


How to Communicate
and Lead Courageously
Through Change

STEER THROUGH THE STORM



LEAH METHER



“An exceptional must-read for any leader responsible for implementing change.”

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DEDICATION

To my family and friends who helped me steer through
my own storm of change while writing this book.

And to my boys – Sam, Callum and Lucas.

CONTENTS

Introduction	xiii
PART 1 WHY	1
Chapter 1 LEADING THROUGH CHANGE	3
More heart, less head	4
The Five Cs of communicating and leading courageously through change	7
Lead yourself first	10
Leadership is about people; management is about tasks	11
You don't have to like the change to lead people through it	12
Anyone can lead through change	15
The stronger your relationships, the easier it is to lead your people through change	17
Chapter 2 CAN'T THEY JUST GET ON WITH IT?	20
Change is challenging	21
Resistance is real and has reasons	24
Avoidance makes problems grow	29
Organisations don't change, people do	32
Dealing with the feeling isn't optional if you want your change to be successful	34
Chapter 3 DEALING WITH THE FEELING	35
The difference between emotions, feelings and moods	36
Expect emotion, prepare for feelings	38

MEDIA USE ONLY

EQ is the new IQ	39	Tell stories	106
Common responses to change	40	Own the message	107
There's no "one-size-fits-all" response	44	Be clear about what people can and can't influence	111
The reaction does not necessarily correspond with the emotion underpinning it	46	Give them options: people don't like being told what to do	113
Allow yourself to feel	49		
Increase your emotional vocabulary	50	Chapter 6 CONNECT WITH CURIOSITY	116
Emotional contagion	53	Get curious with yourself	121
What's it like to be around me?	55	Empathy is essential	123
		Empathy as a tool for de-escalating conflict	126
Chapter 4 COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP BALANCES WARMTH AND STRENGTH	60	Injecting empathy is simple but incredibly powerful	128
It starts with you	62	Get curious not furious	129
Are you in or are you out?	64	Curiosity in practice	132
Look after yourself	67	Ask great questions (note: "any questions?" Is not one of them)	134
Lead with warmth first, strength second	70	Curiosity requires the courage to accept feedback well	136
You're not a magician, you can't do it for them	73		
Vulnerability is strength, not weakness	75	Chapter 7 CHALLENGE WITH CANDOUR	141
		Challenge focus	144
PART 2 HOW	79	Challenge ethos/mindsets	148
Chapter 5 CREATE CLARITY	80	Challenge unfettered optimism	160
Get clear yourself	83	Challenge behaviours	164
Provide clarity for your team	85	Challenge group think and the squeaky wheel	170
Bad news is better than no news	88		
A four-part framework for communicating in uncertainty	90	Chapter 8 COACH WITH COMPASSION	179
What if you can't share the reasons behind a change?	93	The most compassionate people have boundaries	186
Know your audience: it's about them, not you	94	The straw that breaks the camel's back - change fatigue is real	188
Pre-empt curly questions with Q&A sparring	99	Make time to meet	189
Questions to consider (and answer) in your messaging	100	Different strokes for different folks	192
Emphasise the why	101	The dos and don'ts of good coaching conversations	195
Give it to them straight	104	Don't be tempted to problem-solve, sometimes people just want you to listen	199
Be proactive	105	What to do when they're not ok	200
Keep it simple	105		

Chapter 9 COMMIT WITH CONSISTENCY	206
More than words	208
Don't lie to yourself	210
Communicate early, communicate often	214
Consistency creates calm	218
Consistent doesn't mean fixed	219
Catch people doing the right thing, and tell them	220
Celebrate the wins - big and small	222
Conclusion	226
WANT TAILORED SUPPORT?	231
Acknowledgements	232

INTRODUCTION

This book is a love letter to leaders around the world who find themselves having to steer their people through the storm of uncertainty and change.

Think industry transitions, power station shutdowns, corporate takeovers, major restructures, funding cuts, government regulations, the impacts of natural disasters, pandemics and a changing climate.

You may not have instigated it, you may not be able to control it, you may not even know what it is yet – but change is happening anyway.

And you're in the middle of it. The one who must lead people through it, even though it may not be what you signed up for, it feels like there is no "win" in it for you or your team, and you're just as uncertain as anyone about what the future will bring.

