Purdue University

Purdue e-Pubs

Jul 6th, 12:00 AM

Shadow of the leader: How library leaders undermine or bolster change efforts

Petra Düren
Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Germany

SHADOW OF THE LEADER: HOW LIBRARY LEADERS UNDERMINE OR BOLSTER CHANGE EFFORTS

Petra Düren
Hamburg University of Applied Sciences
Germany
petra.dueren@haw-hamburg.de

Rob Ross
USA
rossrob4@gmail.com

Abstract

Major change projects in libraries often fail due to a combination of staff resistance and management behavior that undermines the change. Based on a pre-survey conducted in the USA and the German speaking countries Germany, Switzerland and Austria, the authors identify the most common productive and unproductive behaviors exhibited by library leaders in times of change. This paper shows the most important aspects of leaders' behavior during major change processes and culminates in recommendations to library leaders on how to behave during change initiatives to increase their odds of success.

Keywords

change agents, change leaders' behavior, change management, leadership, major change projects, pre-survey

1   Introduction

Companies in the private sector as well as the public service and nonprofit sectors now experience perpetual change. Rapidly iterating technologies as well as changing demographics are two common causes of this ongoing cycle of change.

Major, deliberate large-scale changes are projects that need extensive action and affect most parts of the library and with this are characterized by complexity and challenge [Krummaker, Vogel, 2012].
To manage such change projects leadership is a critical issue, especially as there is a need to balance the traditions of the library profession with the need to change something and here especially to manage and to lead this change [O'Connor, 2014].

But in total only 19 % of the companies evaluate their major change projects as successful [Schmidt, Sackmann, 2014].
Therefore a qualitative, international research effort, asking leaders and change managers about their behavior during major change projects, was conducted in 2012.
Some of the findings of this first qualitative study can be found in Figure 1.
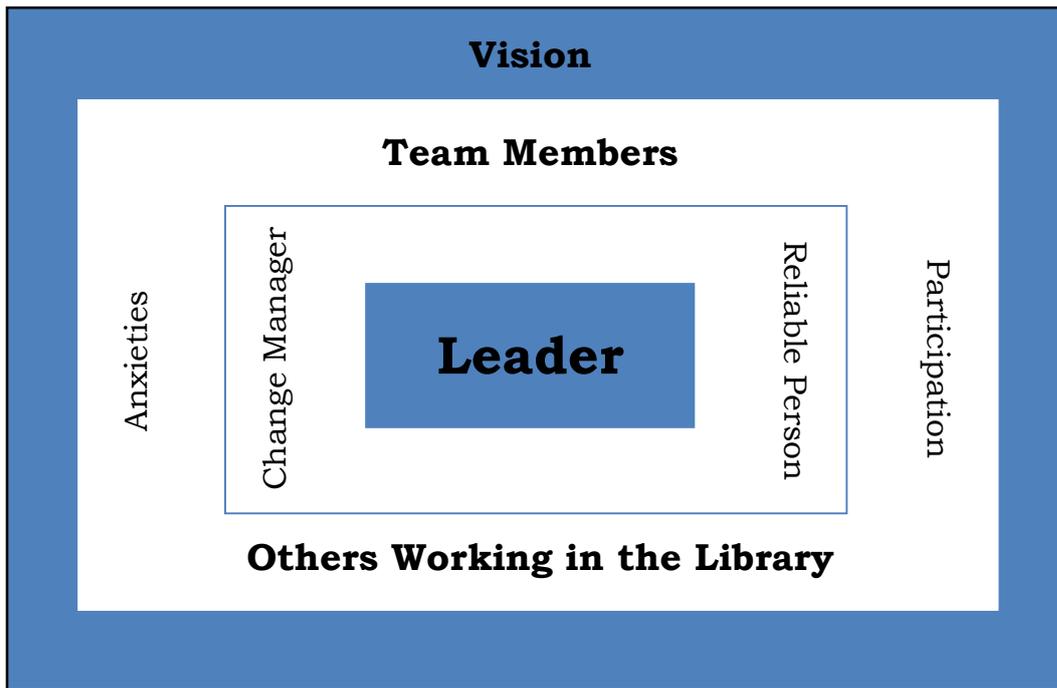
Figure 1   New aspects of leadership [Düren, 2013, p. 138]

As can be seen, leaders need
- to have a vision and plans,
- to be aware of and manage team members' anxieties,
- not to forget the other people working in the library,
- to interact with their team and let team members participate in the process,
- to know about change management and be able to use its tools,
- to be reliable [Düren, 2013].

