

## An Approach for Navigating Through Sustained Organizational Whitewater\*

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This article provides strategies for leaders to effectively navigate organizations through sustained organizational whitewater. *Organizational whitewater* is defined as turmoil caused by complex and ever-changing environments. Sustained whitewater is currently the landscape for many organizations. To lead in this complex and dynamic environment, certain strategies need to be developed and implemented. These strategies include embracing change; influencing behavioral change and organizational learning; affecting motivation and efficacy; developing organizational climate and social systems; focusing on organizational agility; implementing an effective conflict management system; and, finally, providing strategic alignment for sustained change/whitewater. Effective leaders need to take on the role of organizational change agents to develop well-functioning organizations in a sustained organizational whitewater environment.

**Key words:** change agent, conflict management systems, organizational agility, organizational climate, organizational whitewater

Vaill (1996) first coined the term *sustained/permanent whitewater* to describe organizations that were going through sustained organizational turmoil caused by complex and ever-changing environments. He described *permanent whitewater* as having five characteristics, stating: “Permanent whitewater conditions are full of surprises. . . . Complex systems tend to produce novel problems. . . . Permanent whitewater conditions feature events that are messy and ill-structured. . . . Whitewater events are often extremely costly. . . . Permanent whitewater conditions raise the problem of recurrence” (10–13). These characteristics are more relevant now than at any point in history due to the rapid and unprecedented advances in technology, emerging markets, and social changes. Vaill’s definition of permanent whitewater represents the sustained churn and turbulence prevalent in contemporary organizational life (Bierema, 2016).

For the purposes of this study, *whitewater* is defined as frequent and disruptive change within organizations that has the potential to adversely affect the

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\*To cite this article: Keebler, D. W. (2022). An approach for navigating through sustained organizational whitewater. *International Leadership Journal*, 14(1), 59–76.

organization's success. These types of environments are quite different from those that existed just a few decades ago; those environments were traditionally more stable for both business leaders and employees. Employees were known to be loyal to companies by remaining with them for many years, if not their entire careers. Today's environment is quite different, requiring innovative and blended strategies to address the complex nature of sustained whitewater.

### **Blended Strategy**

To develop an organization's ability to effectively navigate sustained whitewater, leaders need to influence organizational behavior, learning, motivation, efficacy, climate, social systems, agility, conflict, and strategic alignment. This may seem like a complex task, but if these areas are effectively addressed or influenced, organizations will reap the benefits of creating a highly agile workforce with the capability of rapidly adapting to changing environments.

Leaders who manage frequent and disruptive change need to develop and implement a blend of seven strategies to be successful: (a) embracing change; (b) influencing behavioral change and organizational learning; (c) affecting motivation and efficacy; (d) developing organizational climate and social systems; (e) focusing on organizational agility; (f) implementing an effective conflict management system; and (g) providing strategic alignment for sustained change/whitewater. These strategies directly address all five of the characteristics noted by Vaill (1996). When effectively implemented in a blended fashion, these strategies can diminish or eliminate the detrimental effects of constant change in an organization. Sustained whitewater should be viewed as an opportunity to develop an agile and effective organization better equipped to navigate through turbulent times.

### **Embracing Change**

Due to advances in technology, emerging markets, and social change, organizational leaders have found the global business environment more challenging and complex than ever. As such, there has been unprecedented leadership churn. Sherman (2014) noted that "leadership churn has been

compared to organizational whitewater. Although periodic leadership change can be good and result in needed innovation, frequent changes in leadership can create instability for the workforce” (156). The emerging global economy has introduced more financial and organizational pressures than at any other time in history. These less stable environments have caused an uneasiness in the workforce, with an increasing number of employees and leaders exhibiting lower levels of organizational commitment than in the past (Cappelli, 2000).

