

## **When Turtles Try to Change Organizations**

**By: Karen Foster, Ph.D. & Jeff Freedman, MSOD**

People are counting on you ... lots of people, especially when it comes to leading large-scale organizational change. As a leader, you know that change initiatives can be challenging at best ... and nearly 70% of them fail to deliver intended outcomes.

Lack of communication and effective organizational change management contribute to this dilemma. People, who are targets of the change, must first hear and understand before they act. A significant underlying motivation for their actions is confidence in their leadership. Hesitant leaders impede organizational change, while leaders who demonstrate conviction, authenticity, and “managerial courage” successfully facilitate change and get superior results.

The recent economic recession has impacted more than GNP, productivity, and unemployment figures. It has fostered excessive risk aversion. Rather than acting as effective change leaders, far too many executives are acting like turtles in defensive mode, aka, Turtling. They avoid sticking their necks out rather than taking a stand, communicating, and doing the right thing. Though they may act with intentionality, their reluctance slows them down. The unintended consequences are many – credibility, reputation, and political capital are affected. Employees can become cynical, disengaged, and leave. Ultimately, the executive may fail to achieve the desired impact of the change effort.

A better way for leading change exists. With so much at stake in today’s competitive landscape, it pays to notice and quickly address the early warning signs of Turtling – be it in yourself or others. Outlined below are practical ideas, tools, and tips you can use to identify and minimize unproductive Turtling behavior as you embark on your change initiatives.

## Turtles

Turtles and Turtling behavior exist at the highest levels of leadership. Bill, the EVP of a \$350 million business unit in a Fortune 500 company, was seen as a high potential leader who had frequently been promoted throughout his 25 year career. He led an organization of nearly 2,000 people in multiple sites across the United States. Bill was extremely smart, likeable, and driven. Bill's fast-track career had progressed well.

Executives may advance successfully until they reach a point of overwhelming reluctance to bear the conviction of leadership. This can occur when there is a significant change in the environment, or CEO leadership demands higher performance leading to intense visibility. In some cases, these changes may elicit strong emotions, and one may question leadership, one's self or one's decisions.

At these times Turtling behavior may become more evident.

So, what is Turtling? It is a(n):

- Unconscious reaction to stress and anxiety
- Natural response to a threat – perceived or real
- Effort to avoid rocking the boat or jeopardizing political capital
- Mechanism employed to prevent taking the fall for poor performance
- Attempt to dodge risk and difficult encounters with others

In Bill's case, the recession caused dramatic changes to the business. The CEO began to pressure Bill for significantly improved results in the first quarter. Bill needed to transform his organization from a collection of regional entities into a cohesive global operation. Bill's imperatives were to: Improve quality by 20%, keep costs flat year-over-year, and reduce cycle time by 30% to meet new customer requirements. Significant actions were required: Realigning the organizational structure, redesigning core processes, and creating a shared culture.

Bill's leadership team came up with a workable plan. However, Bill became increasingly concerned about the CEO's direction. Bill attempted to persuade the CEO's perspective and decisions, but felt unsuccessful as changes were mandated. These circumstances provoked a strong reaction within Bill, and he began to question the company's leadership, himself, and his decisions.

### ***Turtling Hinders Org. Change***

The CEO and several key peers disagreed with Bill's plan. They stated concerns about the impact of his proposed changes. Everyone was on edge. "Delivering results at all costs" became the unspoken mantra. In the past, Bill would have addressed the scrutiny directed his way head-on. This time, however, the pressure felt greater, and his (unconscious) reaction was Turtling behavior. He:

- Avoided further confrontation with the CEO
- Began micro-managing his senior team
- Tightly controlled communications

Bill no longer felt able to take a tough stand, or to say what needed to be said to influence the situation. Bill later admitted he "dove for cover" and retreated from his leadership role, staying removed from the organization and emotionally disengaged from his senior team.

Bill's Turtling behavior occurred at the beginning of the change process as he was asking himself:

- Does this change make good sense?
- Do I stand to gain or lose position?
- What gamesmanship will this churn up?

- Am I prepared to do battle and survive?
- After the change, will I be as valuable as I am in the status quo

### *Courage or Safety*

As an executive charged with leading change, Bill had choices to make. He could be courageous or complacent, take personal responsibility or avoid conflict, speak up and communicate a compelling vision or inflict change and fight resistance. Change leadership is all about increasing employee commitment to the new vision, while

decreasing commitment to the status quo.

Bill knew that leading successful change efforts requires conviction, authenticity, and managerial courage. Yet this time, the pressure to deliver was greater than ever. Bill fell into Turtling behaviors, triggered by several of the following emotional catalysts:

- Fear of losing or being wrong
- Fear of rejection or being exposed
- Fear of emotional discomfort or criticism
- Loss of control or ambivalence about his role, the work, or the change
- Low energy, passion, or burn-out

Bill was conflicted, and could not truthfully explain the situation to his staff. He saw how trust was being eroded. There was a sizable gap between his personal values and those of the company officers. Recent actions by the CEO and some of his peers seemed contrived, out of integrity, and inconsistent with stated values – especially those related to customers and employees.

