smoky Mountains Trail Map 1993).

Many hikers get themselves into trouble because of overestimating their physical/mental preparedness or underestimating the demands of the hike. Though it is exhilarating to challenge oneself to climb a mountain that may have seemed impossible before, a balance of good common sense, a positive attitude, and some willingness to take acceptable risks seems to be the best approach. Organizations can abide by these lessons as well. At work we can choose our attitude and have fun while we're working (Lundin, Paul, and Christensen 2000). For employees who may fear their own potential, the change leader should challenge them to set higher expectations for themselves **(**Calabrese 2002). Leaders also must help others create new mental models to address new contexts in the organization (Calabrese 2002). While collaboration can help everyone in reaching goals, peer pressure coupled with peer support is most effective (Fullan 2001). Bennis (1984) postulated that the transformational leader demonstrates competencies, including knowing his/her personal skills, believing in people, and remaining focused.

"Stay on the trail" (Great Smoky Mountains Trail Map 1993).

Staying on track during the hike can become very discouraging at times. In steep or more treacherous stretches, the hiker may average only one mile per hour. Keeping a steady pace is better than wearing oneself out. Sometimes, Bill and I have had to use our hands to pull us up from rock to rock or to help one another over a steep spot. This is true in a collaborative organization in which everyone supports the work of colleagues. Surprisingly, it is often easier to climb up a mountain than to go back down. Hiking down is a strain on the knees, and some places are so steep that it is safer to simply sit down and slide. Organizations, likewise, experience both ups and downs. According to Bolman and Deal (2001, 57–58), "A spiritual pilgrimage always brings peaks and valleys. . . . If you wall off the valleys, you close off the peaks as well."

To divide our hikes into manageable chunks, Bill and I take rest stops at key points along the trail. As organizational leaders, we should plan for these small "rest stops" along our change journey as well. Celebrating short-term wins confirms that our sacrifices in transforming an organization have been worth it (Kotter 1996).

Bill and I always follow the blazed trail to avoid becoming lost. In the wooded areas, the blazes are generally painted on the trees in specific colors for each trail, and on larger rocks in open areas. Identifying markers called cairns are used beyond the tree line. Cairns are piles of stones or rocks. We depend on the *cairns* to stay on the trail, and to measure the progress of our hike. It is the leader's responsibility, in collaboration with others, to establish the goals that represent the cairns for organizations. "Goals and the commitment that they generate . . . hold teams together . . . suc-

cess depends upon how effectively we select, define, and measure progress and how well we adjust effort toward goals" (Schmoker 1999, 24–25).

If a hiker misses a trail marker (blaze or cairn), he or she undoubtedly will have to retrace steps. This costs both time and energy. Likewise, organizations must establish manageable goals, keep their eyes fixed on the goals, and measure progress toward them to avoid wasting time and becoming sidetracked.

By simply considering the elevation of a mountain in determining the difficulty of climbing it, a hiker can be deceived into thinking that a smaller mountain will be easier to scale. Climbing Mt. Washington (6,288 feet) was much more difficult than climbing Mt. Mitchell (6,684 feet), because of its 4,000-foot altitude gain within a little more than four miles. Knowing the vertical rise of the mountain gives the hiker a better idea of how difficult the ascent will be. Approaching resistance to change is similar to encountering the vertical rise of mountains. Organizational leaders should not be deceived by thinking that small changes will be easy to implement. In reality, the leader may have to work harder to gain less altitude.

Trail builders construct switchbacks along the trail due to the actual vertical rise of a mountain. A hiker may be tempted to take shortcuts to avoid yet another switchback. This digression, however, can get the hiker into trouble, because of the shortcut's steepness and uneven footing. When organizations take shortcuts during transformation, they also can get into trouble. Leaders may be tempted to implement the latest innovation or "flavor of the month" without taking the time to gather and analyze the organization's data. "Not using data to monitor results can be calamitous" (Schmoker 1999, 37). By using data to "stay on the trail," organizations can document incremental improvement, no matter how small. "The cumulative impact of many small improvements is thus dramatic" (Schmoker 1999, 51).

Today's leaders must be systems thinkers who recognize the interdependence of everyone within the organization.

My husband had never gone hiking until we were married. Though hiking is not his favorite athletic activity, he does it for me. I am reminded of Barker's (1999) comment, "A leader is someone you choose to follow to a place that you wouldn't go by yourself." Organizational leaders also may have participants as reluctant as my husband. It is the responsibility of the transformational leader to provide the motivation and support for everyone along the journey. Leaders must "keep the level of distress within a tolerable range for doing adaptive work" (Heifetz 1994, 128).

Nature (Climate and the View)

One thing that my husband and I do have in common is a love for the outdoors. I especially appreciate the beautiful natural settings and shoot many photos while hiking.

