



**articles**

What qualities does a leader need to bring their team or organisation successfully through a change? =mc Director **Bernard Ross** shares 5 key characteristics and examples of his heroes in each area.

Change leadership:

# The characteristics of successful change leaders

It's a cliché that we live in times of enormous change. We do. But I also think there have been other times of enormous change.

I remember talking to my partner's grandmother who was born in 1902. She talked about growing up and seeing a newspaper article about the first airplane, hearing a radio broadcast for the first time, speaking on the telephone as it became all the rage, and then watching a generation of young men march away to war while she learned to be a bus conductress. I think that level of change might blow away many people who worry way too much about how Twitter has changed their lives when they are not digitally native. My belief is that people are fundamentally adaptable and able to manage change on a personal level.

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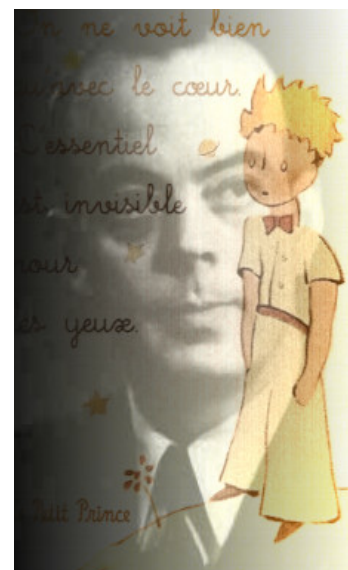
So people can cope. What's interesting to me as a consultant is how difficult organisations seem to find it to manage change. Take out your mobile phone. Have a look at it. In your hands you have an almost definitive insight to the world of changing strategy. You have the proof of organisational change failure, if you need it, in your pocket. 10 years ago your phone would have been made by one of the giants – Eriksson, Nokia, or Blackberry. Now those names have all but disappeared – overtaken by Samsung and Apple who just decided it would be a good idea to get into mobile telephony. The old companies weren't unproductive or even un-innovative – they were working hard and making big decisions about hardware and software and design. They just made the wrong decisions... while the newbies made some very good decisions, even with no experience of the market or the technology. And of course companies don't make decisions – people do. And most often senior people make those decisions.

So a key question for charities and public sector organisations, and for commercial organisations, is the kind of leadership needed to help organisations and people who work in them manage change. It's a question that the UK Labour Party also seems greatly exercised by at the time of writing.

I'm currently writing a book about change, and trying to decide who to vote for in the Labour election, so I've been thinking about this and reading around the topic. (Including some excellent thinking by Luke Johnson, former Pizza Express MD in a recent the Sunday Times article.) Let me share with you my thoughts about the key qualities that make for an outstanding leader in change situations. I'd be glad to hear your views.

***“If you want to build a ship,  
don't drum up the people  
to gather wood, divide the  
work, and give orders.  
Instead, teach them to yearn  
for the vast and endless sea.”***

**Antoine De Saint-Exupery**



**Motivation:** one of the great myths in management is that you can motivate people. All the great theorists from Maslow onwards acknowledge that leaders can't motivate people – they can simply provide a stimulus or a framework in which people can choose to be motivated. Making the right choice about the stimulus is the real skill. My all-time hero in this circumstance has to be Sir Nick Young, the former CEO of the British Red Cross. Nick had an extraordinary talent for knowing when to stop and offer a personal word to a new colleague, when to give the big visionary speech, and when to take tough decisions on his own in an office backed up by spreadsheets. The result was that he gathered around him an extraordinary high performing team and held on to them – bringing great success to the British Red Cross as it transformed itself into one of the fastest growing and most influential UK charities.

**Delegation:** it's tempting for a chief executive in a change situation, and especially in a crisis, to opt for a war room mentality – taking all decisions, keeping control, making sure nothing goes wrong, spinning hundreds of plates in the air. But an outstanding change leader isn't afraid to delegate key areas of work – giving others a sense of ownership for solutions and allowing them to focus on the few unique things they alone can do. It also allows them to maintain oversight and some distance.