Initially, Bill outwardly appeared to be onboard. However over time, Bill's integrity was challenged. He feared having to take future arbitrary actions in-line with the new and unstated organization values. Bill did not fundamentally believe the changes or the new values were right.

### **Are You a Turtle?**

Do you recognize yourself in the description thus far? Are you questioning your ability to stay through the change effort? The following behaviors suggest you might be Turtling:

- Difficulty following through on commitments
- Hesitancy taking action when dealing with difficult situations
- Sidestepping conflict, not delivering bad news, and not giving direct feedback
- Perfectionism or intellectual elitism
- Withholding recognition or blaming others
- Bullying or berating someone and public humiliation
- Conveniently not hearing or dismissing challenging feedback

### **Costs and Consequences**

Bill's change effort stalled and dragged on. Key milestones were missed which led to a significant cost over-run. There was an environment of fear, uncertainty, and cynicism. As Bill's capacity to inspire leadership was diminished, morale and teamwork were compromised. He lost touch with his organization and missed important cues. This made it even more difficult to implement needed changes. By the end of the second quarter, two individuals regarded as high-potential talent left Bill's organization and one more left the company.

### *Actions That Matter*

Change efforts require a dual focus. You must manage both the technical and the people aspects to achieve success. A distinguishing characteristic of a great leader is the ability to pro-actively deal with the human side of change. This includes acknowledging one's internal reactions and conflicts, in addition to mastering the facts and figures of work.

Clearly, Bill was not achieving the results he desired or that were expected of him by the CEO. He was highly motivated to turn things around, and had a short timeline in which to do so. Bill engaged an Executive Coach and an Organizational Change Consultant. With their counsel, he discovered meaningful ways he could recognize and rise above his Turtling behaviors and get back on track.

Bill realized what was most important to him, and faced the conflicts he had been avoiding. He mobilized his energy and created an action plan for both himself and his organizational change effort. He:

- Challenged his thinking – especially about engaging in conflict
- Took a broader view of his values, goals, and personal responsibility
- Strategically evaluated new opportunities to influence the CEO
- Created greater alignment around his intentions within the organization
- Visibly fought for the values he believed would ensure success

Bill, also used best practices for leading change, and:

- Re-engaged his leadership team and gave them stretch goals

- Developed a clear and compelling change story
- Held Town Halls to communicate the change and inspire confidence
- Acknowledged employee concerns and future impacts
- Gave frequent recognition as well as direct feedback when necessary

By the end of the third quarter, Bill and his team were able to improve quality by nearly 20% and reduce cycle time by 15%. They completed their re-organization, streamlined six critical core processes, and began to impact their cost run rate heading into the fourth quarter. As importantly, employees expressed confidence in the leadership team again and morale was improving. There was more to do to achieve the lofty goals of a 30% cycle time reduction and flat cost structure. Yet, Bill and his team achieved more than they thought they could in the time they had to turn things around.

Bill and his team were able to get the change effort back on track, after losing time, some credibility and resources. Both he and the CEO were challenged through this process and both learned through their weekly discussions. They worked diligently to find solutions to their respective divergent perspectives. At times the discussions were heated and confrontational. To their credit, both the CEO and Bill did not give up but persisted to create buy-in from the other.

### **Looking in the Mirror**

Leading large-scale organizational change is challenging. Turtling may appear to buy time, but the costs are considerable. To mobilize your energy and unleash your passion, consider the following reflection points:

- Consider The Story Behind the Story. What led up to current events? When did you withdraw into the shell of protection? Who are the other characters in the story? Who are the heroes and who are the villains?
- Restate your 1 Year, 5 Year and 10 Year Goals, professionally and personally.

- **Question Your Assumptions.** Write questions about your situation daily for a month. Over time the questions will change, illuminating some preconceived assumptions.
- **Deconstruct the Political Landscape.** Examine the ties that bind the formal and informal decision making relationships within your organization. What values are currently informing the decisions and messaging to customers and employees?
- **Stick With It.** Commit to create the momentum of change for yourself and maintain your discipline to continue.

### **Continuity Counts**

The 2011 economic landscape will require courageous leaders in order to drive growth and stay ahead of the competition. Success will result from both well-defined strategies, and a deep understanding of organizational change. Leaders will need to simultaneously lead people to perform, drive execution, and sustain optimism, while living their organization's core values. Otherwise, the costs to the business may be surprisingly significant.

“People” make change happen – not org charts, redesigned processes, or metrics in and of themselves. Successful leaders build trust, show that they care, and have the guts to take the heat when the going gets tough.

Yes, a better way for leading change exists. Demonstrating managerial courage enables sustainable change and results that matter. Recognizing and prodding your inner Turtle is not an overnight process. It requires effort, honesty and hope. Change is possible!

*Written by Karen Foster, Ph.D., president of Portara Consulting, and Jeff Freedman, MSOD, president of ClearPath Alliance, executive coaching and organizational effectiveness firms specializing in partnering with executive teams to navigate change. Tel: (404) 351-8000 & (858) 292-5361.*

Web: [www.portaraconsulting.com](http://www.portaraconsulting.com)

& [www.clearpathalliance.com](http://www.clearpathalliance.com)