

LEADING CHANGE WELL

A discovered leadership system for managing resistance and improving performance, built on firsthand research inside a financial services firm's period of sustained hyper-growth.

Every leader who has pushed a difficult change through an organization knows the moment. The plan looks solid, the announcement goes fine, and then the following week something quietly starts to resist. A manager who wasn't fully on board says just enough to sound compliant. A team nods along, then inches back toward the old way once nobody seems to be checking anymore. What leadership believes it communicated and what employees say they actually heard turn out to be two different things.

None of that is a personal failing, and it isn't fixed by finding a more naturally gifted communicator. The leaders who managed this best were not unusually charismatic or beloved. What set them apart was a specific, repeatable pattern in how they led change, one that held together as a system rather than a collection of personality traits. This paper lays that system out in plain terms: what it is, how it held up under real pressure, and where even a leadership team practicing it well can still fall short.

Where This Comes From

This comes from research inside a real financial services firm that grew through a period of substantial, acquisition-driven hyper-growth. Thirteen senior leaders, from the CEO down through regional directors, were interviewed about how they actually managed resistance during that growth, and what they said was checked against a survey of 46 of their own direct reports, not just taken at face value. What follows isn't a theory about change leadership. It's a description of what a group of real leaders actually did and said, backed by evidence that it worked.

A Discovered System, Not a Checklist

Five patterns showed up consistently across nearly every leader interviewed, and they didn't show up as five separate ideas. They showed up as one system: a specific, repeatable way of leading change where each piece depends on the others to work at all. That wasn't the starting assumption. It's what held up once real interviews and real numbers were checked against each other, and it's the actual finding here, not any single pattern on its own.

THE FIVE PATTERNS AT A GLANCE

1. **EXPLAIN THE WHY**
2. **LET CULTURE CARRY THE WEIGHT**
3. **BUILD FRAMEWORKS, THEN REFRAME**
4. **SELF-AWARENESS BEFORE AUTHORITY**
5. **SET THE GOAL, THEN TRACK IT**

1. Explain the Why

Of all the patterns that surfaced, the one that spoke loudest: leaders establish the reason for a change, not just the mechanics of it, as a matter of course.

"It always goes well if you start with the why. It never goes well if I just show up, and I'm like, here's how we're doing this."

Employees who said their leader explained the why were significantly more likely to describe their own pushback as feedback rather than a problem, one of the strongest, most reliable results in the whole dataset.

2. Let Culture Carry the Weight

Not policy, not authority. Leaders relied on shared organizational culture as their primary mechanism for managing resistance, and modeled it in their own behavior first.

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"I sit in service to all of these team members every day and I want to serve them well. And in return, they serve our other team members across the organization well."

Trust and culture explained nearly half of how employees rated overall performance, the single strongest link found anywhere in the data.

3. Build Frameworks, Then Reframe

Leaders did not explain a change once and move on. They built repeatable language and stories that gave people a lens for processing setbacks as part of a larger, coherent story, not evidence the plan was wrong.

"On the other side of this transaction, on the other side of the change, is a relationship. You have to decide today: do I want to make a point, or do I want to make a difference?"

4. Self-Awareness Before Authority

Discovered, not anticipated: in 12 of 13 leaders, active self-monitoring and self-correction turned out to be the competency underneath everything else on this list.

"I've never looked back on a previous decade in my life and didn't think I was an idiot the previous decade, and I don't expect that to change in coming decades. None of us have this all figured out, so let's learn and grow together."

Self-awareness held up as one of the strongest predictors of performance anywhere in the survey.

Consistent With Established Leadership Research

None of this is a break from what's already known about leadership. Trust, transformational and servant leadership, clear vision-casting: all of it shows up here too. What's different is that this wasn't observed in the abstract. It happened inside one real, pressured, fast-growing organization, and it held up when checked against the numbers.

These patterns come from one company's experience, and on its own a single case doesn't prove they hold everywhere. But they aren't isolated findings either. They line up with decades of established leadership research, and with what the author has observed firsthand advising organizations through change for over twenty-five years. That combination is what makes them worth taking seriously well beyond the one organization where they were first documented.

5. Set the Goal, Then Track It

Eleven of the thirteen leaders interviewed had no formal process for setting goals or measuring performance against them, not just no way to track results, but no clearly defined targets to track in the first place. Three said so directly.

"We don't use sophisticated KPIs. That was a conscious organizational choice to prioritize the employee experience."

This was the one place where relational excellence wasn't enough on its own. Performance outcomes were the lowest-scoring measure in the entire survey, even inside an organization that was, by every relational and cultural measure, performing extremely well. The single strongest link anywhere in the data was between a leader's willingness to remove obstacles for their team and how employees rated performance, stronger than any formal feedback process the company had in place.

The conclusion isn't that formal accountability replaces relational leadership, or the reverse. It's that they have to operate as one system. An organization can build extraordinary trust and still leave real performance on the

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table if it never sets a clear target, or sets one and never checks whether it's actually being hit. Both halves have to be in place: a goal worth aiming at, and a real way of knowing whether it was reached.

What This Means in Practice

Inside this organization, explaining the why, building a culture strong enough to carry resistance, and reframing setbacks into a larger story were not soft skills. They were specific, observable behaviors that measurably moved performance. But none of it substituted for a leader who was also willing to set a real target, track it honestly, and let someone say out loud when the numbers said it wasn't working.

That combination, relational leadership and performance discipline operating together rather than as a tradeoff, is what separated an organization that was thriving from one that could have been thriving further.

Questions Worth Asking Your Own Organization

What would a similar look inside my own organization actually find?

Are we thinking about values and culture as actively as we're thinking about strategy?

When someone raises a concern about a change we're making, are we hearing feedback, or are we hearing a roadblock?

Recommendations for Practice

The five patterns above describe what individual leaders did. What follows is aimed at the organization itself, not just the leaders in it: not a menu to choose from, but a connected system where each piece depends on the others.

1. Build the explanation of the why into training and onboarding, not just individual leader instinct. Teach incoming and existing leaders alike how to explain change at the employee's level, how to build communication frameworks, and how to recognize resistance as information rather than defiance.
2. Train leaders explicitly to diagnose resistance before reacting to it. Most resistance is information about what's still unclear or unresolved, not defiance, and treating it that way starts with pausing long enough to ask what it's actually signaling, rather than moving straight to persuasion or correction.
3. Train leaders on the organization's own values specifically, and how to apply them when setting objectives and addressing resistance, rather than assuming values training happens by osmosis.
4. Make framework-building and reframing an explicit part of leadership development, not something leaders are left to improvise under pressure. Three specific reframes mattered most: naming what isn't changing along with what is, showing a change isn't a personal target aimed at one team or person, and framing a new approach as different from the old one rather than a verdict that the old way was wrong.
5. Invest directly in emotional intelligence and self-awareness training, rather than treating it as an individual leader's personal development project. The clearest illustration: a leader who adopted the habit of muting himself on calls specifically to interrupt his own impulse to jump in too early. That kind of self-correction is far more likely with structural support than without it.
6. Put 360-degree feedback in place. Leaders who lacked visibility into how they were actually perceived by peers, bosses, and direct reports had no reliable way to close that gap on their own.

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7. Use storytelling deliberately, as a recruiting and culture tool, not just an internal communication style. Organizations that clearly communicate their values through story tend to attract candidates who already fit, and repel those who don't, before either side wastes time finding out the hard way.
8. Design every change initiative with sustainability in mind from the outset, not just a launch plan. A change that lands well in month one and quietly reverses by month six was never actually finished, and the reversal is usually harder to diagnose than the original resistance was.
9. Build a real Management by Objectives infrastructure: specific, collaboratively set goals, tied to organizational values, that are actually tracked. Without it, hard-won cultural and communication strengths have nothing to keep hard-won change from quietly reverting once attention moves elsewhere.

John Von Thaden, D.S.L.

Doctor of Strategic Leadership, Liberty University | elevatingexcellence.us

WANT HELP CLOSING THIS GAP IN YOUR OWN LEADERSHIP?

I coach leaders who want to strengthen exactly what's described in this paper: explaining change clearly, building a culture that carries resistance instead of fighting it, and knowing whether your own behavior actually lines up with what you say matters. If any of the five patterns above named something you're not confident about in your own leadership, that's the place to start a real conversation, not a reason to feel behind.

Not ready to talk yet? Take the free, 2-minute Leadership Accountability Self-Assessment first:
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