You're outside your comfort zone, can feel the tension rising in yourself and your team, and you're unsure how on earth you're going to lead your people through.

Hell, you might not even be sure how you're going to stay afloat.

If this sounds like you, take a deep breath. Shake out your arms. Roll your shoulders. You're in safe hands. I've written this book for you: the leader who has to navigate the rough seas of change without losing people overboard or sinking the ship.

You're responsible for your team adopting or adapting to the change but you may not be the one leading the change itself.

In fact, it's likely you are the piggy in the middle – your board, boss or the government is driving the change, and your people are resistant, fearful and angry. Perhaps you're even resistant, fearful and angry too! You want to yell “Don't shoot the messenger!” every time you have to deliver more change news and you're copping it from above and below.

That said, you are a professional. Part of your role as a leader is to not only be the messenger but to also own the message of change. And, even in the face of the challenge change brings, you still need a functioning team. You still have to get the job done, deliver the goals and KPIs, manage performance and behaviour, protect the safety and wellbeing of your people, and get yourself through with your own health and integrity intact.

But how do you do that? How do you lead your people through significant change – whether it comes out of left field or is years in the making? And whether you're the one driving it or not?

That's what this book is all about. Helping you lead yourself and your people THROUGH change.

Let me be clear: this is NOT a book about change project management. It's not about processes, policies, procedures and Gantt charts. It's about people and how to steer them through the storm of change to calmer waters safely and pointing in the right direction. Less of the head, more of the heart.

It's not an academic book, rather it's a practical, plain-speak guide to help you navigate your team through the rough waters in a way that steadies the ship and keeps you on course.

Many leaders find themselves the bearers of change news without ever being taught the foundations of HOW to lead their people through change. They are essentially set up to fail. While the

upper echelons of an organisation will often invest in change management support for themselves, there is a gap in support for the middle management, team leader and coordinator level who actually have to get the change across the line. There is also a gap in the advice and support available for those facing change that is not of their own design, or is out of their control. It is those gaps that this book seeks to address.

I don't need to know the exact change you're going through to teach you the principles that will help you through. This book is about the foundational communication, leadership and people skills you need to support your team through any change – be it big or small. It's about feelings and emotions – but not in a light, fluffy way.

It will show you how to work with and respond to the feelings of your people in a way that allows you to influence, motivate and unite your team.

Who am I to write this book? Good question. I'm an Australian communication specialist obsessed with making the people part of leadership easier. I do this by helping leaders develop their “soft skills”, which are really hard. Skills like communication, emotional intelligence, collaboration and self-management.

I've worked with thousands of leaders and teams across the country who are experiencing significant change. Leaders and teams in the power, water, government, environment, health, education, disability and aged-care sectors, some of which are under great pressure and strain. First in my role as a news journalist, then as a corporate communications manager, and for the last 12 years as a communication and leadership trainer and speaker.

While my work takes me Australia-wide, home is in the Gippsland region of south-east Victoria. As a region, Gippsland has

experienced great change over the last 30 years, most significantly in the aftermath of State Electricity Commission (SEC) privatisation by the conservative state government in the 1990s.

I've seen what happens when change occurs in the absence of courageous, supportive, people-focussed leadership. I have seen the impact of industry privatisation, factory closures, lack of investment and major transition on the mindset, sense of self-worth, mental and physical health of a community when it's not handled well, and I don't want to see that happen again.

As I write this book, Gippsland is in the midst of another huge transition as Australia and the world shift to a cleaner energy future that is seeing our region's coal-fired power stations and mines closing. On top of that, we've got a timber industry in transition after the government's decision to stop logging native forests. Add in the global pressures of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising cost of living and you've got a region grappling to reinvent itself again for a positive future.

Gippsland is not alone in its challenges. Enormous change is happening worldwide on both a macro and micro scale. That is why I've written this book. To equip you as a leader with the skills to steer through the storm.

Steer Through the Storm is my second book for leaders and a companion to my first book, *Soft is the New Hard: How to Communicate Effectively Under Pressure*. While you don't have to have read one to benefit from the other, the two go together well. *Soft is the New Hard* influenced positive change in the behaviour and communication of many leaders around the world. My hope is that *Steer Through the Storm* does the same with my trademark practical, relatable, plain-speak style. I'm not going to try to impress you with big words, complex theories, dry facts and figures. I'm going to use stories, simple strategies and actionable advice to equip you with the skills you need to succeed.

