Change is hard

Transformational leadership: What every DevOps leader needs to know

> *"Culture eats strategy for breakfast."*
> *—Mark Fields, Ford CEO, who attributed the quote to Peter Drucker*

Ask any executive who has lived through an unsuccessful change initiative that ran counter to the organization's culture, and he or she will tell you that Fields' maxim (the Drucker connection has never been verified) is a vast understatement. John Kotter, in his 1996 book *Leading Change,* boldly stated that in his experience, 70% of organizational change initiatives fail.

the years. In fact, Kotter stated in *Leading Change* that in an organizational change initiative, altering the culture comes last, not first.

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The DevOps dynamic

Understanding this dynamic is critical for leaders engaging in a DevOps transformation. Few can argue that, for most organizations, the implementation of DevOps is not as simple as adopting a new set of technical practices and tools. It is one of the reasons why Gene Kim's novel *The Phoenix Project* resonated so strongly with virtually everyone who has read it. DevOps offers tremendous promise for organizations that embrace the Three Ways, shifting from a silo culture to a lean-agile mindset focused on a continuous flow of value creation and delivery.

However, the daunting history of failures associated with culture change presents a barrier along the journey to DevOps. In fact, in a recent survey

The easy answer might be to simply maintain the status quo and avoid the rocky path of cultural change that is often sparked by a DevOps initiative. The problem with that strategy is that DevOps is far more than just another methodology or framework for technologists. Today's organizations face a never-ending stream of internal and external forces (market disruption from new entrants, global economics, geopolitical instability, currency fluctuations, changing workforce demographics, rapid advancements in technology, and more) that provide both opportunities and threats.

The ability to adapt and innovate rapidly in this environment has become a core organizational competency. Successful DevOps adoption leads to the changes in systems development processes, technology, and culture that enable the organizational agility required to gain competitive advantage in today's markets. This leads to by reduced time to market, less waste, improved quality, and innovative products and services.

The inevitable question for leaders and change agents launching DevOps initiatives is clear: How do we beat the odds and stack the deck in our favor to increase the chances for success as we embrace DevOps principles, practices, and culture?

Why leaders matter

The secret to overcoming the challenges of cultural change related to DevOps implementations can be found in the way leaders *lead*. The research I conducted as part of my own doctoral journey affirms this hypothesis.

My first objective was to understand the reasons why organizational change initiatives have such a high failure rate. Many studies cited factors such as poor planning, institutional inertia, poor communications, and unrealist expectations. The most common causes were overwhelmingly related to how

2. Low readiness for change.

3. Poor employee engagement.

Armed with this knowledge, I set out to discover what researchers have pursued as ways to improve how members of an organization respond to change. Many studies found that how leaders lead and how they engage others can significantly and positively influence employee response to change.

Much of the most recent literature focuses on one theory: transformational leadership. Originally proposed by James McGregor Burns (an autobiographer of John F. Kennedy), transformational leadership has spawned more peer-reviewed research than all other leadership theories combined. The four core transformational leadership behaviors synthesized from Burns and subsequent researchers are summarized in the following infographic:

Decentralize decision making
Unlock intrinsic motivation
Intellectual Stimulation (IS)

▸ Challenge the status quo

▸ Encourage followers to learn, be creative, explore new ways of doing things

▸ Decentralize decision making

▸ Expect relentless improvement

▸ Encourage innovative thinking

Inspire and align with mission
Inspirational Motivation (IM)

▸ Articulate a clear vision and intent

▸ Inspire passion and motivation to achieve goals

▸ Drive organizational alignment

▸ Encourage others

Develop leaders
Individualized Consideration (IC)

▸ Offer personalized support, coaching, and encouragement Keep lines of communication open

▸ Offer direct recognition individual and team contributions

▸ Exhibit genuine care and concern

Lead the change
Know the way
Idealized Influence (IIA/IIB)

▸ Be a role model; set the example

▸ Be a lifelong learner; gain the knowledge required for change

▸ Create an environment of trust and respect through transparency

▸ Act with integrity

Lead Others
Creativity | Growth
plan do adjust check
Vision | Authenticity
Lead Yourself

Figure. The ... of transformational leaders

implementing specific change management practices. Second, and perhaps most importantly, the behaviors of transformational leadership can be learned.

Take these proven steps

Organizations can take tangible, proven steps to increase the probability of success for DevOps and other change initiatives by investing in training, coaching, and mentoring programs for current and future leaders to help them grow in their transformational leadership competency. I have had the highly rewarding experience of participating on a team charged with developing and delivering such a program at a large federal IT contracting company, with exceptional results.