"Leadership is always important but is especially important at times of rapid and even fundamental change" [O'Connor, 2014] as "Leadership is crucial to facilitate successful change in organizations" [Krummaker, Vogel, 2012].

This represents the perspective of leaders on change. But what about those impacted by the change. What do *they* want from their leaders?
To answer this question, this study focuses on the opinions of members of library staff about their leaders' behavior during deliberate large-scale changes.
What follows are the results of a short pre-survey conducted in the USA and in the German speaking countries Germany, Switzerland and Austria to answer this question.

2   Methodology

The aim of this study was to measure the most common behaviors exhibited by leaders of change projects during *successful* changes, as well as the most common behaviors exhibited by change leaders during *unsuccessful* changes, to determine which behaviors can be most strongly correlated with success or failure.

To avoid self-serving bias, this pre-survey was administered to those who were involved in a change effort, but did not themselves lead it. In other words, the goal was to collect data from those in a position to observe the demonstrable behaviors of change leaders, not to ask the change leaders themselves what behaviors they thought they exhibited.

To find out more about leaders' behavior during major changes two questions have been asked.

1. Think of a time when you were part of a successful organizational change initiative (e.g. implementing a new technology; developing a new program; revising a set of policies, etc.), but did not lead the initiative. Thinking about the person(s) who did lead the change initiative, identify the behaviors the change leader(s) exhibited that contributed to the change initiative succeeding.

Ex. Change leader communicated frequently about the status of the change initiative.

2. Think of a time when you were part of an unsuccessful organizational change initiative (e.g. implementing a new technology; developing a new program; revising a set of policies, etc.), but did not lead the initiative. Thinking about the person(s) who did lead the change initiative, identify the behaviors the change leader(s) exhibited that contributed to change initiative failing.

Ex. Change leader ignored the concerns of stakeholders.

In the German version of the questionnaire the same two questions have been asked.

1. Denken Sie bitte an ein erfolgreiches Veränderungsprojekt in Ihrer Bibliothek (z. B. die Einführung einer Selbstverbuchungsanlage oder die Veränderung der Abteilungs- und Teamzuschnitte), an dem Sie teilgenommen bzw. von dem Sie betroffen waren, das Sie aber nicht verantwortlich geleitet haben. Wenn Sie an die Person(en) denken, die für dieses Veränderungsprojekt verantwortlich war(en), welche Verhaltensweisen dieser Person(en) haben Ihrer Meinung nach zum Erfolg des Projektes beigetragen und dieses zu einem erfolgreichen Abschluss geführt?

Beispiel: Die / der Verantwortliche für das Projekt hat regelmäßig über den Stand der Veränderung berichtet.

2. Denken Sie bitte an ein nicht erfolgreiches Veränderungsprojekt in Ihrer Bibliothek (z. B. die Einführung einer Selbstverbuchungsanlage oder die Veränderung der Abteilungs- und Teamzuschnitte), an dem Sie teilgenommen bzw. von dem Sie betroffen waren, das Sie aber nicht verantwortlich geleitet haben. Wenn Sie an die Person(en) denken, die für dieses Veränderungsprojekt verantwortlich war(en), welche Verhaltensweisen dieser Person(en) haben Ihrer Meinung nach dazu geführt, dass dieses Projekt nicht erfolgreich abgeschlossen bzw. die Veränderung nicht im geplanten Umfang umgesetzt werden konnte?

Beispiel: Die / der Verantwortliche für das Projekt hat die Bedenken der von der Veränderung Betroffenen nicht ernst genommen.

In the USA, 77 participants completed the survey.

In the German speaking countries, 39 participants fully completed the questionnaire. Most of them are working in university libraries (24), 7 in academic specialized libraries, only 4 in public libraries, and the other 4 in national, corporate or other libraries.
The majority (21) has worked five or more years in libraries, 4 have worked three to under five years and 14 have worked in a library less than three years.

There are differences between the USA and the German speaking countries in assessing the leaders' behaviors during major changes, as can be seen in the following section.

3 Findings

In this section the results of the two surveys conducted in the USA and the German speaking countries are analyzed and compared.

