

BECOMING AN INNOVATIVE CHANGE LEADER

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I. Introduction

The exact compilation of leadership skills that would guarantee success in business has been debated for decades. Is it a person's strategic thinking ability that defines their leadership or their level of emotional intelligence? That's not a debate that I'm willing to take up because it's the wrong question. The question that we should ask is this, what are the attributes that lead to innovation and change? After all, isn't that what a successful leader has to do over and over again? Don't they have to be able to identify opportunities to add value to the company? So how do they do that? And is that a task that is really limited to just the senior leadership or is it something that everyone single person at every level of the company is capable of completing? Just think about the power of innovation unleashed within your walls. It would be an intrapreneurial explosion like no other. Customer service would improve as employees naturally look for ways to improve how they serve their customers, whether internal or external. Costs would improve as people challenge every action they take to ensure that it is value added and done as efficiently as possible. Employee satisfaction would improve as their full potential is cultivated and they become more engaged in the company. And, profits would improve as both revenue and costs improve. That's power and its power that is available to every company by focusing on seven key attributes that contribute to innovative thinking by your employees. In this eBook, we will briefly examine these seven skill sets and why they are so critical to innovation:

Why Innovate?

Better Customer Service

Reduced Costs

Increased Employee Satisfaction

Higher Profits

What Are THE Key Innovation and Change LEADERSHIP SKILLS?

Critical Thinking

Problem Solving

Emotional Intelligence

Conflict Management

Communication

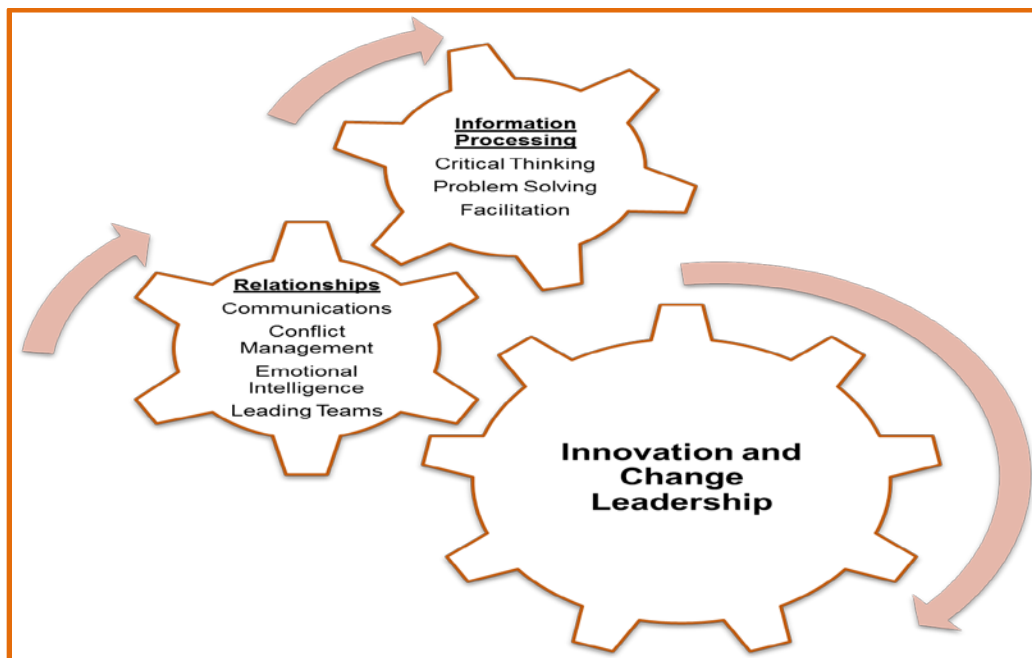
Leading Teams

Facilitation

1. **Critical Thinking** - a type of reasonable, reflective thinking that is aimed at deciding what to believe or what to do. Critical thinking requires imposed rationality, self-awareness, open-mindedness, honesty, discipline, and judgment.
2. **Problem Solving** - using generic or *ad hoc* methods, in an orderly manner, for finding solutions to specific problems. Problem-solving must be built upon solid critical thinking to be effective.

3. **Emotional Intelligence** - the ability to identify, assess, and control the emotions of oneself, of others, and of groups. Emotional intelligence is the intangible element of leadership that bridges the technical with the intrapersonal. Innovative change leaders need a strong dose of emotional intelligence to build and maintain relationships, to overcome their own biases, and to overcome people's natural resistance to change.
4. **Conflict Management** - implementing strategies that limit the negative aspects of conflict, increases the positive aspects of conflict, enhances learning, and improves group outcomes. When managed well, conflict can spur innovation. When handled poorly, conflict can torpedo great ideas. Strong conflict management skills require strong emotional intelligence skills.
5. **Communication** - the activity of conveying information through the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information so that the receiver **understands** the message of the sender. Poor communication will stymie even the best planned change effort.
6. **Leading Teams** - providing guidance, instruction, direction and leadership to a group (the team) for the purpose of achieving a key result. Leveraging diversity of thought and diversity of skills requires mastering the art of leading teams.
7. **Facilitation** - the designing and running of successful meetings. The proliferation of unproductive meetings has led many to swear off meetings. But meetings are not the issue, the poor management of meetings is the issue. An innovative leader has to learn how to get the most out of the group meeting.

When pulled together, these seven skills operate like a fine-oiled machine to keep the wheels of innovation and change turning.