Today’s competitive landscape is one of hypercompetition, which requires a new set of innovative strategies to stabilize the organization and be successful. Hitt et al. (2017) defined *hypercompetition* as “competition that is excessive such that it creates inherent instability and necessitates constant disruptive change for firms in the competitive landscape” (7). Organizations have changed significantly over the past decade, creating workforce pressures and the need to develop new strategies to address growing organizational gaps (Keebler, 2015). As such, organizational leaders should seek to understand the issues and challenges associated with continuous change and pursue blended and innovative methods to embrace change while increasing organizational performance. To successfully navigate the sustained whitewater of today’s business environment, learning cannot be left to prescribed training courses or traditional degree programs. Many traditional school systems have left our current workforce ill prepared for the everchanging environments that currently exist in the global marketplace (Vaill, 1996). Change is inevitable, and organizations must strive to embrace it, or they are destined to fail.

Keebler (2010) stated that “an organization must train its people to accept change as a way of doing business in the twenty-first century. As such, change must be looked upon as a positive, not as something to fear but something to be embraced” (58). Organizational leaders need to provide insight on the need for change to ease their followers’ feelings of fear and resistance. Constant change provides opportunities for individuals to learn and grow, so continuous organizational learning should become a way of being.

By implementing these seven strategies, leaders will become change agents and reshape/transform their organizations into highly adaptable and productive entities that can navigate sustained whitewater. Transformation needs to be viewed as a tool to gain a competitive advantage. Those organizations that successfully develop and implement these strategies will be better equipped to manage through complex and challenging times.

### **Influencing Behavioral Change and Organizational Learning**

In today's extremely turbulent and competitive global marketplace, organizational leaders need to develop strategies to navigate their businesses and effectively manage their staff through these challenging times. One area of focus needs to be guiding or changing the behaviors of the employees, so that they will embrace change as an exciting prospect rather than an encumbrance. French et al. (2005) suggested that learning takes place once behavioral change has occurred or when a new vision and a way of thinking is provided within the organization. In short, a change needs to occur either within the individual or in their environment. Individuals have sophisticated social systems that develop in a variety of ways, which leads to the complexities associated in analyzing and evaluating them.

Bandura (2002) also noted that people have an evolved ability for social learning of knowledge, attitudes, values, and emotions through the social interactions they have within their environments. It can be argued that environment, behavior, and outcome are intertwined with one another. When one aspect is changed, the other two may or may not be affected. Bandura called this concept *triadic reciprocation*. Bandura (2006) noted that reciprocal interplay exists between behavior, cognitive, and environmental influences. In the triadic model, however, these factors influence each other bidirectionally rather than unidirectionally. Bandura (2006) argued that "in human transactions, one cannot speak of 'environment,' 'behavior,' and 'outcomes' as though they were fundamentally different events with distinct features inherent in them" (165). That is, environment, behavior, and outcome are interconnected, and each needs to be considered when developing policies intended to deal with sustained whitewater change.

### **Affecting Motivation and Efficacy**

To guide behavioral change in the workforce, leaders should understand their employees' motivations. *Motivation* "is the inner state that causes an individual to behave in a way that ensures the accomplishment of some goal" (Certo, 2000, 354). As part of the process, intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are key aspects to the accomplishment of a goal. Locke and Latham (2002) suggested that intrinsic motivators are not subconscious and that leaders can provide the motivators that enable followers to perform well. Leaders need to identify their employee motivators to have a high performing team in times of change. Locke and Latham's study "found that specific, difficult goals consistently led to higher performance than urging people to do their best" (706). Providing clear, but challenging, goals is essential to success. However, leaders should safeguard those employees by assigning obtainable goals or milestones.

Leaders have an opportunity to affect workforce efficacy. Workforce cohesion creates a more stable environment, one that can expeditiously address sophisticated issues and in which members contribute ideas of solutions to workplace challenges. Team learning transforms conversational and collective thinking skills so that groups of people can reliably develop intelligence and ability greater than the sum of individual members' talents (Senge et al., 1994).

