



Deborah Rowland

Paul Pivcevic

April 8th, 2022

Leading change post pandemic: belonging

0 comments | 53 shares

Estimated reading time: 3 minutes



Recent research reveals that creating a sense of belonging and collective loyalty is necessary for leadership success, risk-taking and innovation. Deborah Rowland and Paul Pivcevic explain the four ingredients leaders need for success: inner capacities, external practices, change approaches and ordering forces.

How was it, despite the **warnings** of a 'turnover tsunami', that at least 1 in 4 people left their jobs last year? Costs were estimated at £16.9 billion in UK and Ireland alone. Covid churn aside, what could leaders be missing? Could such turnover mean people realised they didn't feel they *belonged* any more?

Coming out of the pandemic we have had a 2-year lesson in change management, including a fast track into the digital age. Will its leadership **lessons** be heeded?



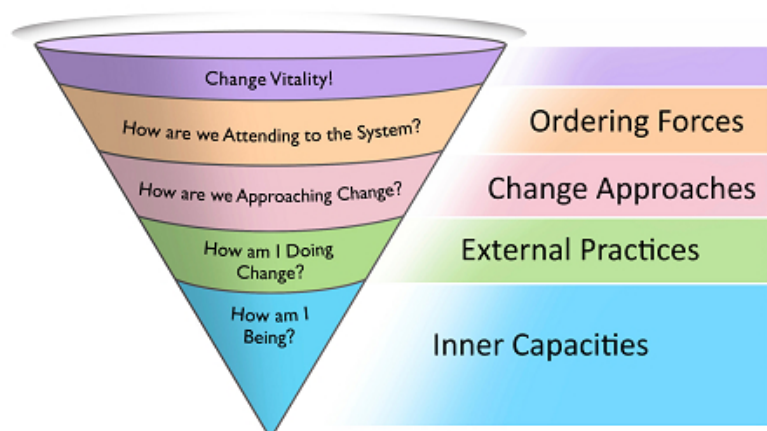
If you feel you belong, loyalty follows, and with that the permission for risk-taking and innovation



Our most recent research into the successful leadership of large-scale complex change, pinpointed a vital ingredient omnipresent in all human systems: our fundamental need to belong – to feel secure, included and part of something significant. If you feel you belong, loyalty follows, and with that the permission for risk-taking and innovation. On its own, leaders attending to the need to belong strengthens a system, but when they can weave this behaviour into the alchemy of practices we call ‘**Change Vitality**’, such attention takes on a crucial role in helping systems move into new futures.

So, how can leaders attend to this in a way that makes a real difference? Last year we embarked on our fourth round of research into successful change leadership, this time, pioneering an inquiry into the link between change success and how a leader attends to underlying system dynamics. We collected from 60 leaders around the world 77 recent stories of leading complex change across Corporates, NGO’s, Healthcare, Government Agencies, Faith and Education institutions. We coded these stories for a set of leadership skills contained within the Still Moving Change Vitality Cone and for the first time, examined what we call the ‘Ordering Forces’.

Figure 1. Change Vitality: four essential ingredients for leading change well



Sources: Copyright Still Moving Ltd 2022

Ordering forces

Drawn from a body of work called **Systemic Constellations**, the Ordering Forces are powerful systemic undercurrents that govern behaviour in all human systems. Keenly felt within teams, organisations, communities, yet not seen – just as the wind blows and we only see its effects – these forces are, to use another nature metaphor, like tides that can propel or inhibit movement.

The Ordering Forces comprise *time* – how the residue of the past and the anticipation of the future energetically impacts the present; *belonging* – how we form loyalties, and the norms we internalize that define our felt sense of inclusion/exclusion and security; *place* – finding the true hierarchy and sets of relationships and responsibilities that best serve a system's purpose; and *exchange* – the delicate balancing of give and get over time that builds cohesion and loyalty.