II. Critical Look at Critical Thinking

Lack of time has become the scapegoat of today's business professional. We've become so accustomed to operating in crisis mode that we view any time not spent directly addressing a task as wasted time. If we are going to truly engage in critical thinking that results in innovation, we have to change that mindset. Spending a ½ day in a conference room solution-building or spending 1-2 days offsite working through a major change initiative may just be one of the most productive things that you do with your time. There is one caveat though, you must establish the right atmosphere prior to, during, and after the session. Why is "thought" time so valuable? Simple, if you give the right people time advance time to think, then get the right people in the room together, with the right facilitator, and the right corporate environment, you can accelerate your corporate strategy exponentially **Spending time engaging in critical thinking will:**

- **Decrease time spent achieving objectives**
- **Decrease resource waste**
- **Reduce the likelihood of project failure**
- **Increase overall productivity beyond the immediate project**
- **Uncover distinctive competitive advantages.**

. For critical think to happen, you must first engage people with the requisite knowledge, skills, and training. But engagement alone is not enough. You must also have a facilitator that understands the psychological aspects of collaborative thinking and cooperative learning to guide exploratory sessions. And then, you must make sure that your metrics don't interfere with the innovation process, that your environment encourages healthy conflict, and that group-think and overreliance on logic does not torpedo ideas early within their innovative life cycle. Walk a lot about facilitation in Section VIII, so let's focus on our attention on metrics.

You may have heard the saying "what gets measured gets done". Well, that fact can work for or against you. Metrics can supplant critical thinking by encouraging rote action to meet targets or metrics can supplement critical thinking by measuring innovation. If a person has tight productivity measures to meet with little discretionary latitude, then they are less likely to try out a new process that may cause them to temporarily miss those targets. But you take those same productivity measures and transform them to focus on productivity gains (trends) by department (for competitive effect) over discrete time periods and you now have some motivation for innovation. Metrics have grown in use as balanced scorecards, executive dashboards, and quantitative analysis gained ground in the business place. But under what context where these metrics developed? If they were not developed with an innovation mindset, then it's time to challenge and potentially redefine them. Care must be taken here so that you don't fall into these traps: irrelevant metrics, generic metrics, or overly specific metrics. Often, metrics are established that have, at best, an indirect bearing on the success or failure of a project. These metrics are

used because they were used in the past or were embedded in a standard somewhere but were never challenged during practice to see whether they truly added value. Over time, these metrics becomes “industry practice” so there use continues. Metrics also help contribute to non-sequitur conclusions because they are too generic or too specific. When metrics are too generic, a lot of assumptions have to be made about what they mean. This brings in subjective elements that include biases and many fallacies. When metrics are too specific, they have to be extrapolated to the broader matter with the same issues arising. A few simple questions can help you analyze your metrics (*see self-analysis at end of section*).

Unresolved conflict can be an even greater impediment to critical thinking than metrics. The impact of unresolved conflict on the critical thinking process includes impaired judgment and unproductive expenditure of time and energy. Unresolved conflict typically becomes emotionally charged. You become vested in being right and proving your point. Strong emotional biases are the bane to critical thinking. You become closed to exploring different perspectives because of the feeling of being personally assaulted. If you are carrying an emotionally negative stance toward an individual, team, or group, you are more likely to take a negative view toward options raised by this party even if the options have merit. Beyond impacting the judgment applied to a particular situation, unresolved conflict may result in endless debate around particular topics. These debates cost time and time is money. These debates also reduce morale and productivity as energy is diverted from action to endless analysis and political maneuvering. Over time, these maneuverings may create the perfect breeding ground for group think.

Group think occurs when there is a strong, persuasive group leader, a high level (or high desire to have) group cohesion, and an intense pressure from the outside to make a good decision. Under these conditions, it’s natural to favor consensus over a healthy debate and critical evaluation of alternative ideas or viewpoints. The danger with group think is that it doesn’t just go away. In fact, if left unchallenged, group think will take a natural progression that looks like this:

- 1) Decisions are rationalized in the face of contradictory evidence**
- 2) Peer pressure is exerted on any dissenters or non-conformists**
- 3) Complacency in the decision-making process emerges / discussion diminishes**
- 4) Team members begin to exert moral high ground arguments routinely**
- 5) Self-censorship by members occur to minimize dissent**
- 6) Illusion of unanimous agreement created due to lack of dissension**

Once group think sets in, conscious action must be taken to banish it. It will not go away on its own. Banishing group think that has occurred for years is not an easy task. It will take more than a policy statement or a few knowledge exchanges or forums to counteract. In some cases, it may even require a change in leadership in strategic places. You will want to count the cost of banishing group think carefully before you begin so that you don’t abandon efforts mid-stream. Abandoned efforts can entrench group think even further. Group thinks also has an air of rationality surrounding it. This makes it even harder to banish. However, if you routinely practice some of the tips (*see tools*) you may be able to make inroads.

Tools to Get Started with Critical Thinking

Critical Thinking Self-Analysis

1. Do you understand the outcomes that your metrics are trying to motivate or assess and how those outcomes create value for your company?
2. Do you have acceptable boundaries established for each metric and action plans developed for metrics that fall outside of those boundaries?
3. Are their unresolved intra or inter team conflicts within your organization?
4. Are dissenting opinions encouraged and valued?
5. Does your organization (or team) exhibit the signs of group-think?

Tips for Promoting Critical Thinking

1. **Self-Assessments:** Conduct critical thinking self-assessments amongst your team members and share the results. People often think they are more open-minded and rational than they actually are until they complete a self-assessment.
2. **Role play / role shifting:** Require people to evaluate a situation from a perspective other than their own. For example, have an Operations person assume a technology officer role when evaluating a particular problem or solution. To add more realism, the individual may even assume this role for a brief period of time (e.g., one day) prior to the role play activities.
3. **Scenario Analysis:** Impose constraints or assumption changes into the current situation and ask people to project how they would respond given the desire to achieve a certain outcome. Scenario analysis can be facilitated in many ways, some low-cost and some more expensive (e.g., virtual game simulations). If designed properly, scenario analysis encourages both independent and group problem-solving.
4. **Positional Debates:** Assign differing positions to team members and have them prepare to debate their assigned course of action. It's amazing how creative individuals can be when giving the license to influence and convince others without having to fit within current environment.