Yukl (2006) suggested that there is a difference between self-efficacy and collective efficacy. He noted that *individual self-efficacy* "is the belief that that one is competent and capable of attaining difficult task objectives," while *collective efficacy* refers to "the perception of group members that they can accomplish exceptional feats by working together" (253). The constructs of self-efficacy and collective efficacy are very similar, but one refers to individuals and the other refers to groups. One might infer that the two are independent of one another; however, Wang and Lin's (2007) study indicated otherwise. They concluded that "this study demonstrates that self-efficacy has a significant effect on collective efficacy and discussion behaviors" (2263). Based on their study, we can conclude that self-efficacy does affect collective or group efficacy.

Further research into motivation found that individuals tend to be highly motivated when they perceive something will benefit them in some manner or meet their desires. Britt's (2005) research tested a variation of Herzberg's theory and confirmed this notion. He suggested that students performed better in training if they perceived it would benefit them and defined this form of self-interest as *identity-relevance*. He argued that "as expected, the identity-relevance of the cognitive task influenced motivation during the test. Psychology majors were more motivated to do well when they learned that performance on the test was related to their future success as a psychologist" (198). Britt proposed that if individuals perceive they will receive a desired benefit, their motivation will increase. Employees also consider the level of difficulty in reaching the desired outcome. If the difficulty level is too high, then it negatively affects an employee's motivational level. An employee gains the highest level of satisfaction when the goals are clear and obtainable.

Ponton and Carr (1999) noted that "one aspect of the psychology dimension consists of the learner identifying needs that serve as motivational inducements to cogitate learning goals" (273). There seems to be a logical connection between an individual's motivation and the desire for a particular outcome, even if the results are not immediately realized. Leaders need to learn to influence their followers' ability to expand their personal capacity to achieve the results they most desire. and create an organizational environment that encourages all its members to develop themselves toward those individual goals and purposes in accordance with organizational goals.

### **Developing Organizational Climate and Social Systems**

Jaisa et al. (2020) questioned whether organizational leaders can develop mutually beneficial relationships and partnerships based upon trust, respect, and achievement for common goals. This important question highlights the need to assess the critical role that organizational climate plays in the workplace. Burton and Obel (2004) explained that "climate measures trust, conflict, morale, equity of rewards, resistance to change, leader credibility and scapegoating" (135). Each of these elements can directly or indirectly affect the social system of an organization.

In many cases, social systems provide undue stress on individuals to conform to cultural values and ideas that are dominant in their communities and societies, as seen in countries around the globe.

From an organizational perspective, a social system may not foster a positive environment that nurtures organizational growth or learning and can be debilitating in a sustained whitewater environment. A leader should be responsible for meeting the needs the individual as well as the group. This will provide the follower with a sense of well-being and increase the level of trust with the leader and the group. Ellis and Fisher (1994) noted that “a leader who attends to social needs is concerned with promoting a harmonious and pleasant social environment in the group; this requires the leader to be sensitive to the group’s individual members and their interpersonal relationships” (198). Leaders should focus on positively affecting an organization’s social system and develop a harmonious and effective workforce.

Mok and Au-Yeung (2002) defined *organizational climate* as “a set of measurable properties of the work environment, perceived directly or indirectly by the people who live and work in this environment and assumed to influence their motivation and behavior” (130). These properties have been shown to affect individual growth as well as organizational growth. A research study by Väänänen et al. (2004) suggested that there is a link between the climate of an organization and employee absenteeism. The authors noted that earlier research on the same topic indicated that the lack of job autonomy was related to increased health problems and absenteeism. Absenteeism adds to the turmoil in a complex whitewater environment. According to Väänänen et al., “unfair managerial procedures and poor organizational climate have been found to result in several negative consequences” (426). Burton and Obel’s (2004) theory on organizational climate suggested that a negative climate may affect the health of employees, noting that organizations with a low level of trust create an atmosphere of anxiety for their employees. Organizations should try incorporating facets of a positive organizational climate into their strategic vision. This will provide a shared goal and address the characteristics of organizational climate.