As before, we used a multi-rater panel to assess change success in each of the 77 research stories, coded the stories for all elements of Change Vitality, and then subjected the data to quantitative analysis, using T-Tests, regression analysis and model testing.

Our results were unequivocal. When a leader takes care of a system's health through harnessing the Ordering Forces you get more successful change. Moreover, attending to the force of *belonging* was the standout differentiator. In your mind, go back to a memory of being moved teams, or location, losing touch with people and ways of working you've become familiar or comfortable with, perhaps even overnight. It is an existential question: you might feel adrift, unwanted, questioning your value – independent of your abilities. *That* is the **primal** force of *belonging*. Change disrupts *belonging*. So, fostering detachment from previous loyalties might be a task of equal importance to a leader as securing new ones.

What's more, we also found that the leadership punch is in the interaction: how change leaders combine skills from *across* the different Change Vitality factors is crucial.

First off, leading change well depends on how you attend to the **quality of your inner state** – tuning into and regulating your mental and emotional response to experience. For example, turning anxiety into curiosity. When you then combine this intentional quality of *being* with skill in what you *do*, your outer action, you create even more effective change. For example, inquiring into unhelpful repeating routines. And both these sets of personal leadership skill – your inner state and outer action – are put to greatest effect when they are directed towards nourishing the systemic health of your organisation: attending to the Ordering Forces. Change flows far more easily when you don't just drive towards new outcomes but put your leadership to work on the underlying system that produces today's outcomes.

This alchemic mix of leadership skills explained 51 per cent of change success. That's a big swing factor.

Four Key Leadership Elements

To guide you in how you can apply this in your leadership, here are four key leadership elements that we found in dynamic interplay in all successful change, with some reflection prompts to give you a felt sense of each one.

1. Noticing – the inner capacity we call Staying Present.

Your entire skill in being able to lead big change well rests on paying non-judgmental attention to all that is going on within yourself (thoughts, feelings, impulses) as a clue to what needs attending to in the wider system. Your inner world is the pivot, or axis of spin of the Change Vitality cone. Successful change leadership requires intentionally *staying non-distracted* amid competing demands and allowing 'what is the case to be the case', accepting all that is here, however turbulent or awkward. Such discipline of curiosity centred stillness creates space for movement, overriding our default tendency to download and repeat habitual, "autopilot" responses. Noticing, therefore, widens perception and enables choice.

And this is crucial when attending to *belonging*. One leader in the research took his inner state of feeling adrift not as a symptom of his own uncertainty but as a symptom of how a department that was being merged into his felt like 'orphans'. With this striking systemic insight (his noticing), he set up a series of heart-felt "we need you, you have a place here" conversations – bringing much-needed stability to the organisation.

What's your predominant inner state right now in the change you are leading – frustration, joy, sadness, irritation? What might that be telling you about what needs attending to in the wider system?

2. Building shared purpose and meaning – the external practice we call Attractor.

Drawn from the magnetic notion of '*strange attractors*' in the physical world, such as gravity, this is a leadership skill that powerfully moves communities towards new futures. A leader will ask the question, who and what higher purpose is the change for? The link between *attractor* and *staying present* was palpable in the most successful change stories. Leaders who are most non-judgmentally present to all that is coursing through their veins can exquisitely tune into the story that is emerging for their people and the wider world.



His deep and visible loyalty to serve its (the institution's) higher purpose made people feel secure even through the turbulence of a significant restructuring



Such leaders act as a tuning fork for purpose and through that build *belonging*. It's hard to belong to something you don't believe in or understand. The leader we describe above who was merging departments rose above a need to be someone people follow, and intentionally put himself in service of what his wider institution needed to become. His deep and visible loyalty to serve its higher purpose made people feel secure even through the turbulence of a significant restructuring.

What's the emerging story you are tuning into to create purpose with others that will build loyalty to change, however difficult the cost?