Sceptical? Good. Sceptics are my favourite people to work with. This book busts the old management myth that you can simply steamroll your people through change and get transformational results. Instead, it makes the case for leading in a way that people want to follow.

But don't make the mistake of thinking that then means this book is soft and fluffy, or that the so-called "soft" skills taught in it are easy. Hell, they're the hardest part. That's why my first book was called *Soft is the New Hard*. This is tough stuff and you can't shirk away from it. The "people bit" is the hardest part of leadership.

Taking the approach to leadership outlined in this book – steering rather than steamrolling or shirking – is not just about being a good human (although that's not a bad thing), it's about steering through change in a way that gets results. It's about making your leadership more effective during the toughest times and ultimately making your job easier.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I've written this book to be read from start to finish, and also to be easy to dip in and out of because I know that as a leader navigating change, you're busy. That's why there are lots of subheadings, highlighted reflection prompts and actions, dot points with questions and tips, and scripts that you can use immediately.

I want this to be a book you come back to again and again. Read it through in full first and then use it as an ongoing resource and guidebook.

But before you read any further, I want to offer you an important piece of advice: do not try to implement all the strategies in this book at once. Improving your leadership through change is a big project, so start small and remember that developing a new skill takes time. As you would with any big project, break the implementation of the strategies in this book down into small, manageable chunks and then break them down further into tangible actions that are specific to you, your development and circumstance. Pick one or two things to focus on initially, get conscious of them, make a commitment to practicing them, and hold yourself accountable for doing them. Once you've got those strategies bedded down, look at adding more in. Skill stack your way to success.

If some of the principles that underpin this book are already familiar to you, the question I want you to ponder as you read on is this: *if I know it, am I doing it?* If you know these strategies, are you implementing them as you lead yourself and your people through change? Because knowing and doing are two very different things and it's the doing that matters. There's no point talking the talk if you're not walking the walk.

PART 1

WHY



Chapter 1

LEADING THROUGH CHANGE

Brad felt like he was out of control. The decision to restructure the unit wasn't his idea but as a team leader, he had responsibility for implementing it. And it did not go well. His people were angry and resistant, declaring the change a stupid idea and waste of time. His upper management were frustrated and impatient, pushing Brad to do more to get his people on board. And then there was Brad, caught in the middle with no idea what he was meant to do or how he was meant to lead his people through.

As he attempted to placate both groups, Brad felt like he was losing the trust and respect of both. The constant bitching, bickering and stonewalling was dragging him down and he didn't know how to get things back on track.

He wanted to throw his hands in the air and shout "What the hell am I meant to do here?"

If only he knew the answer.

Change is challenging and uncertainty is unnerving. It sends many people into a spiral that is hard to deal with as a leader. Your team may get bogged down in gossip, rumour and conspiracy theories. They can become resistant, angry, upset and distracted. That leads to you getting frustrated and your tolerance slipping. You may feel completely out of your depth and wish you could simply deliver the change message, have it accepted and implemented, and then move on. If only it were that simple. But it's not. "Just get on with it" doesn't work when you're dealing with the emotional beings that are humans.

MORE HEART, LESS HEAD

Leading THROUGH change is different to leading change but it's just as important. It's not leading the overall change itself (deciding what the change is and leading its implementation), or managing the change (systems, structures, processes). Leading through change is about supporting your team through the rough seas so they make it through in the best shape possible. More heart, less head. Even if you can't control the change, you don't like it, and there's no "win" for your people, you have a responsibility as a leader to guide your people through.

That's not to say that the project management processes of navigating change are not important. They are! You do often need systems, structures, processes, coalitions and working groups to make change happen well. This "head" stuff is important. But the "heart" – the leading emotion-driven people bit – is too often overlooked. You need a combination of both. There are hundreds, if not thousands of books out there on managing change, leading restructures and getting people "on the bus". I'll leave the project and process aspects of change management to them. This book is about the people bit.

Why is that important? Because organisations don't change, people do.

You can have all the processes you like, you can mandate a new way of doing something, you can change the org chart to reflect your restructure, but unless you can get your people to change, the change you're implementing will never succeed.