Taking time to study the little things—a wildflower, a fern, or a mushroom—affords us an opportunity to rest. The multitude of vegetation demonstrates the interdependent nature of a forest: "one form of plant life, regardless of what it is, helps set the stage for another and then another" (Conner 1998, 58). In likening this interdependence in nature to that in organizations, Conner (1998, 58) suggested, "The key to this who-cares-where-it-starts approach is the realization that once true self-direction begins, it usually becomes pervasive within the operation." Today's leaders must be systems thinkers who recognize the interdependence of everyone within the organization.

In studying the fractal beauty of ferns along the trail, I rejoice in Wheatley's (1994) analogy between the self-reference and fractal principles found in nature to that in organizations. "Self-reference is what facilitates orderly change in turbulent environments. In human organizations, a clear sense of identity of the values, traditions, aspirations, competencies, and culture that guide the operation . . . [provide] a reference point for change" (94). If a culture that sets broad parameters for everyone's work is created, these guidelines will ensure that the organization's values are found at every level. Just as ferns are fractal, "replicating a dominant pattern at several smaller levels of scale" (130), the best organizations also have a fractal quality. "An observer of such an organization can tell what the organization's values . . . are by watching anyone . . . [The] power of guiding principles or values . . . are strong enough influencers of behavior to shape every employee into a desired representative of the organization" (132).

Though we appreciate the aesthetic beauty of mushrooms, neither my husband nor I eat them. Therefore, we are not tempted to determine whether or not the mushrooms we find on our hikes are poisonous. Hall and Hord (2001) used the metaphor of mushrooms to discuss interventions in organizations. "Mushrooms are constructed out of the interpretations [and the resultant behaviors] that each person gives to the actions and events in a change process. People look for ways to make sense of and to explain what is happening to them and around them" (176). Successful change facilitators are adept at anticipating the growth of mushrooms, detecting the difference between the positive and negative (poisonous) ones, and taking the necessary actions to nurture or eradicate them, respectively (Hall and Hord, 2001).

> *"Do not cross a stream unless you are sure you can make it" (Great Smoky Mountains Trail Map 1993).*

Trailblazers often have constructed bridges to help hikers cross swiftly moving parts of a stream. Using bridge building as a metaphor in organizations, Barker (1999) purported that leaders "build bridges . . . bridges built of hope and ideas and opportunities . . . bridges that help us move from where we are to where we need to be."

Sometimes hikers must use moss-covered rocks as stepping-stones to reach the other side of fast-moving mountain streams. This risk-taking can be both exhilarating and dangerous. My husband and I make sure that we are ready to support one another during a stream crossing. Similarly, do we as leaders support risk-taking in our organizations? Short and Greer (2002, 91) stated, "Creating an environment supportive of teacher

risk-taking and innovation will often require a large change in the culture of the school." Encouraging the growth of trust is an important leadership function as organizations encounter treacherous streams and other obstacles to improvement. "Trust helps enormously in creating a shared objective" (Kotter 1996, 65).

This sense that crossing streams can be considered either an opportunity or a danger also can be compared to how we face challenges in our organizations. "By correctly anticipating what is going to happen, a person is able to ready himself or herself in the best way possible. This sense of preparedness is fundamental to securing dynamic balance" (Conner 1998, 35). Can we create missions strong enough for our organizations to adapt to change? According to Wheatley (1994), streams can teach us about organizations. Streams have "an impressive ability to adapt, to shift the configurations to let the power balance move, to create new structures. . . . The forms change, but the mission remains clear" (15–18).

Transformational leaders also are obliged to prepare to lead change, understand the process and nature of change, and provide the essential gear and support for those involved to be successful.

On a particularly hot day of hiking, I can't resist the urge to shed my hiking boots to cool off in one of these beautiful mountain streams. Unlike this invigorating and welcome change, Schmoker (1999, 40) characterized schools' traditional change effort: "Having ever so gingerly put our toes into the cold waters of change, we realized that change would require something like accountability, which we have never warmed toward." Change leaders, therefore, must make accountability less threatening. Rather than stepping back fearfully from data collection and analysis, organizations should welcome this as evidence of improvement. "Wrongly used, data have a chilling effect" (Schmoker 1999, 40). However, data used to help rather than punish, can energize everyone in an organization to be more accountable (Schmoker 1999).

The Summit

According to Kouzes and Posner (2000, 24–25), "The summit is the vision . . . keep [it] in mind as you prepare for and make the ascent. Leaders have to . . . keep their eyes focused on the summit and their minds concentrated on getting there."

Keeping our eyes on the top has been difficult when Bill and I have climbed mountains that were thickly forested all the way to the summit. There have been other mountain summits that have greeted us with rain and fog. Imagine, hiking for hours, knowing that you were at the summit because of finding an Army Corps of Engineers marker, but not getting a well-earned view of the valley below. Both moun-

tain climbers and change leaders ought to remain hopeful when faced with disappointment. "Remaining hopeful and taking action in the face of important lost causes . . . may be less emotionally draining than being in a permanent state of despair" (Fullan 1997, 231).