3. Changing the now – another external practice that we call Transforming Space.

Noticing one's inner state to tune into and build shared purpose is then powerfully augmented by the skill of shifting routines in the present moment. Complex, sustainable change is not led by plans and PowerPoints. Leaders who excel at *transforming space* create experiences that live the change you are seeking. There's a clear link to *staying present*, as it is hard to spot and disrupt routines when you are not noticing. And doing in-the-moment system changing work adeptly attends to *belonging*: the unhooking from past loyalties, as well as fostering commitment to new ones.

The leader in the example knew he had to create a powerfully memorable lived experience to bring these two departments together – one that overrode established hierarchies and alliances to build fresh *belonging* to a bigger whole. To that end, on the very day the new organization 'went live', he brought every single staff member together online – almost 2000 people. From the outset he vulnerably shared his story of why he had joined the organization in the first place and what it meant to him to serve its purpose. The design was such that everybody was mixed up and able to voice, precisely modelling the new distributed form of gathering and intelligence sharing that was needed in the change at large.

In what way are you creating powerful experiences that model the change you are seeking?

4. Attending to the Ordering Force of belonging.

And so, we come to this most powerful undercurrent in all human systems, our need to belong. Successful change leaders make skilful and conscious effort to build or rebuild *belonging*, as well as paying close attention to potential endings. For example, allowing people to 'leave well', or enabling teams to disband in a restructuring. Our leader above recognised the need to belong very clearly, explicitly sending the message "in order for our organisation to be successful, I need you, I need your skillset, you are important to me".



Rather than saying don't break us up, why don't we have a conversation about why you feel

uncomfortable about being broken up?



He also noticed that one team kept raising any number of reasons why the change in structure would not work. He explicitly raised the issue, saying “what we are talking about here is *belonging*. You are a close-knit team and you are talking about a family....you did fantastic work, but is this construct right for what we need to do in the future? Rather than saying don't break us up, why don't we have a conversation about why you feel uncomfortable about being broken up?” A super example of all four skills!

Are you aware of all the transitions happening in your change where belonging might most feel under threat? What are you doing to bring attention to this?

In today's tectonic shifts of social, accelerated digital, geopolitical, and ecological upheaval, the pressure on senior leaders to effect change only grows. In such a context, a more effortless and effective way of leveraging collective loyalty is a valuable skillset to have.

The first step to understanding how to use the insights of this research can be to create a map of belonging for yourself within your organisation: what do I feel loyal to, for example, the geographic location, the functional team, the technical affiliation? Which one am I most loyal to? Which loyalty might I have to compromise, even betray a little to fully bring the desired change to life? This can help you step into the shoes of those you lead and support wise choices.



Notes:

This blog post expresses the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.

Featured [Image](#) by [krakenimages](#) on [Unsplash](#)

When you leave a comment, you're agreeing to our [Comment Policy](#).

About the author

**Deborah Rowland**

Deborah Rowland is a speaker, writer, and coach in the field of leading big complex change. She is the co-author of three books, including Still Moving

Field Guide: Change Vitality at Your Fingertips (Wiley 2020). She has personally led change at Shell, Gucci Group, BBC Worldwide and PepsiCo, and pioneered original research in the field, accepted as a paper at the 2016 Academy of Management, and the 2019 European Academy of Management.

2017 Thinkers50 Radar named Deborah as part of the generation of management thinkers changing the world of business, and 2021 HR Most Influential Thinker list.

**Paul Pivcevic**

Paul has been a consultant and coach to leaders leading large-scale change across Europe and the US for more than 20 years. He has worked closely with Still Moving for over 10 years. Clients through Still Moving have included RWE, Rolls Royce, the Church of England, and Santander Bank. Paul is also a social entrepreneur, founding a national organisation promoting community gardens, and a bioregional group around his home city of Bath that is interested in bringing to life a new local economy which is more connected, caring, just, circular, and land-based.

Posted In: Career and Success | Leaders | Leadership | Management

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *