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# Change management: 5 rules for building a world-class guiding coalition

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London: Chartered Management Institute has issued the following news release:

How the US Air Force built a successful change programme around a bus timetable, and other great examples of having a guiding coalition team to drive through change

Guest blogger David Ferrabee

In 1992, Bill Clinton's presidential campaign was shaped around a phrase that James Carville, Clinton's campaign strategist, had coined for the internal audience: 'It's the economy, stupid'.

The phrase was to become a constant reminder for a campaign that was steered by a dynamic team of change-drivers. Policies, speeches and public appearances were all driven by this simple idea.

The high-level advisers that drove the successful presidential bid were 100% clear of what needed to be done. And they made that simple and clear to all who came in contact with them.

Clinton's campaign team was led by what Professor John Kotter would define as a dynamic guiding coalition.

Like all effective leaders, Clinton knew that he could never implement new strategies on his own. As every change manager knows, it takes a powerful guiding coalition.

The missing link

All this might seem obvious, but it is frequently one of the weakest parts of a change programme and a key, early reason why so many fail. There is a temptation for programme leaders and programme

sponsors to "just get on with it."

The programme seems on track and the clock is ticking, so surely everyone will follow the logic.

Unfortunately programmes don't work like that. This lesson needs to be learned over and over again, often at great cost.

Breaking down this mindset is key to delivering a successful change outcome.

In the early stages of a change programme, everyone seems to agree with the concept of building, sustaining and supporting a guiding coalition, yet all too often it's never fully implemented.

Despite everyone's best intentions, there's a world of difference between understanding the need for a guiding coalition and actually executing on it.

The responsibility for this failure can be laid at many doors: leaders who are too busy; sponsors who get ahead of everyone else; impatient programme teams; programme managers who don't want to cede control.

There are many, understandable reasons for avoiding this step, but the impacts and resulting challenges to the programme are consistently dire.

Somewhere between understanding and executing

Put simply, the guiding coalition is an easy notion to grasp, but surprisingly hard to do well. Yet the success of a change programme hinges first and foremost on the quality of the team that guides it.

As a consequence, the composition, alignment and coordination of this guiding coalition is key. A misaligned, ill-fitting, uncaring team can cause the entire programme to flounder or grind to a halt.

How the Air Force does it

John Michel, the US Air Force Brigadier General who oversaw a 15-nation scramble to build a modern Afghan air force, understood this only too well.

According to Michel, the guiding principles behind his work in Afghanistan are as applicable to executives in a corporate setting as they are on the battlefield. He firmly believes that organisations that fail to create a shared language for change, and that don't spell out very well-defined priorities and shared measures of success, are often the ones that fall short.

This is central to the role of the guiding coalition: to ensure a common understanding, a common goal and agreement on the expected benefits.

His maxim is that the time taken to explicitly and implicitly communicate how you intend to forge forward helps squeeze out ambiguity.

Read about the 5 greatest examples of change management in business history

Yet very few attribute the success of a change management programme to the brilliance of the guiding coalition.

There are few, if any, white papers or case studies that focus on the transformative value of the team behind the change. The literature would suggest that people will jump on board the change programme and effortlessly engage in a shared ambition for change.

In fact, the guiding coalition are the unsung heroes of change management; the team that relentlessly ensures that change is occurring on a daily basis.

So let's take a closer look at what the ideal team should look like.

### 1. The Dream Team

Pulling together a team of people committed to changing the way an organisation operates requires engaging people from all levels, divisions and locations within the business.

Ideally, this team should reflect the requirements of the task, be highly committed and comprise people who can drive the change across all relevant constituencies within the company.

Diversity, too, is essential. Not just diversity in thinking, but also in approach.

The team needs to be composed of people who have strong vision and process capabilities as well as high credibility with others within the organisation.

These people will need to be influential in helping others adopt the changes. And they need to be trustworthy.

### 2. Change must trump 'business as usual'

The guiding coalition must include people who are able to ensure that the change is delivered over and above the ongoing 'business as usual'.

In most changes there is a requirement that business continuity is maintained and sustained. Too much management and too little leadership can cause an imbalance, particularly if we take the view that management is about a set of processes that ensure that complex business systems keep running.

Leadership, on the other hand, defines the future and aligns people with the new vision. Both are essential components.

So change needs to be driven within the machinery of the business, but the highest level of leadership needs to deliver, and support, a clear vision and objective.

### 3. A fine balancing act

This is why it's so important to assemble a group that's prepared to act as the guiding coalition.

Doing so early and engaging them in the process requires additional skills and subtlety, too. If you ask too much of your key leaders and managers, you will unnecessarily overload their agendas, and risk losing their interest.

However, if they aren't active participants in creating the plan and vision, they risk paying lip-service to the task of 'guiding'.

It's about getting the balance right.

The coalition should neither be stacked with work and meetings nor starved of vital opportunities to build momentum for the change.

### 4. Keeping engagement alive

Once the guiding coalition has been appointed and has contributed to building the plan and vision, they need to remain actively engaged with it. Without this sustained participation, the guiding coalition will inevitably meet resistance to change.

Buy-in can erode over time as other, seemingly more pressing issues arise, so it's important to set up a structure whereby the team can work outside of the normal hierarchy with a direct reporting line to senior leadership.

Likewise, encouraging the coalition to participate in off-site team-building activities is another way to coordinate team efforts and keep the group focused.

## 5. Keeping it simple

Final word to Brigadier John Michel: "If leaders aren't vigilant, anything from a military unit to a small business or corporation has a tendency to get unnecessarily complicated over time".

He advocates celebrating simplicity as a way to fight organisational entropy.

It was relatively easy for Michel to reinforce this point, as 98% of the air force he was training had no private transportation. They had to have finished for the day in time to catch the last bus in the afternoon.

This meant that he and his military advisers had to build a sophisticated, modern-day air force around a bus time table. It's a great example of guiding coalition being alive to the need to maintain flexibility, agility and adaptability.

The guiding coalition drives a change programme. And change ensures sustained competitive advantage and ongoing organisational success.

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