When we finally reach a mountain summit, my husband and I look forward to a special ritual. We perch at the top, enjoy the view, take numerous photographs, *and* eat a Snickers® candy bar. Since we generally do not have many sweets at home, the candy bar ritual is not only a special treat, but also a well-deserved one. Members of organizations also deserve "candy bars" when they achieve improvement goals. "More than ever, we need to revive ritual and ceremony as the spiritual fuel we need to energize and put more life back into our schools" (Deal and Peterson 1999, 32).

"Storms can arise quickly" (Great Smoky Mountains Trail Map 1993).

During one of the first hikes that I had convinced my husband to try, we got caught in a tremendous thunderstorm. The trail that we had used to ascend turned into a raging stream as we descended. My husband still relishes sharing this story, especially when I have the foolishness to suggest a hike when rain is predicted. Deal and Peterson (1999, 55) believed that "Stories are powerful ways of communicating values, reinforcing norms, and celebrating cultural accomplishments." During my career as an organizational leader, my staff and I have had a number of stories that we enjoyed telling about obstacles overcome and foolish acts that became funnier in the retelling.

Weather predictions, of course, are not always accurate. Beautiful, wispy cirrus clouds can give way to thunder clouds very quickly. "Clouds themselves are self-organizing. . . . We are capable of similar transformations when we trust. . . . New thoughts and ideas [clouds] are spectacular examples of strange and unpredictable systems, structured in ways we never imagined possible" (Wheatley 1994, 99). Similar to meteorologists' errors, we cannot always predict the outcome of our organizational change efforts. Leaders should remember that change resistors, like thunder clouds, may make us uncomfortable, but they are not always bad. By empathizing with all organizational members, leaders find "a way to reconcile positive and negative emotion [in order to release] energy for change" (Fullan 1997, 233). The seasoned hiker must be ready for any type of weather, from warm breezes to beating sun to thunder clouds. Likewise, leaders must demonstrate their own climate preparedness. "Effective administrators are sources of both light and heat. They help teachers see the benefits of new initiatives while simultaneously insisting on progress" (Tomlinson 1999, 114).

Safety

"If you get lost, stay calm and do not leave the trail" (Great Smoky Mountains Trail Map 1993).

Fear of the unknown is common in both mountain hiking and organizational change. Unreasonable fear, however, can become a barrier to a successful hike and to an effective organizational change effort (Greenberg and Baron 2000; Robbins 2000).

It is as likely for organizations to lose their way as it is for hikers to lose theirs. Remaining calm is an important skill under these circumstances. According to Fullan (2001, 40–41):

> *All successful schools experience 'implementation dips' as they move forward. The implementation dip is literally a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings. . . . Leaders who understand the implementation dip know that people are experiencing two kinds of problems when they are in the dip—the social-psychological fear of change, and the lack of technical know-how or skills to make the change work.*

Fullan (2001, 124) concluded that effective leaders "don't panic when things go wrong in the early stages of a major change initiative. It is not so much that they take their time, but rather that they know it takes time for things to gel." There are moments when both hikers and organizational leaders, however, confront barriers that legitimately cause them anxiety.

> *"The best way to avoid bears is not to attract them" (Great Smoky Mountains Trail Map 1993).*

Although we have occasionally spotted bears at a distance, we luckily have not encountered one on the trail. It is especially prudent not to startle a bear. Therefore, we try to make warning noises (loud talking; "bear" bells) as we near a curve in the trail or approach a stream. Even with all of our precautions, we undoubtedly will come face to face with a bear at some time. Experts seem to disagree about the best way to safely manage a situation with a bear. It appears that different species of bears, brown or black, are best handled in different ways. Some would say that the best approach for a brown bear is to appear nonthreatening and to avoid eye contact. Others claim that one should try to look large and imposing for black bears. The dilemma for hikers is to make a split-second decision about which of the bear types they are facing and how to react properly.

Organizational leaders, too, often are faced with "bears" or other dangers. At these times, they should be prepared to confront these problems as if they were black bears. According to Conner (1998, 72), "When the danger signal is triggered, leaders should be ready to diagnose what needs to be done to protect or regain the nimble status, and build plans to focus on the precise elements that need attention." "Consciously competent" leaders guide their organizations to be successful in competitive environments and "highly unstable conditions" (72–73).

Conclusion

This metaphorical review of my well-worn copy of the *Great Smoky Mountains Trail Map* has furnished me with some new insights into being a change leader. The map addressed the necessary preparation, processes, and safety precautions involved in undertaking a hike. Likewise, these same components must be considered when leading change. Transformational leaders also are obliged to prepare to lead change, understand the process and nature of change, and provide the essential gear and support for those

involved to be successful. Though Bill and I will never scale any mountain near the size of the 29,035-foot Mt. Everest, climbing the much smaller 6,684-foot Mt. Mitchell was still compelling. Leading organizational change, however large or small, can be equally challenging.

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