At last year's DevOps Enterprise Summit (DOES), Gene Kim was so intrigued by the implications of this research that he sponsored a small experiment based on the hypothesis that we would find strong transformational leadership behaviors among the successful DevOps leaders he had invited to speak at the DOES conferences.

Current and previous speakers were asked to complete a transformational leadership survey that is widely used by researchers. The results confirmed my hypothesis: These successful DevOps leaders consistently exhibit strengths in vision, authenticity, and a commitment to individual growth and creativity through empowerment and decentralized decision making.

Leadership is the secret ingredient

The implication is clear: How leaders lead is the secret ingredient in navigating the perilous waters of cultural change inherent in a move to

environment where leaders cast clear vision, lead with authenticity, and foster an environment of trust, the chances for a successful DevOps transformation increase dramatically.

Want to know more? Come see my presentation, Transformational Leadership: What Every DevOps Leader Needs to Know *at* DevOps Enterprise Summit London, *or post your questions and comments below.*

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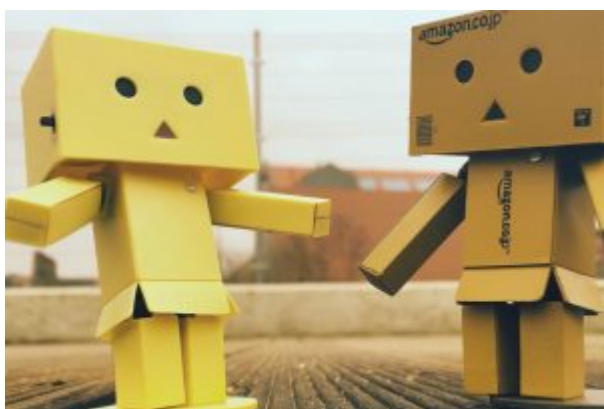
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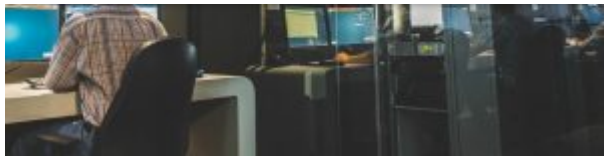
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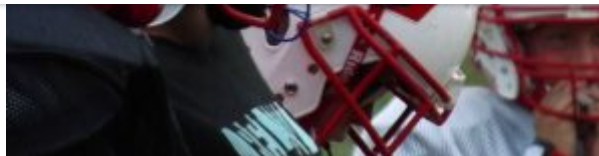
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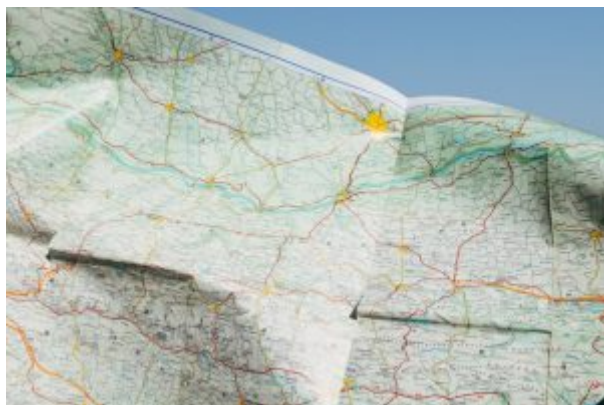
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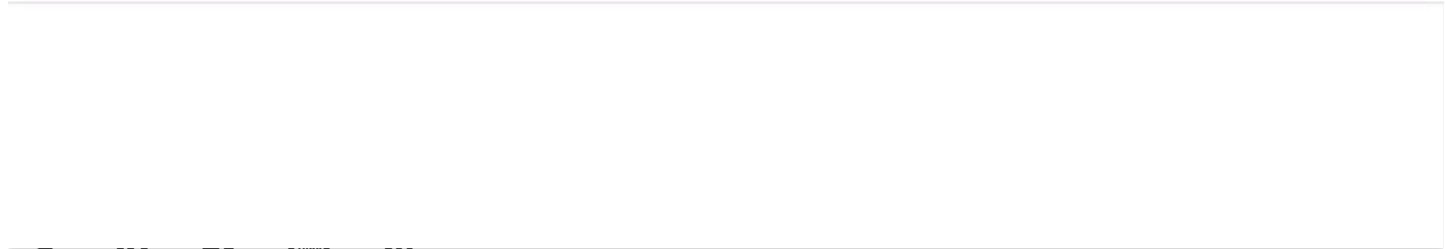
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