Reasons for successful change initiatives:
In the USA the categories of behaviors most frequently reported of change leaders during *successful* change initiatives were:

Participation/Preparation (35 %)
Communication (27 %)
Expectations/Goals/Objectives (22 %)
Employee relations (10 %)
Trust/Accountability (5 %)

These findings indicate that the recipe for successful change leadership is not as complex as many assume. 84 % of the reported behaviors exhibited by change leaders during a successful change initiative fell into three broad categories: Change leaders (a) encouraged active, authentic, two-way participation, (b) communicated frequently, and (c) explained the rationale and projected benefits of the change. Certainly this is just one first step in analyzing what contributes to a successful change initiative, but it is nonetheless heartening for two reasons: First, this is a short list of best practices for – at least American – change leaders to hold themselves accountable to. Second, all three of these behaviors are not innate, but can be learned.

In the German speaking countries the categories of behaviors most frequently reported of change leaders during *successful* change initiatives were:

Communication (29 %)
Project management (24 %)
Participation (13 %)
Goals/Objectives and positive aspects (16 %)
Serious handling of team members' worries and anxieties (12 %)

Also these behaviors can be learned. Communication has to be open, transparent, regular, and involve everyone. Project management includes definite responsibilities and decision structures, and a realistic time schedule. Participation gives the persons concerned the possibility to share their own ideas and suggestions and offers them a chance to participate in the change. Leaders have to be positive and inform those impacted about the goals and objectives of the change and they have to handle their team members' worries and anxieties seriously.

One **significant difference** between the USA and the German speaking countries is that in the latter project management is one of the most important aspects to successfully execute major change projects. In the USA, respondents cited some elements of project management like

timelines and assigned parties, represented in the category "Expectations/Goals/Objectives", but in the German speaking countries project management goes much further with clear responsibilities and project structure, as well as good accessibility of the project leader.

Reasons for unsuccessful change initiatives:
In the USA the categories of behaviors most frequently reported of change leaders during *unsuccessful* change initiatives were:

Participation/Preparation (38 %)
Communication (19 %)
Expectations/Goals/Objectives (17 %)
Employee relations (14 %)
Trust/Accountability (12 %)

Not surprisingly, behaviors exhibited during an unsuccessful change initiative closely mirror those exhibited during a successful change initiative. The change leader's (a) discouragement of active, authentic, two-way participation, (b) lack of communication, and (c) failure to explain the rationale and projected benefits of the change were cited as the primary behaviors of change leaders during an unsuccessful change initiative. However, change leaders' behaviors falling into the categories of Trust/Accountability and Employee relations were more frequently cited when recalling an unsuccessful change initiative.

Within the category of Trust/Accountability, respondents cited the change leader (a) not following through on the plan, (b) casting blame on others and/or not being accountable him/herself, and (c) being untrustworthy or having a hidden, ulterior agenda. Within the category of Employee relations, respondents cited the change leader (a) not being supportive or empathetic to staff, (b) intimidating or mocking staff and (c) not acknowledging the work of others.

In the German speaking countries the categories of behaviors most frequently reported of change leaders during *unsuccessful* change initiatives were:

Poor communication (28 %)
No or poor project management (26 %)
No participation (22 %)
Negative attitude (13 %)
No serious handling of team members' worries and anxieties (11 %)

Poor communication includes giving information too late, or only parts of it, leaving out the project leader's own team members etc. No or poor project management led to ambiguity in decision making and a lack of clear areas of responsibilities and with this differences about competences in the project as well as no planning of the resources needed for the project, too many change projects at the same time and not listening to experiences from previous change projects. No participation is characterized through top down decisions. Negative attitude of leaders is shown in being unmotivated to change something, in only seeing risks in the change process and in a missing readiness for innovations. Also very unhelpful for each change project is when leaders are handling their team members' worries and anxieties not seriously.

Here also are **major differences** between the data from the USA and the German speaking countries. The second mostly named aspect is the missing project management, which includes the above mentioned aspects, and the negative attitude of leaders in German speaking countries is the fourth important aspect that leads to unsuccessful change initiatives.

As can be seen, **communication** is one of the most important aspects for successful (or unsuccessful) major change projects. A lack of communication creates a vacuum. Within this vacuum paranoia flourishes.

In the survey data, a trend emerged in unsuccessful change initiatives: When there was a lack of communication, staff members tended to assume that communication was, in fact, happening, but that they were being excluded. Their premise was that the change initiative, in their estimation, was important enough to be communicated about. Therefore, the fact that they were not involved in these presumed conversations led them to conclude that their exclusion was purposeful. Based on own practical experience with change initiatives, it is likely that, rather than there being secret, exclusive communication about these change initiatives, most likely no communication was happening at all.