A hero here would have to come from the private sector where Richard Branson has built an empire by hiring and holding onto outstanding managers who run businesses for him. I'm still not exactly sure what Richard Branson is good at technically – maybe he doesn't need to be good at anything technically when he can identify talent and allow it to get on with delivering results. (By the way, the only time I've ever met Richard Branson was when I was invited to one of the staff parties. (Don't ask how!) 5000 of us arrived in buses to his house. As each bus arrived at the house and 40+ people decanted each time Richard Branson stood at the bottom of the stairs and shook everyone's hand personally and said “Welcome to my house. Thanks for coming.” Only **he** could say that. When I saw him from a distance four hours later his hand was strapped up from the shaking.)

**Decisiveness:** linked to the delegation issue is the ability of high performing change leaders to take decisions – especially tough decisions. And then they have to take responsibility for those decisions. Linked to this is the ability to listen carefully to diverse opinions and weigh them up before taking the decision.

Let me stress again, the decision has to rest with the leader – especially if they are the CEO. (The clue is in the job title.)

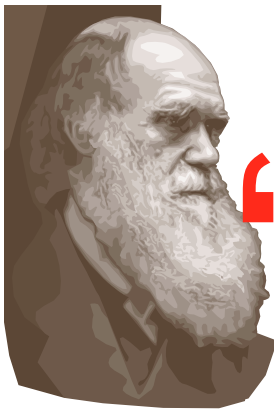
We often work with organisations where there is a desire for the culture to be engaging, empowering, and involving. You **can** be all those things but ultimately someone has to be responsible for making decisions and seeing them through. If you're looking for a hero here then Caroline Harper, Chief Executive at Sight Savers has over the last 10 years made a series of decisions that helped that organisation grow in stature and in impact. And she herself has become a model for many leaders in the charity sector.

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**Dependability:** I seem to be working around a lot of letter D topics here. Let me assure you this is just chance but I couldn't possibly miss out one more D: dependability.

Dependability has many dimensions. One simple aspect is to be reliable when you make a commitment to review a paper, to secure a budget, or even to turn up the meeting on time. That kind of discipline is essential – it encourages others to be dependable and disciplined too.

It also means being reliable and calm when the organisation is facing a crisis. A good change leader exhibits an air of calm while driving forward practical action. If I can quote a home-grown hero here, my colleague Angela Cluff has a phrase which she uses in any crisis. I share it with you as a calming mantra: “we are where we are.” For some reason this phrase helps us – and believe me consultants have their share of crises – to stop looking for who to blame or suffering from analysis paralysis. Having accepted we are where we are we can then begin looking forward for a way out of the challenge.



It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.

Charles Darwin: *The Origin of Species*

**Adaptability:** the quotation from Darwin above reflects an absolute truth. As we know from the mobile phone example simply being big or successful doesn't guarantee continuing success. Try asking the dinosaurs how on earth did they manage to lose it all to the tiny, puny mammals after being in charge for 75M years.

The recent round of government expenditure cuts announced in the UK will mean that almost every charity and public body will have to reshape their business model.

The excellent change leaders are those proactively making moves to stay ahead of the curve to change before it's essential.

If you're looking for a hero here then Simon Lebus, Group Chief Executive of Cambridge Assessment (CA) has to be a strong candidate. In a decade his organisation, which provides testing and educational materials for young people, has gone from having 80% of its business in the UK to 80% internationally. This has meant change in almost every part of the business.

I'm proud that =mc has been working with CA last year on a massive change programme designed to shape this educational social enterprise for the next 10 years.

So I'm sure you've recognised that my list of key characteristics is a shortlist drawn from a very long list. I guess my purpose in offering you a shortlist is to demonstrate one final characteristic I could include, which has to be the ability to identify the small number of key things that have to be addressed. This instinct to focus on the few and put aside the many is my last offering. It is a common feature of all my change heroes. Take a minute to score yourself on my key characteristics.

## What next?

The Management Centre (=mc) is the UK's leading consultancy for ethical organisations. As part of our work we help public bodies and charities, and INGOs to become more adaptable and more resilient. Among the organisations we've helped are Greenpeace International, the National Trust for Scotland, ActionAid, and Glasgow City Council.

If you'd like to know no more about our approach to change you can find more here:

### Article:

[The 5Cs of change response](#)

### Blogs:

[The change series part 1: why change?](#) – a collection of blogs by Bernard Ross, =mc director. (Links to subsequent change blogs are included in part one)

### Training programme:

[Leading & Managing Change](#) – available in-house or as a public training programme

Or contact Clare Segal, director, at [c.segal@managementcentre.co.uk](mailto:c.segal@managementcentre.co.uk). +44(0)20 7978 1516.