Van der Vegt et al. (2010) investigated the relationship between team learning and team turnover. They concluded that employee turnover had a destructive effect on a team, which, in turn, affected the team's performance. Their analysis further suggested that regardless of the investment organizations make in training and educating individual team members, team learning—and subsequently, performance—function best when team members work together over time with little or no team member turnover. Employee turnover is a very real concern when organizations are going through sustained organizational whitewater.

In a whitewater environment, both the social and cultural aspects of conflict must be mediated. Costantino and Merchant (1996) explained that “organizational responses to conflict do not occur separate and apart from the organizational ‘culture’ or the attitudes, practices, and beliefs of the system and its members” (7). Organizations should seek to make their work environment desirable to a variety of cultures. As such, leaders need to develop a collective identity within their groups.

### **Focusing on Organizational Agility**

Developing an organization that is agile and responsive is key to success in a sustained whitewater environment. Harraf et al. (2015) stated:

Organizational agility is considered a core competency, competitive advantage, and differentiator that requires strategic thinking, an innovative mindset, exploitation of change and an unrelenting need to be adaptable and proactive. Agility thus becomes a business imperative for survival rather than choice. (675)

Leadership has opportunities to stimulate new ideas and innovation through the workforce socialization process. Filstad (2004) supported the effectiveness of role modeling in socialization and argued that socialization is similar to assimilation, suggesting that *socialization* is “the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills to assume an organizational role” (396). Filstad's qualitative study found that the earlier role modeling was offered to new employees the greater the positive effect upon the personal characteristics of expectations, experience, self-confidence, and competitive instinct.

Filstad (2004) also found that the greatest effect of role modeling occurred when it was offered to employees during the first four to six weeks on the job. In line with



Bandura's (1986) description of vicarious experiences, including role models, Filstad stated that "newcomers also turn to non-interpersonal sources, such as written material, vicarious observations and experimentation" (397–398). However, research has also found that newcomers emulate only those traits and characteristics they perceive as beneficial to their needs and interests. Leaders can help develop the workforce by affected what employees perceive as beneficial. Senge et al. (1994) asserted that "team learning is transforming conversational and collective thinking skills, so that groups of people can reliably develop intelligence and ability greater than the sum of individual members' talents" (6). This philosophy has the potential to increase productivity and employee morale within an organization. In part, leaders can create a dynamic work environment that is desirable to a chaotic setting.

Leaders may evoke change in organizational cultures through a variety of ways, such as setting a new vision, hiring new employees who fit the new cultural assumptions, and training and educating leaders on defining and implementing a new value system (Kramer, 2007). As such, organizational leaders should review the current cultural assumptions, then assess and redefine them to meet their strategic vision or mission. Effective leadership has an important responsibility to provide a stimulating work environment, one that supports new member acculturation.

### **Implementing an Effective Conflict Management System**

In a sustained whitewater environment, there are times of conflict due to the fast pace of change. As such, an effective conflict management system is essential to an organization's success. Some leaders seemingly disregard the sustainability of a positive relationship through effective conflict management systems, therefore, the continuous tension that the workforce perceives will continue to be counterproductive to the organization. Costantino and Merchant (1996) explained that "measuring the effectiveness of conflict management involves looking at the results of dispute resolution efforts, the durability of the resolutions, and the impact on relationships" (10). This type of analysis can be of great benefit to an organization.

Power plays a critical part in a conflict resolution and negotiation process. Deutsch et al. (2006) suggested that a fundamental dynamic within a conflict

resolution system is the unwillingness of those that have power to share it with others. This unwillingness to share power or treat others as equals may cause or inflame tensions in the workforce, as “failing to deal with others sensitively as human beings prone to human reactions can be disastrous for a negotiation” (Fisher & Ury, 1991, 19). It is important for leaders to understand conflict and negotiation processes and philosophies to be effective leaders in a sustained whitewater environment. Leaders and followers must value each other’s roles within the shared vision and common goals that drive their business relationship.