There were surprisingly few behaviors reported during either successful or unsuccessful change initiatives that could be considered innate qualities that are difficult or impossible to learn. Some examples of these qualities exhibited during successful change initiatives were "optimism", "persistence" and "enthusiasm". Some examples of these qualities exhibited during unsuccessful change initiatives were "lack of passion", "close mindedness", "egoism", "acting competitive", "lying" and "aggressiveness".

The relative lack of innate qualities reported can be viewed as a positive finding, as it underscores the fact that most people can learn to become great change leaders; it is not an innate ability one is born with.

4   Conclusions

This pre-survey did show the most important aspects of leaders' behavior during deliberate large-scale change projects.

One of the most important aspects is that under-communicating has consequences.

This study confirms the results of the above mentioned qualitative study asking leaders about their change experiences that did show that communication is an essential competence of leaders in times of change [Düren, 2013].

Even if one feels that she or he doesn't have a substantial update, or perhaps there is bad news to report about the change initiative, it is better to communicate anyway to ensure no communication vacuum develops. Communicating that no progress has been made since the update from two weeks ago, for example, is better than not communicating at all. Communicating that there has been a setback even without being certain what the leader's response will be, for example, is better than not communicating at all.

Staff members want to have a voice. Giving staff members many and varied opportunities to share their feedback and input about the change will increase its likelihood of success. This does not mean that all staff input must be accepted or adopted. The change leader, ultimately, must make difficult decisions. The key takeaway is to enable authentic, two-way conversation between the change leader and those impacted by the change. This participatory style of change leadership, alone, will greatly increase the odds of success. Staff members' voices will be heard and, even when one of their ideas is not adopted, they will feel that their opinion and perspective was valued.

In the German speaking countries besides the communication the participation of the persons concerned and the clarification of the goals and the leader's expectations a good project management is crucial for the success of major change projects. Krüger [2009] recommends a secondary organization (in addition to the already existing primary organization of the day-to-day business) that supports the transformational process through a management committee or steering group and the implementation of project teams.

Also, team members' worries and anxieties need to be handled seriously. It seems to be ideal to involve a change communication manager early in the change process, who is able to pay attention to the emotional needs of the persons concerned by the change and also to react to these needs [Deutinger, 2013].

And a leader's negative attitude – including being unmotivated to change something and only seeing the risks in the new – leads to unsuccessful change projects. For this the top management has to motivate their leaders of the middle and lower management during the whole change process and also to empower these leaders through information and participation in the process to be able to act as change leaders / change promoters [Houben, 2008].

This study has to and will be continued. To find out more details about the leaders' behavior that results in successful or unsuccessful change projects, qualitative interviews with members of staff should be conducted followed by an extensive quantitative survey to test the hypotheses.

Literature

Deutinger, G. (2013). *Kommunikation im Change: Erfolgreich kommunizieren in Veränderungsprozessen.* Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Gabler.
Düren, P. (2013). *Leadership in Academic and Public Libraries: A time of change.* Oxford: Chandos Publishing.
Houben, A. (2008). Men in the Middle. *Personal, 07-08/2008*, 18-19.
Krüger, W. (2009). Das 3W-Modell: Bezugsrahmen für das Wandlungsmanagement. In Krüger, W. (ed.), *Excellence in Change: Wege zur strategischen Erneuerung* (pp. 19-44). Wiesbaden: Gabler.
Krummaker, S., Vogel, B. (2012). An In-Depth View of the Facets, Antecedents, and Effects of Leaders' Change Competency: Lessons From A Case Study. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 2012, 49(3)*, 279-307.
O'Connor, S. (2014). Leadership for future libraries. *Library Management, 2014, Vol. 35, No. 1/2*, 78-87. DOI 10.1108/LM-06-2013-0047.
Schmidt, C, Sackmann, S. (2014). Change-Fitness-Studie 2014: Eine Zwischenbilanz des Projektes „Change-Readiness-Evolution 2020". *Zeitschrift für Betrieb und Personal B + P, 2014, Heft 11*, 735-738. Accessed: 24.06.2015.
URL: http://www.mutaree.com/sites/default/files/Seiten%20aus%20B%2BP_2014_11_Beitrag_Personalpraxis.pdf.