Simon was a leader in the power industry who found himself responsible for implementing an unpopular change to rosters in his team. Roster changes are notoriously difficult to get across the line and are often met with huge anger and resistance. This case was no different. Despite the fact that Simon didn't come up with the change (that was Simon's management), he was the one who had to deliver the message to his team and ensure it was implemented.

Only he didn't know how.

"I'm just the coordinator," Simon told me when I spoke to him about leading his teammates through the change. "What can I do? It's not my change. I don't like it either. I'm not sure what role I have to play in all of this aside from telling the crew we have to follow the new rosters."

Simon had never been taught how to lead through change. Like many leaders in the industry, he'd been promoted off the back of his technical skills and experience – not his people skills. While Simon had worked hard to develop his leadership over the years, when it came to leading his people through this high-conflict, high-resistance change, he was at a loss to know how to handle it.

His people knew it and took advantage. Simon's pre-start meetings quickly turned into aggressive free-for-alls where people demanded answers and point-blank refused to go onto the new rosters.

Brad and Simon's stories are not uncommon. Many leaders find themselves in a similar position. They don't have the skill or experience to lead change, and sometimes they don't even have the inclination. They've been instructed from above, which makes them feel like they are just the messenger. In these instances it can be tempting to pass the buck of responsibility onto others, but avoiding the elephant doesn't do anyone any favours, least of all you. You are not just the messenger. You are a leader.

That's why the sub-heading of this book is "how to communicate and lead COURAGEOUSLY through change". This stuff isn't easy. Dealing with the feelings of your people when they're angry, scared and resistant is not for the faint-hearted. It takes guts. Nor is it for those who think they can strong-arm their way to people's compliance. It needs a balance of warmth and strength, curiosity and clarity, compassion and challenge, commitment and consistency.

"But Leah, I'm not a counsellor or psychologist!" you might claim. That's ok, I'm not either.

You don't have to be a counsellor or psychologist to lead courageously through change. What you do need to be is human. You need to draw on your humanity to help people through.

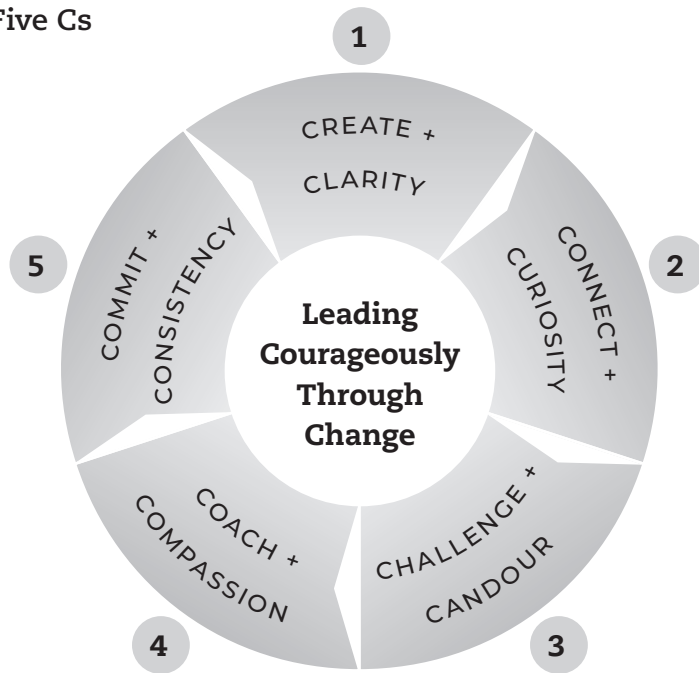
The framework I teach you in this book will give you the foundations to be able to communicate and lead yourself and others courageously through any change, big or small, in your personal and professional life. While it's not the be-all-and-end-all (there's no silver bullet answer), the framework will give you the tools to manage the wide range of responses and emotions that change often sparks. Responses that have the potential to create significant challenges for your team or organisation – even if you manage the actual change process well.

Why am I so confident in that? Why do I know the strategies in this book work? Because over the last two years I have trained hundreds of leaders in this model as they face changes in their industries and teams, from closure, to restructures, to government funding cuts and system overhauls. I've also used this model myself to lead through significant challenges and change in my personal life. I've walked the walk, talked the talk and bought the t-shirt. And now I want to share those skills with you.