Power sharing does require the more powerful to see the benefit in power sharing. Costantino and Merchant (1996) defined this type of viewpoint as *interest based* and explained that “actually participating in interest-based alternatives to dispute resolution often leads to the deepest understanding on the part of organizational participants that they have and want a choice in the manner in which conflict will be resolved” (230). When the powerful understand that personal benefits exist in power sharing, they will be more inclined to buy into the philosophy. Deutsch et al. (2006) suggested that an organization’s climate and social structure influence power sharing, providing either a positive or negative perception to individuals on the value of power sharing. Deutsch et al. argued that an organization that values an empowerment philosophy is more inclined to power share, noting that “sustainable resolutions to conflict require progression from unbalanced power relations between the parties to relatively balanced relations” (134). The goal of an organization should be to balance these power relations to reduce conflict within their businesses.

The leadership of an organization is key to its cultural development. Developing leaders is a necessary and prudent step that will reduce conflict and enhance the productivity and effectiveness of the organization. Deutsch et al. (2006) stated that “cultural difference regarding power not only is the source of much cross-cultural misunderstanding and conflict, but it also significantly affects how individuals from different cultures respond to conflicts with others in high and low power” (131). Lack of trust can increase conflict within an organization, as such trust can be considered a critical component to any relationship. Knowing this, leaders must

also realize its frailty. A leader can build trust by valuing all employees individually; listening to their concerns; and addressing issues that are of importance to them. Leaders need to assess their effectiveness and seek to provide the type of work environment that is desirable to their workforce, which will further reduce conflict. Fisher and Ury (1991) stated it plainly: "Like it or not, you are a negotiator. Negotiation is a fact of life" (27). Though we would all love to have less conflict in our lives—both personal and professional—we cannot help but become involved in disputes based upon the very nature of conflict. Nevertheless, leaders must seek to become conflict resolution experts.

### **Providing Strategic Alignment for Sustained Change/Whitewater**

An organization's strategic design has enormous impact on work relationships, activities, and the resources available to leaders within many industries. Businesses that want to succeed in today's atmosphere of global competition cannot continue to work without the benefits provided by a well-thought-out strategic plan. Keebler (2020) suggested that leaders need to develop environments that are flexible and effective and that enrich their experience while not diminishing the intellectual growth of their staff. They should seek to reinforce the organization's vision and mission to help the group bonding process. These measures will help build trust and, hopefully, increase their followers' commitment.

In developing a strategic design for an organization, areas such as gap analysis and sustained organizational change need to be addressed. These areas affect work relationships, activities, as well as the resources available to organizational leaders. Thompson (1967/2010) stated that "the basic function of administration appears to be co-alignment, not merely of people (in coalitions) but of institutionalized action—of technology and task environment into a viable domain, and of organizational design and structure appropriate to it" (157). Businesses that want to succeed in today's competitive global economy need to address the gaps that exist within their organizations. Part of the challenge of diagnosing and then eliminating gaps is encouraging others (throughout all levels of an organization) to realize that those gaps truly exist. Block (2000) cautioned those who desire to enact a hardline expert role that they may correct a problem without teaching the

organization how to do similar work as further problems arise. Thus, a collaborative posture is encouraged for organizational diagnosis and sustained change.

In a period of sustained change, employees need to learn how to be flexible and rapidly adapt to change. Easterby-Smith et al. (2006) argued that evaluative enquiry is a critical element in creating a learning environment. They identified seven key areas that leaders must emphasize to change their organizational culture: (a) asking questions; (b) identifying and challenging values, beliefs, and assumptions; (c) reflection; (d) dialogue; (e) collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data; (f) action planning; and (g) implementation. By providing an environment that fosters these concepts, an organizational leader has the opportunity to realize the advantages that a learning environment provides. Merriam et al. (2007) stated:

A number of key points about organizational learning are present . . . first, it is individuals who do the learning, but in service to the organization, so that the organization can adapt and develop in response to the environment. (43)

As such, individuals should be recognized as critical elements of an organization's success. Management has the responsibility to lead the followers through this learning process, so they may understand the value of the decisions being made and ultimately support or reject the action (Ponton & Carr, 1999).

Today's organizations have employees with very different values and backgrounds. As such, there are inherent differences that add to the complexities of developing effective communication within organizations. An organization should seek to use these differences as a competitive advantage and communicate a shared vision that employees at all levels will embrace. A shared vision is one that reaches and motivates the employee base. A clear vision promotes a sense of community and builds a shared image and value that can effect change in its broadest sense. When employees feel valued, they tend to be more receptive to change. Yukl (2006) suggested that "leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (7). For an organization to successfully meet its

strategic goals, a shared vision is essential, especially within a sustained organizational whitewater environment.

Peterson et al.'s (2000) research study assessed *collective efficacy* (a group's judgment of their ability to perform a particular task) and some dimensions of *shared mental models* (models of the group structure, process, and task that members hold in common) in student groups working on semester-long research projects. They found that the development of shared mental models provides for group and organizational growth. Peterson et al. stated:

What these different concepts hold in common is the idea that group members typically have some sort of organized knowledge structures relating to various aspects of the group's situation, such as their task, their interaction process, their environment and their fellow group members. The development of shared understanding on these matters helps group members to predict future actions and work together in a coordinated way. (302)

The researchers discovered that that collective efficacy and shared mental models were predictors of performance for groups, and they were positively correlated. Further, a longitudinal relationship existed between efficacy and shared mental models; that is, higher efficacy leads to more shared mental models.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

An effective approach for navigating through sustained organizational whitewater needs to be incorporated into a business's strategic plan. Businesses are finding that sustained whitewater is the current organizational landscape in this competitive global environment. To lead in this complex and dynamic environment, the strategies discussed in this research need to be developed and implemented. These strategies are navigating behavioral change; promoting organizational learning; understanding individual and collective motivations and the efficacy of one's team; developing a positive and dynamic organizational climate and social system; providing focus on an organization's agility; implementing an effective conflict management system; and finally, providing strategic alignment for sustained change/whitewater.

Kee and Newcomer (2008) suggested that a critical function of leadership is to create a change-centric organization. This type of culture can comfortably adapt

to complex change situations. Changing an organization's culture involves good leadership, employee involvement, and patience. This is a route that leaders should take to stabilize their organization through rough whitewater challenges.

Gilley et al. (2002) noted that "in the role of organizational change agent, HRD professionals exercise the greatest influence on an organization's operations and outcome" (193). Employees with high self-efficacy should be brought into the organization and strategically placed throughout the business to help build collective efficacy. Organizations need to break away from practices of the past and insert processes that require higher levels of employee involvement. The processes need to provide added complexities that requires employees to think in a manner that will help them navigate these troubled waters to gain real and sustained advantages. Organizations need to value their employees as well as their ideas and embrace the creative tension that accompanies a sustained whitewater environment. Organizational leaders should seek to create an organization that fosters inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to openly share and take risks. Additionally, leaders should embrace creative tension as a source of energy and renewal for greater organizational effectiveness in a turbulent whitewater environment (Rowden, 2001).

As discussed, there are seven areas of leadership that need to be effectively addressed to avoid the negative aspects of this dynamic environment. As such, no single method will be effective due to the complex nature of a sustained organizational whitewater environment, so leaders need to be dynamic and flexible to effectively respond to rapid environmental changes in their organizations. Wheelen et al. (2015) asserted that "strategic management has now evolved to the point that its primary value is in helping an organization operate successfully in a dynamic, complex environment" (12). In today's chaotic environment, achieving this goal may seem challenging, however the types of strategies outlined in this research should be implemented and aligned with an organization's goals. An organization's strategic plan should be adaptive and somewhat flexible within a whitewater and chaotic environment, but stable enough to provide overall guidance toward the main goals of the organization. Organizational leaders should

try to understand and implement the systems and policies that help their workforce learn, adapt, and innovate.

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