As the suggestions above highlight, engaging people in critical thinking requires getting people out of their cruise control comfort zone. You must intentionally turn-off the auto-pilot and force them to activate their thinking abilities.

III. Problem Solving Fundamentals

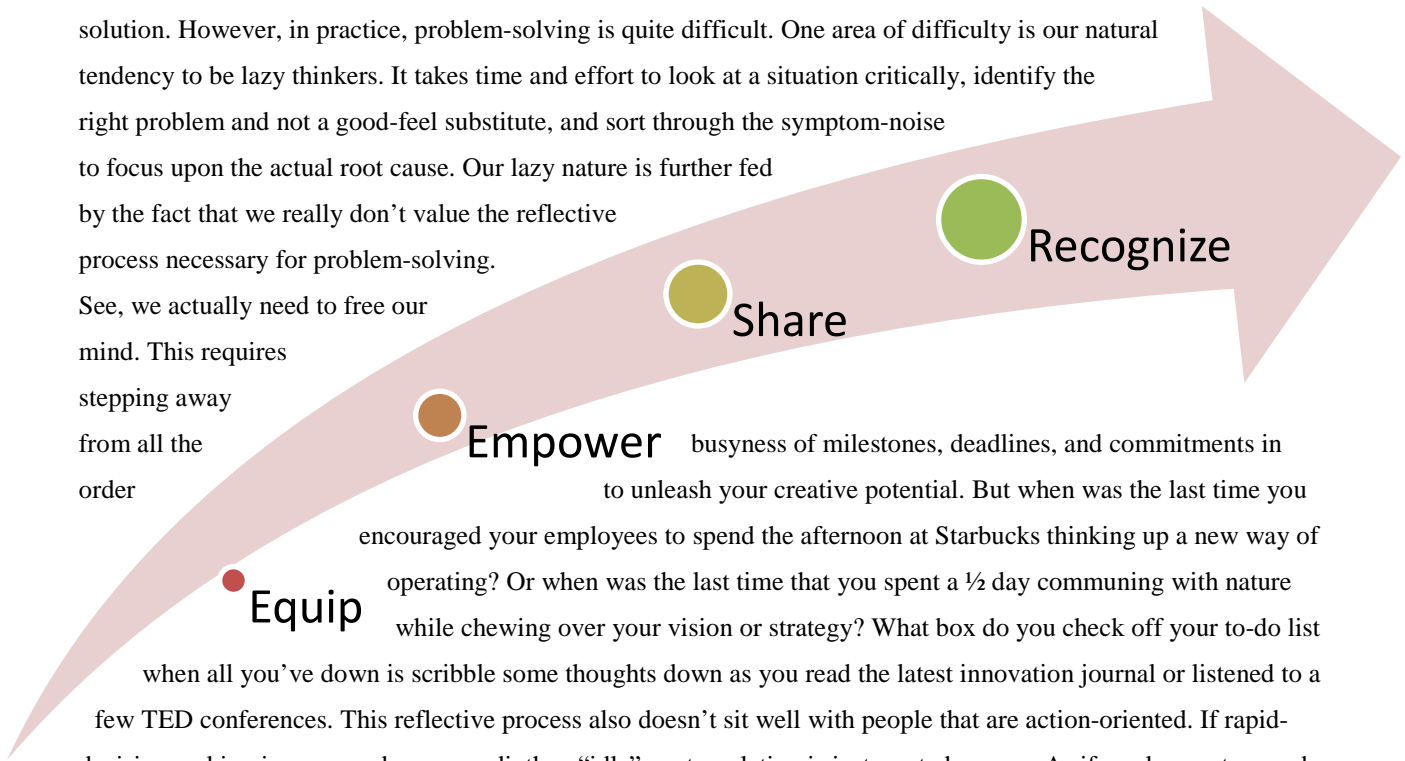
The steps to problem-solving seems pretty straight-forward, identify the problem, analyze options, and design a solution. However, in practice, problem-solving is quite difficult. One area of difficulty is our natural tendency to be lazy thinkers. It takes time and effort to look at a situation critically, identify the right problem and not a good-feel substitute, and sort through the symptom-noise to focus upon the actual root cause. Our lazy nature is further fed by the fact that we really don't value the reflective process necessary for problem-solving.

See, we actually need to free our mind. This requires stepping away from all the order

business of milestones, deadlines, and commitments in to unleash your creative potential. But when was the last time you encouraged your employees to spend the afternoon at Starbucks thinking up a new way of operating? Or when was the last time that you spent a ½ day communing with nature while chewing over your vision or strategy? What box do you check off your to-do list

when all you've down is scribble some thoughts down as you read the latest innovation journal or listened to a few TED conferences. This reflective process also doesn't sit well with people that are action-oriented. If rapid-decision making is your modus operandi, then "idle" contemplation is just wasted energy. As if our lazy nature and perceived lack of value weren't enough obstacles to overcome, problem-solving often also requires us to engage in a trial and error approach. The sting of failure just further lessens the commitment to innovative problem-solving. Given all of these obstacles, how do you unleash your problem-solving skills and those of your team so that they are innovation and not status-quo focused?

1. **Properly equip them.** Train them on how to think critically. Train them on effective problem-solving techniques. Don't assume that just because they are strong technically, they are able to translate this knowledge into innovation. Most people do not spend time thinking about how they think. Don't cut corners on training; it's one of the best investments you can make.
2. **Allocate free time on schedules.** People must be provided with the time to innovate. This time must truly be free and not spent in organized brainstorming sessions that often accomplish little more than encouraging group rote-thinking. This time should be directed but not by bringing people together. Rather, people should be given problems that they are expected to ponder.
3. **Have idea sharing sessions.** Different from brainstorming sessions, these sessions are designed to allow people to share the different ideas that they've developed during their scheduled free-time. The sharing of these ideas can be designed similar to a TED conference but should avoid the feeling of competitive critique. Questions that



help to advance refinement of the idea should be encouraged provided the questions are not back-loaded with judgment. For example, asking whether someone has considered the cost of xyz resources and it's potentially negative impact on the company sounds "strategic" but implies that you have already decided that the idea wouldn't work. However, asking them their views on how the idea will impact the company's use of xyz resources just furthers the thinking around the idea.

4. **Publish the most innovate ideas.** Spotlighting those actions you want to encourage motivates your people to engage in those actions more.

Developing an innovative mindset requires the right skills, the right environment, and strong relationships. Developing the right relationships with your employees is where emotional intelligence becomes critical.

IV. The Ins and Outs of Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Decreased turnover, decreased work-place accidents and grievances, improves sales results, increased productivity, and on and on. The business case for emotional intelligence is compelling. While there are minor variations in the definition of emotion intelligence, there is little disagreement in the core underlying principles. We all know how important self-awareness, social-awareness and motivation, change management (adaptability), self-control, and self-motivation are to our success as individuals and as leaders. That's why advice on raising our EI is abundant though not necessary actionable. Google emotional intelligence or emotional quotient (EQ) and the hits are numerous. You'll get similar results if you place stress management or controlling your emotions in search engines. The sheer volume of what has been written on emotional intelligence can be overwhelming. My hope is that you'll be able to wrap your arms around both the concept and the business application of emotional intelligence in just a few short pages.

Step One: Identify Your EI Bad Habits

We'll start with a key point often overlooked when emotional intelligence is discussed and that's power of habits. Habits occupy a critical role in our life because they allow us to get through the day without having to consciously think about everything. Imagine if you had to think about every movement and action you needed to take to drive a car every time you got into it. Or what if you had to think about how to boil an egg or how to make a phone call? Clearly habits make sense here. You just do it. Well, we often do the same with our emotional responses. If done often enough, our emotional responses become so habitual that we cease making conscious

choices about them. As soon as that trigger event happens, that habitual response transpires. It's probably easiest to see this dynamic at work in long-term relationships. You may even joke about it by saying that "they" know exactly which button to push. What you are basically saying is that your response is habitual. Push the button, get the response. So if they would just stop pushing the button, they would stop getting the response. Right.... Wrong. See, their pushing of the button is just as habitual as your response. So one of the first things we need to do if we are going to grow in emotional intelligence is to understand the bad habits that we've developed in our lives. So how do you do that? I could spend hours on the topic, but for this book, I will provide you with just a few questions to start the thought process.

Question 1: What emotional responses do you deride yourself about?

Question 2: If asked about your least favorable characteristics, what would people say?

Question 3: If you were asked what your most destructive stress response was, what would it be?

Question 4: If you could only change one routine in your life, what would you change?

Understanding your answers to these questions is the first step within self-awareness. But it only counts if you vow to do something with it. In addition to specific actions to address the answers you noted above, your road to improved emotional intelligence skills should include three general steps involved listening, flexibility, and conflict engagement. We will explore those steps in this eBook.

Step Two: Develop Your Listening Skills

Take a minute and ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) Do you sometimes realize that you haven't heard a word the other person has said?
- 2) Do you believe that what you have to say is more important than what someone else has to say, so you tune out when others speak?
- 3) Are you tempted to finish another person's thought for them because you think you know what they are going to say?
- 4) Do you listen solely to glean points that support the message you want to deliver and as soon as you get that lead-in, you pounce?

If you can answer yes to any of these questions (and many of us should), then you are guilty of EI bad habit numero uno - selective listening. Your chance of discerning the nuances that can help you better resolve conflict, effectively build and lead teams, manage change, or generate effective communications are slim. But there is hope. If I, a classic multi-tasking superwoman, can retrain my mind to focus on the conversation at hand and listen for

understanding, then so can you. **And the very first thing you need to do is get over yourself.** You need to view others as bringing just as much value to the situation and to the conversation as you. Once you establish that as your mindset, you can begin to use some **focus tools to really help you be present in the here and now.** Here are two easy tools to get you started.

1) **Reflection** - after I leave a meeting, I spend 5-10 minutes reflecting back on the conversation and jotting down (or audio recording, if traveling) key points. Key points include not just meeting takeaways but it also includes information that I learned about people that could help build a relationship and insights gained that may be relevant to other projects or situations. Then I try to send a follow-up note by the end of the day that includes something that I feel may be of interest to them based on what I learned. It may be a news article or a link to a website or information on other resources they want to consider. The point is that it shows that I was listening and that I'm interested. *Now, I'll admit that I sometimes fail on the same day follow-up and it could lag. Shamefully, it has sometimes lagged for a whole week. But I do get to it, eventually.*

2) **Mind games** - there are some great mind games available on line that improve your power of focus and observation. Some require subscription after the free trial period (e.g., www.lumosity.com) and some are built into social network sites. Neither take much time. Five or ten minutes, 2-3 days a week is all it takes to retrain your mind.

*Train your mind to
listen. Practice
reflection. Play mind
games.*

Step Three: Increase Your Flexibility

"Have it your way", "Instant Credit", "The Customer is Always Right". We are a society conditioned to getting exactly what we want, when we want it. We moved beyond not taking no for an answer to going to outlandish lengths to get our way. It's not that standing up for ourselves or voicing our opinions is wrong. In fact, it's very much necessary. The issue is that we've taken it to such extremes that we've started to believe that our opinion is right by the sheer fact that we believe it. It's another manifestation of our self-centeredness. Even if you've mastered listening, you can still fall short on the EI scale. Though you listened attentively and reflected on what was said, you may still dismiss what you heard. You may dismiss people through your body language, tone of voice, or your words. What are some common dismissal phrases?

1. I hear what you're saying but.....
2. Well, I still think we should though you do have some good points
3. We need to think big picture and not get caught up in the details
4. There are a lot of nuances here that need to be taken into account (i.e., your suggestion is far too simplistic, moron)

Are You Too Rigid?

Clue 1: **Agreement.**

If there is immediate consensus when you present your point of view, it's likely that you've sent the message that anything less is unacceptable.

Clue 2: **Silence.**

If people are not willing to present options despite repeated requests to do so, then it's likely that they've learned that doing so is counterproductive.

Clue 3: **Avoidance.**

If people make an effort to avoid you and intentionally keep you outside of the information loop, then they've likely developed the opinion that you wouldn't understand them.

These types of statements tell the other person that you've closed your mind to any alternative other than the one you've presented. So don't be surprised if the level of engagement is less than stellar as you proceed. See the challenge with collaboration and consultation is that you have to be willing to flex your stance. Anything less is just an autocratic style in costume dressing. Not that there's anything wrong with being autocratic. In fact, in some situations (e.g., crisis), it's absolutely necessary. However, don't pretend to be anything other than autocratic; that never goes over well. And, be willing to ask yourself whether you've become too rigid (*see sidebar*).

Now you may be wondering how you can both flex and be firm. You may especially wonder this in relation to negotiations, conflict resolution, and other situations where you need to take a stand. How these two come together is the epitome of emotional intelligence. It's a skill that is honed with intentional practice. Providing an environment for this intentional practice is one of the values that EI workshops and seminars should deliver. Attending such a workshop should be a future goal but, in the meantime, begin to notice how people respond to you in different situations and see whether you do indeed have a rigidity problem.

Step Four: Engage in Meaningful Conflict

You've probably heard the saying that "**bad news is not like fine wine, it doesn't get better with age**". Well, the same can be said about emotionally charged situations. The emotion involved, whether its fear or anger or pride or selfishness, is irrelevant. Tensions, left unaddressed, will escalate into conflict. And conflict, if left unaddressed, will escalate into confrontation. ***This is not news!*** Yet avoiding conflict when health outcomes are possible is still common within business. That's why we:

1. Postpone negative performance reviews or worse yet sugar coat the message
2. Let an aggressively outspoken person hijack a meeting
3. Delay making the uncomfortable phone call or send an email instead
4. Close the meeting without making the ask

But avoidance is not a strategy. Conflict, left unresolved, will erupt into confrontation and seldom will you get to a win-win resolution. Until you're convinced that avoidance is not acceptable, you won't change this habit. Difficult conversations are not fun and they are not easy, hence their name. But they are absolutely necessary if you're going to achieve your goals. And once you convince yourself of this, you're ready to begin the hard work of learning how to have those conversations with skill. Over the past 1 1/2 years, I've had the pleasure of participating in various life classes at my church that focus on this topic. We have used guides such as Listening

for Heaven's Sake, Speaking the Truth in Love, and Confronting Conflict (Dealing with Tense Situations and Angry People), to explore the foundation of open and honest communications. And one of the consistent threads running through everything discussed was relationship. Before you can truly bring resolution to an issue, you need to have a relationship. That's why developing your listening skills and learning to be flexible are so critical. Only through listening and adapting can you build the type of relationship that will allow you to abandon your avoidance strategy and confront the situation appropriately. So, we once again turn to self-assessment to see how you currently measure up in this area: Complete the emotional self-assessment call out and use these answers to define your EI journey. And don't just stop with your answers. Ask others what they think. Find out how people experience you by asking them for their honest feedback.

Question 1: How adept are you at pinpointing underlying emotions and issues as others talk to you individually or within a group?

Question 2: How honest are you about the emotions that you sense? Do you openly acknowledge them with your team or do you avoid them?

Question 3: Do you know how to deal with the thwarting ploys that are commonly used to sidestep issues (e.g., hijacking the conversation, silence, crying, etc.)?

Question 4: When was the last time you proactively engaged in conflict to spur healthy debate?

V. Mastering Conflict Management

I hate to be the bearer of bad news but there is no microwave way to resolving conflict. In my experience, successful conflict resolution boils down to the 10 items noted in the callout. The challenge with these 10 items is that they require us to actually concern ourselves with other points of view. If we are able to do that, 98% of the time we will be able resolve conflict successfully. So, why is it so difficult for us to focus on the relationship, shut up and listen, and put ourselves in others shoes? Why is it so difficult for us to broaden our knowledge base beyond our specialty so that we can be innovative and visionary? Why is it so hard for us to make those decisions that move us from where we were at to a new, unfamiliar place? And, once having done so, why is it so hard for us to communicate this to others so that they can buy into the solution? I haven't done clinical trials or extensive studies, I'm not a psychologist or a behavioral scientist; however, I have had the benefit of interacting with a wide variety of organizational cultures, societies, and groups and so I share that experience with you today. I will boil it down to one word --- "EGO".

10 Musts for Conflict Resolution

- Relationship
- Silence
- Listening
- Empathy
- Reflection
- Knowledge
- Innovation
- Vision
- Decisiveness
- Communication

We struggle with conflict because accomplishing our purpose and objectives matters more than accomplishing the other person's purpose and objectives. If we can accomplish both without much inconvenience on our part --- great, but if it's one or other, than the other has to go. We struggle with conflict because our ideas and our stories are much more compelling than anyone else's ideas or stories. We struggle with conflict because we automatically consider our feelings and emotions as legitimate and the feelings or emotions of others that are counter to ours as illegitimate. We struggle with conflict because our intentions matter and we want people to judge our actions based on our intentions. However, we judge other people based on their actions and are unable to see the double standard that is at work. We struggle with conflict because we don't want to have to let go of routines or concepts or theories that have become a part of our identity. We are the social media experts. We have developed a process for word of mouth marketing and it has worked for other companies. So, **why** should I listen to someone who is now trying to take this in another direction? Who are they anyone and what have they accomplished compared to what I have accomplished?

So to be successful at conflict management, you will have to eat a little bit of humble pie and realize that your views aren't always right and you don't know it all. You'll need to be comfortable with the fact that you don't have all the answers; your way isn't the only way; and you can learn from people from all walks of life. When you start to see the world as one big classroom where you are constantly learning about people; when you start to see yourself as a critical thinker and problem-solver; and, when you start to separate the issues from the person, then you are on your way to becoming a better conflict manager. **The question you have to ask yourself is whether you are willing to do the hard work necessary to get to that point?** If you are serious about it; then it's time to start clearing out some space in your busy calendar so you can get started. If you're not, then it's time for you to ask yourself why. What's holding you back? If it's a matter of timing, know that there is never a great time to undertake learning or enhancing a skill. Life happens. Life will always happen. If you wait until life settles down, in this environment that we are in, you'll be waiting a long time. So just get started. And to help you get started, we will examine the heart of conflict management – communications.

VI. The Heart and Soul of Communication

If relationships are the soul of conflict, communications are the heart. Because we are wired differently and

Communication Challenges

1. Impatience 2. Generational Acceptance 3. Inflexibility 4. Self-Control 5. Tunnel Vision 6. Unclear Vision 7. Pandering 8. Misplaced Criticism 9. Judgmental Attitude 10. Trust

have had different experiences, we naturally default to different communication styles. Some of us are more expressive in our style. We exude high energy and like to focus on the big picture.

Our communications tend to reflect our creative and artistic nature. Some of us are more sympathetic. We focus on people and relationships. People tend to think of us as good listeners.

Because we like to pacify, we may avoid conflicts, resist changes, and ask lots of questions. Or some people may be more systematic

in their style. We like to analyze the details. Give us the facts and don't pressure us to make decisions. Also don't ask us to break away from protocols or the de-facto rules. And then, there are the direct people. We like brief conversations that cut to the point. Give us the bottom-line. If we want more information, we will ask for it. Did you recognize yourself in any of those descriptions? What about your team-members or supervisors? An innovative change leader doesn't just understand his own style preference, he also understands the style preference of others, and he uses his emotional intelligence skills to bridge the gap. In an age of unprecedented technological advancements and epic miscommunications, this is not an easy task. While it's easy to point to the multiple generations in the workplace and place the blame there, the answer is not quite that simple. Yes, there are

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differences in how generations communicate. But some of our most damaging communication breakdowns aren't between generations but within them. So what's to blame for those communication breakdowns? There are 10 communication challenges (see callout) that must be addressed if we hope to have an engaged, satisfied, and effective workforce.

The innovative change leader understands these challenges, takes action to address them, and leverages the foundation of effective communications to craft her message so that it has the intended impact. Crafting the message doesn't just require an understanding of your audience; you also need to have an understanding of your key message and salient supporting points. You then have to organize that message logically. Finally, you need to invest the time necessary to present your message with conciseness and clarity. It takes more time to write a short, poignant message than it does to write a long, rambling message.

VII. Leading Teams in Today's Environment

A focus on relationships will ultimately build trust and trust is at the foundation of any successful team. So, if you find yourself leading a team whose productivity is on the decline, you need to stop and ask yourself whether trust could be at the heart of the issue. Budget cuts, layoffs, wage freezes, benefit reductions, major corporate change initiatives, and the like have taken a toll on a team's trust in their leaders. Maintaining trust seems to be a simple thing on the surface. Honesty, transparency, and accessibility are all character traits that we aspire to and if, executed upon, would seem to leave our trust shatterproof. Unfortunately, that's not the reality that exists within organizations. We often have information that cannot be shared for a variety of reasons. In most cases, we don't have insight into the future, it's unknown. Because of this uncertainty, we can't answer the questions as fully as team members would like or provide the assurances that they want to hear. On occasion, we may even find ourselves blind-sided and in a position of having to break a previous promise. Any of these situations could result in team members losing trust in you as their leader. What does this breakdown in trust look like?

- **An emergence of self-protective behavior.** Team members are quick to shift blame and slow to accept responsibility. Team members become defensive when their own work is subjected to productive criticism because it may jeopardize their future prospects. Personal agendas begin to dominate each person's focus instead of team goals and objectives. If trust issues are left unaddressed, team cohesiveness begins to breakdown. Team members begin to doubt the intentions of their peers.
- **An increase in unresolved conflict.** Differing viewpoints that at one point may have led to healthy debates lead to grudges or toxic confrontations. Team members become less willing to explore alternative possibilities. Grudges start to accumulate. Team members refuse to work with certain other team members.
- **Decreased collaboration and productivity.** Ultimately, the lack of trust reduces collaboration and productivity to a point that results are impacted. The team may begin to question whether they should even continue to function as a team. Morale drops. Turnover increases.

Rebuild Trust

When trust is shattered, how do you begin to restore it? How do you get people to buy back into the team's mission? There are no silver bullets here. Restoring trust takes time and focused effort. You will need to invest time in the following activities:

- **Creating shared experiences.** You're going to need to socially network with your team. Create opportunities for everyone to share at a personal level. No, this does not mandate happy hours. It can be as simple as bringing donuts or bagels (or a healthier equivalent) in one day a week

Do you have a trust issue? Have you noticed self-protective behavior, unresolved conflict, or decreased collaboration and productivity within your team?

and having a quick non-business related conversation together. It could involve doing a charity event together or an office book club or a weight-loss contest..... The possibilities are endless.

- **Being vulnerable.** This one is tough for leaders. Admit you don't have all the answers. Acknowledge the uncertainty of the future and talk about how you are coping with that uncertainty. Talk about what you do to replenish your energy. Explore strategies together for renewing passion, commitment, and focus during uncertain times. If there were situations that weren't handled in the best manner (e.g., poor communications), acknowledge them and then have an open conversation on what could be done in the future to improve. Also, discuss your own development plans so that your team members know that it's okay to acknowledge areas where your performance could improve.
- **Seeking Out the Elephant in the Room.** We all know that one person that will tell you what you need to here. Seek them out, find out the controversial questions that are on the mind of your team members. Then, don't wait for them to ask the questions, make them a part of your team debriefing. Address them directly, honestly, and succinctly. Let your team know that there is no topic that is off-limits.
- **Following-up and following through.** As you go through the previous steps, matters will come to your attention that you will need to follow-up on with others. Don't let these slip. Follow-up on every commitment that you make and report back to them on the results. Each follow-up will build upon your credibility and each failure to follow-up will take away from your credibility. Unfortunately, the take-away tends to occur exponentially. So keep that in mind.
- **Communicating.** Communicate, communicate, and communicate again. I can't say that enough. Remember, your team members are watching you like a hawk. They are looking for any clues that would indicate that you are not being genuine. So, if you fail to communicate something they feel they should know, they are going to assume the worst. Communicate until you feel like you can't communicate anymore.

In addition to these basics, you will want to take specific steps that indicate that you trust your team's decision making ability. So that means that you will need to loosen the reins, reward innovative thinking, and encourage commitment to achievement of the goals. Let's look at each of these in turn.

Loosen the Reins

Show trust in your team. Let your team have discretion over certain decisions. Set the parameters in which the decisions must be made and any restrictions / metrics that they must meet. Once these are set and communicated, get out of the way and let them decide. Don't second guess them, tweak them, or otherwise try to influence them. If you're not comfortable with this, make it a point of focus for development of your leadership style.

Reward Innovative Thinking

You get the behavior that you reward. What incentives does your team have, either formally or informally? Do they have a reason to engage in debate or are they better served by keeping their mouths shut and going with the program? Is the person that you spotlight as the "team member" of the month a "do-gooder" that never, ever challenges the status quo? If so, what does that tell your employees? Do you constantly stress meeting deadlines and

budgets such that the team may be afraid to highlight something that could take it off track? Do you make it a point to reward the “failure” that inevitably comes from innovation? You will often try several different things before you hit on something that works. Are people punished for the wasted time or are they rewarded for their willingness to try and to bounce back and try again?

Encourage Commitment

Employees are not nearly as disengaged as we think they are nor are they as inept as we sometimes make them out to be. I mean really, how many of you get up in the morning, saying “I wonder how I will fail today as a leader?” Yet, we do fail. We do make poor decisions. Most employees do not wake up saying, “I’m going to go to work and do as little as possible, so that my day will drag and I will be completely bored” or “I’m going to try to disrupt the team as much as possible so that we don’t meet our goals”. So if these scenarios happen, there’s something wrong. Something has occurred that is preventing the employee(s) from fully engaging in the teamwork. You need to understand what those are and take steps to counteract them. And looking at your expectations is a great place to start. So, if your employees are discouraged, I advise you to:

- Acknowledge any unrealistic expectations and set new standards
- Celebrate current accomplishments with no strings attached
- Create an environment where praise and recognition is given when earned (but don’t overdo)
- Reintroduce “play” into the teaming environment. Have some good, clean fun on the clock. Don’t make people give up their Saturday or evening to have some fun with the team. Do it on company time because you recognize the value in it.
- Find creative ways to introduce **healthy** competition into the team. Make the rewards fun and meaningful but inexpensive. Is there a task that no one likes to do, let the competition winner get a “pass”?

Of course, nothing reengages employees like meeting your goals. So don’t lose sight of that while you’re making it fun. And don’t sacrifice accountability for the sake of team building. Your employees still have a job to do and you can’t lose sight of that. Make no allowances for people that seek to evade accountability and responsibility using cop out phrases especially when they knew it needed done and that it wasn’t being done. If you hear a team member say something like:

1. That wasn’t my job, Bob should have done that.
2. I don’t know why he didn’t. It was obvious to me that it needed done.
3. You don’t pay me enough to do that.
4. If you want a receptionist why don’t you hire one?
5. I don’t have time for this.

You need to address the issue right away. Sometimes, laziness is at the bottom of it. Other times, pride is the root cause. And then there are times that self-centeredness is involved. While you must confront these root causes with

Proven Secrets to Leading Teams

- 1. Build Trust*
- 2. Delegate Authority*
- 3. Reward Innovative Thinking*

intelligence and compassionate, you still must confront them. They will not go away and they will destroy team cohesiveness. So put those EI conflict management skills to work.

VIII. The Hidden Jewel of Facilitation

Why is it that one of the most critical aspects of innovation is left to chance? Why would companies spend millions of dollars trying to establish an innovative culture, yet leave a key value driver to chance? It just doesn't make sense, yet I see it happen time and time again. After seeing this enough times, I began to analyze it more critically. I asked myself how and why? And the only answer that resonated with me was this --- leaders did not understand the nature of facilitation or the value that it should bring. In fact, leadership and facilitation were being commingled as interchangeable skills when they were not. Because of this confusion, they weren't assigning the right resources to the process.

Facilitation is a responsibility that should be taken seriously by both the facilitator and the meeting sponsor. The meeting sponsor has an obligation to understand the job of a facilitator, the skill sets that an effective facilitator should display, and the ways the facilitator should add value. Unfortunately, the assumption that if you are a leader or if you are a technical expert, then you're a capable facilitator, just isn't true. Facilitators add value in five very distinct ways that have little to do with technical knowledge or strategic leadership abilities. A great facilitator:

- **Brings light to a situation by revealing the hidden.** They help people see their blind spots but they do so in a respectful manner. Difficult personalities don't like this aspect of facilitation. However, great facilitators have learned to leverage the quirks associated with difficult personalities. They make them work for instead of against them.
- **Gives voice** to people that are typically silent regardless of the reason for the silence. Great facilitators will alter their techniques to draw as many people as possible into the conversation.
- **Provides cover** to discuss the uncomfortable (i.e., the elephant in the room). They are not afraid to spark conflict by raising uncomfortable conversation points.
- **Calls out incongruent behavior.** They notice any conflicting verbal and nonverbal cues and create avenues to safely explore these incongruences.
- **Adds objectivity and neutrality.** They are able to step back from the differing views and opinions and ask thought-provoking questions. For this reason, great facilitators improve a group's critical thinking skills. They break through the chains of group-think.

Why is it that some people are better at facilitation than others? First, there is a distinct psychological element to the facilitation process. So facilitation isn't just about knowledge, emotional intelligence, conflict management, communications, and all the other skills we just reviewed all play a role in the facilitation process. How do all these

skills work together to improve the facilitation process? There are five critical attributes that shine in great facilitators that are directly derived from the skills we just reviewed.

- 1) **Active listening** – facilitators must be great listeners. This doesn't mean just being able to articulate what is said but also being able to "read" the unwritten communication occurring within the room. They need to be able to discern the presence of antagonistic personalities that may prevent open and honest discussions. They also need to "hear" unspoken biases and frames of reference that may be limiting the creative process. The ability to actively listen to this depth must be cultivated. It will not develop by chance.
- 2) **Associative thinking** – facilitators must be good at identifying relationships between seemingly unrelated bits of information. To do this, they have to be comfortable with abstract analysis. They need to look for the concepts that run through the spoken words.
- 3) **Inquisitive Mindset** – facilitators must be willing to probe deeply without expending excessive energy chasing rabbit holes. They have to keep digging until they are able to pull out the "concepts" but not let the exploratory process get off track. Many techniques have been deployed to guide your inquiry process including the Five

Do you have what it takes to be a good facilitator? Are you skilled at working a room? Are you observant? Are you objective? Are you willing to be the bad guy? Are you comfortable challenging people? Do you listen well? Are you inquisitive? Are you an active learning? Are you an abstract thinker? Can you synthesize information well?

Whys, the Six Thinking Hats, the Reframing Matrix, and McKinsey's 7S model. However, these tools are not sufficient by themselves. Facilitators must also understand how to control the inquiry process.

- 4) **Expanded Perspective** – Good facilitators are able to expand the perspective of the people in the room. They should be able to add content or "food for thought" to supplement the points raised by the group.
- 5) **Baseline Knowledge** – facilitators need to have some level of knowledge about the topic they are facilitating in order to provide an expanded perspective to the group. However, they do not need to be a subject matter expert (SMEs). In fact, many SMEs make horrible facilitators because they hijack the thought process. They contribute too much information and short circuit the discovery process. What constitutes the right level of baseline knowledge is a subjective decision that will vary with the desired outcomes. The session planner will need to determine what level of knowledge will help the associative thinking and probing processes. So the lesson here is to be wary of someone who feels they can facilitate any and every discussion and also be wary of someone who is a technical expert but has no prior facilitation experience or training. Good facilitators know their limitations.

That's it. I think that is about as straightforward of a list as you can get. So the next time you ask a person to facilitate a meeting, make sure you question whether these attributes or skills are present. If they are not, you may want to rethink whether that individual is the best person to facilitate your session. You have too much at stake to leave this to chance!

IX. Closing

Now that we've examined each of the seven foundational skills in more detail, let's jump back to the topic of innovation and change leadership. Leaders that exhibit each of these skills are better able to lead their organization through change because they can:

- Use critical thinking and problem solving skills to craft a vision of a future state, develop a plan for moving from the current state to the future state, and solve the problems that will inevitably arise as you try to move from one to the other.
- Use emotional intelligence to understand how people are experiencing change and develop a response that appropriately addresses both their spoken and unspoken needs.
- Use communication skills to rally people around the vision, manage stakeholders throughout the change process, motivate and encourage people on the front-line of change, and emerge from the change with strengthened relationships.
- Use conflict management and team leadership skills to develop and maintain the cohesiveness, accountability, and leverage necessary to implement the changes. As conflicts arise, they solve them swiftly and effectively in a manner that propels the group forward toward the business objectives, strengthens relationships, and enhances the company's brand.
- Use facilitation skills to move toward group consensus throughout the innovation and change process and to supplement problem solving and conflict management processes.

Being an innovative change leader may seem like a tall order. It is certainly not something that will happen by chance. You will need to be intentional about developing and applying the skills necessary to be effective in this role. You will need to have the patience to try and fail and try again. Are you ready to be that type of leader?

For more on innovative leadership, explore Petra's blogs and podcasts, schedule a free consultation on potential formal and informal training opportunities, and sign-up for Petra's monthly newsletters.

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