THE FIVE Cs OF COMMUNICATING AND LEADING COURAGEOUSLY THROUGH CHANGE

This book is jam-packed with practical strategies for courageous communication and leadership through change but to make it easier for you, I've summarised the key elements in a simple and foundational model: five concepts, made up of 10 C-words that flow in a continuous cyclical model. As such, it's best represented as a circle. It never stops and is not strictly one after the other, although on first go, the order is right. After that first lap around the ring, all five elements should be key features in your change leadership approach. That's why I've called them the Five Cs® of Leading Courageously Through Change.

The Five Cs



Below I've given you a brief outline of each of the five elements so you have an overview of the entire model before we deep-dive into each step in the second half of this book.

CREATE CLARITY

Create clarity for yourself and your team. Get clear on how you want to navigate the change personally and as a group, clarify your key messages, and then provide that clarity to your team, explaining why the change is needed and why it's important to get through it well.

Even if you don't have all the answers about what the change is or how it affects your people, you can still create a level of clarity by being proactive, clear, concise and transparent in your communication.

CONNECT WITH CURIOSITY

Once you have created clarity, you need to connect with your people, show them you care, and get curious about their feelings and response to the change. Curiosity is an underutilised leadership superpower. It's about asking more questions rather than telling people what to do.

This empathetic approach builds trust and gives you a much greater understanding of where your team is at. You can then use this understanding to lead them much more effectively through the tough times.

CHALLENGE WITH CANDOUR

After you've taken the time to create clarity and connect with curiosity, it's time to challenge the mindsets, focus and response of your people towards the change.

It's only when you have built trust with warmth first that you can challenge your people in a candid and frank way and hold them accountable for their behaviour and performance.

COACH WITH COMPASSION

This is where 1:1 conversations with your staff and your influencing skills come into their own. Coaching conversations empower your people to find their own solutions amidst the storm of change and compassion ensures they feel cared for and supported along the way.

COMMIT WITH CONSISTENCY

Leading through change is not something you do once. It's not one conversation, one meeting or message. It's a process that requires commitment and consistency, repetition and reinforcement.

Many changes fail because they are over-managed and under-communicated. Change leadership and messages need to be instilled into day-to-day activities in new and varied ways.

LEAD YOURSELF FIRST

It starts with you. To be able to lead other people courageously through change, you have to lead yourself first. This was a key message in my first book, *Soft is the New Hard*, and it's where we need to start here as well. Leading your team through change requires an inside-out approach. In most cases, if a change affects your team, it affects you too.

Your emotions and behaviour are contagious. If you don't model the behaviour you want to see in others, how can you expect them to behave in a different way? This means you have to manage your own mindset, emotions and behaviour.

You need to focus on how you respond to challenges, even when you can't change them. And crucially, you must make sure you're looking after yourself with the basics of getting enough sleep, fuelling and moving your body well, and managing your stress levels.

Throughout this book we'll look at how the strategies apply to leading yourself as well as leading others through change.

LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT PEOPLE; MANAGEMENT IS ABOUT TASKS

Let's pause here for a moment to make a distinction between leadership and management. The two words are often used interchangeably but there is a significant difference between them that many people in leadership positions have never been taught.

I'm not talking about the titles within a hierarchy – different organisations do different things in that space. In some workplaces the “Manager” title ranks higher than “Leader” and in other organisations this is reversed.

What I am talking about is the different skill sets required for each. It's not that one is better than the other, it's that they are very different. This book is deliberately and clearly focussed on the leadership space, not management for a reason.

Leadership is about people.

Management is about tasks.

Managers focus on getting the job done – on systems, processes and schedules. A manager oversees a team, instructs people what to do, and plans the next steps. They tell more than they ask and rely on hierarchy and position to get people to do what they need.

Leaders focus on people. They empower a team by engaging people's hearts and minds, they ask questions, model the behaviour they want to see in others, and influence based on trust. A leader is someone people want to follow.

This book is about leadership and as Winston Churchill said: “The difference between mere management and leadership is communication.”

Manager v. leader: What’s the difference?

Manager	Leader
Focusses on tasks	Focusses on people
Oversees a team	Empowers a team
Focusses on doing things right	Focusses on doing the right thing
Plans and organises	Motivates and develops
Instructs and directs	Coaches and models the behaviour
Relies on hierarchy/position to get people to follow them	Builds trust so people want to follow
Follows the rules	Lives the values
Tells	Asks

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It’s crucial you understand the difference between leadership and management to ensure you bring both skill sets to the table while navigating change. When you’re stressed yourself, it’s easy to default into management. Systems, processes and plans are practical, logical and give us a sense of control and comfort when our sense of certainty is threatened.

Leadership takes courage. It’s messy because humans are messy. There’s no one-size-fits-all answer when you’re dealing with people.

YOU DON’T HAVE TO LIKE THE CHANGE TO LEAD PEOPLE THROUGH IT

Sometimes you have to lead people through a change you didn’t instigate and that you don’t like. It may have been imposed on you by executives, a board or a government. In extreme cases as 2020 showed us, it can be a global change no one has any control over, like a pandemic. You might be as resistant to the change as your team. That doesn’t mean that you can’t lead your people through it.

This is where you have to separate your own feelings about the change from your responsibility as a leader.

You’re allowed to be frustrated because the change is poor or it wasn’t your idea. That’s completely understandable. But when the change is difficult or unpopular, that’s when it’s most important for you to step up. This is when you really do need to “steer through the storm”. It’s when you have to make a choice about who you are as a leader.

This is the situation facing leaders in the brown coal power industry in the Latrobe Valley as I write this book. With power station closures slated for the next five to 15 years as the transition away from fossil fuels continues, 1,000+ people will be out of a job. And that change is happening whether people like it or not.

While leaders can’t change the closure decisions, they can choose how they respond. They can choose to lead their people well right up until the end, ensuring they retain staff, keep the plants operating, and employ as many people for as long as possible. They can choose to instill pride in their team for powering Victorian homes for more than 50 years, and see out these last few years with a sense of accomplishment at being part of history, much like leaders at Holden did when the Australian car manufacturer stopped production of its cars in Adelaide in 2017.

That doesn’t mean you can’t express your feelings about the change. But you need to do that in the appropriate forum – up the chain.

The time to argue your case and put forward your opinions is behind closed doors with your bosses. Not in front of your people. In front of them, you need to own the message.

Many leaders think that if they're not on board with a change they don't have a leadership role. Some abdicate responsibility and become absent. Others undermine the change by bitching and whingeing about it in front of the team at every opportunity. Either reaction does huge damage. By stepping back and letting 'it' hit the fan, you're leaving your team at the mercy of those driving the change, who may not have their best interests at heart like you do.

When unpopular or difficult change happens, your people are looking for a leader more than ever. And how you show up will be what they remember. Lead through change well and you will build great trust with your team. Be absent or shirk responsibility and people will lose respect for you and your authority.

REFLECTION

Think about the leaders you most admire. The leaders who have stepped up at times of great change, emergency or crisis. Either leaders you've worked for yourself, or famous leaders you've watched from afar.

Ask yourself:

- ▶ What did they do that made me see them as a good leader?
- ▶ What traits did they display?
- ▶ How did they communicate and behave?

And on the flipside, think of those leaders you've seen in action who have crumbled under pressure. Who have been bullish in their approach or absent at the time of need.

Ask yourself:

- ▶ What did they do that made me see them as a poor leader through change?
- ▶ What traits did they display?
- ▶ How did they communicate and behave?

ANYONE CAN LEAD THROUGH CHANGE

You don't have to be the CEO or leader of the change itself to lead your people through change. Leadership is not a title or position. It's an action and behaviour. You can be a coordinator or supervisor, have no direct reports at all, or simply be a member of a team, and still lead yourself and those around you through change.

Knowing that you can lead without a title or a position of high power in a hierarchy can give you a sense of purpose during great upheaval. Regardless of who you are, you can just do it.

Rachel's husband's family-owned business was under pressure when regulation changes in the logging industry meant new safety management systems had to be implemented.

The changes weren't optional. Either they implemented new safe work procedures and practices, and the logging crew filled out the required paperwork for each job, or they wouldn't be able to continue working.

But the workers were resistant. After all, they'd always done it the old way, without the need for all this extra "fluff and paperwork". Some were disgruntled and annoyed at what they thought was bureaucratic interference in their industry, and fired up whenever the changes were mentioned.

Rachel, who was a stay-at-home mum to two young children at the time, had strong working relationships with members of the logging crew. Overwhelmed by the scale of the changes, her father-in-law and husband pleaded with her to take on the role of OHS representative to implement the systems. She accepted, knowing that their default command-and-control style of demanding compliance wouldn't work.

“Their style was to just lecture, not listen, not care about what the staff said, and to punish anyone who didn’t do what they were told.

“I know you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar, so I agreed to take on the development and implementation of the safety management system. My husband and his parents were relieved – they didn’t really want anything to do with it.”

Rachel’s approach was very different.

“I used humour, friendliness and grace, coupled with clear, simple language,” Rachel explained. “I got up at toolbox meetings and explained why adopting the changes was necessary – if we didn’t do it, we’d have no work and we’d lose our contract with the Australian Paper Mill. I explained that this was a change being applied to the entire industry, not just us, and all our competitors were in the same situation too.

“There was a bit of eye rolling to begin with, but I listened to their frustrations and empathised with their concerns. I also encouraged questions. If I couldn’t answer them in the moment I’d say, ‘Leave that with me,’ and I’d follow it up for them. Because I was open, they knew they could trust me. I was approachable and relatable, and balanced being gentle with holding them all to account. The guys could see I was caring and also competent. Finally, after all of that initial resistance, they complied.”

The company’s safety systems were audited twice within the next nine months. The first audit found 97.5% compliance, and the second 99%.

“I was really proud that we achieved such a fabulous result and I shared the audit results and celebrated these wins with the crews. Because they took up the new procedures so well we were also able to secure an extended contract with Australian Paper Mill, which meant they had secured their jobs. It was a great outcome for everyone.”

REFLECTION

Think about a time when you’ve seen someone step up and lead through change, even if it wasn’t their responsibility. Perhaps you’ve had a supervisor who stepped up and said, “How can we make the best of this?” even when the boss was avoiding the conversation. Or a leader who responded with care, compassion and calm to guide their people through COVID lockdowns, even though they didn’t know what was happening or how long it would last for either.

Consider the impact it had on the team to see this person step up when others stood back. Leading when you don’t have to is often more powerful than leading when you do.

THE STRONGER YOUR RELATIONSHIPS, THE EASIER IT IS TO LEAD YOUR PEOPLE THROUGH CHANGE

Success is in the set-up. Ideally, you will have built trust with your team and equipped your people with the skills to be adaptive and resilient well before a change happens. If you don’t have a positive culture, leading effectively through change is still possible, but it will be much harder.

To increase your influence as a leader through change:

- ▶ Invest time in building relationships of trust with your team.
- ▶ Show your people you care.
- ▶ Take an interest in them as a human, not just a worker.
- ▶ Show your own humanity as a leader.
- ▶ Create open channels of communication.
- ▶ Encourage people to speak up and ask questions.
- ▶ Create an environment of psychological safety where it is safe to speak up.
- ▶ Share information openly when you can.
- ▶ Discuss shared expectations for behaviour.
- ▶ Catch up with your team members for regular one-on-one conversations.
- ▶ Recognise and appreciate people's efforts.

These things may sound basic – and they are – but I am constantly surprised by how many leaders neglect the basics of building a positive team culture and strong relationships, and are then surprised when they find leading through change harder than they expected it to be.

As author Dr Erika James said on the *Dare to Lead* podcast: “If you wait until you need something from your people or team, if you haven't done the pre-work to build trusting relationships, what on earth makes you think they'll be there in your time of need? But if you've done that work in advance, most times people will walk through fire to help you.”

You can, and should, lay the foundations for leading your people courageously through change now by working on the culture, trust, communication and behavioural expectations within your team.

See building and strengthening relationships as essential to your success, not as a “nice to have” optional extra.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I have outlined the difference between leading through change and leading change, as well as the difference between leadership and management.

You now understand that steering others through the storm requires leading yourself first, and that you don't have to like a change or be in a senior leadership role to lead your people through change.

You also appreciate the importance of building relationships and a positive culture for making your job easier.

But what happens if you don't step up and lead your people through change? What if you do resort to old-school management techniques and ignore the feelings of your team? What impact and cost does that have?

How are your people likely to respond? You'll find out in the next chapter.