

# Leading Change: A Piano Lesson

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Change is often talked about on a grand scale: organizational change, cultural change, change sweeping the nation. But the simplest truth is that real change happens on an individual level. Real change is a personal process, a growing process, a discovery of the answer to some new question. How can we lead or manage change if our focus is the change someone else needs to make? The real answer starts with changing ourselves.

Change is a learning process. It is finding the answer to a new problem, gaining new skills, and applying those new skills in a different situation. It is much like learning to play the piano. The steps are very similar: First you choose to play, then you find a teacher. You discover tools with which to build your skills. Then comes the most important part: practicing. Finally, you continue to test and challenge the skills you've developed.

## Starting to Play

In most healthcare organizations today, it is hard to escape change. Mergers and acquisitions, demands for increased productivity, new regulations, and new tools have created a dynamic, exciting, and highly stressful environment. But in the midst of the demand, there are individuals who resist change. These may be managers who are convinced that new processes will never work or employees who refuse to learn to use new tools. Clinging to the old for fear of failure, they do not see the failure in staying the same. They kick and scream through every organizational change, regardless of its nature. They have chosen not to play, like the child who took piano lessons for 10 years because his parents told him he must and who quits on the day he is no longer required to play, never to play again. In the midst of an environment that requires change, he never really does. The choice is not his.

Fear of failure is a known barrier to change. But innovators -- people who choose to play -- understand that failing is a necessary part of success. They celebrate failures as a way to learn how to perform better in the future. The trick is to fail faster, learn from the failure and move on. If you are too afraid to hear that sour note played, you will never train your fingers to reach the right notes. Take the failure test by asking yourself, "What is the worst thing that could happen if I fail?" Although the consequences may be dramatic when taken to the extreme, the extreme rarely happens. One of the worst mistakes I ever made managing an HIM department was buying the wrong transcription system. In the end we did waste some time and money because of the mistake. But we also made tremendous progress, even when we abandoned the system. We had new hardware, industry-standard word processing software, and contacts and contracts with exceptional resources that helped "fix" a temporary solution. And we had developed internal expertise in the software, implementation, and testing disciplines. I discovered the value of partnering with a vendor, understanding and communicating the complexities of our requirements, and moderating the advantages of technology with the realities of change. Ten years later, my only regret is the length of time it took to admit the mistake, face the failure, and move on.

## Finding a Teacher

Few of us would set out to learn the piano, or expect our children to play, without a teacher -- someone who has expertise at piano playing and can share that expertise with us. A teacher encourages us to try, to fail, to keep practicing. They reward effort as well as performance. They show us shortcuts and other ways to understand a new concept. They help us see our accomplishments when we are frustrated with our lack of progress. They help us set reasonable goals and celebrate our success. Given all that a teacher brings to learning, why do we stop seeking them once we have a diploma? If leading change relies on learning to change, then we need to find teachers to help.

What do you look for in a teacher or a mentor? The list looks very much like what you expect from a piano teacher. Rarely can you find one person who can perform all of those functions when you need them. Consider building a cadre of people who

can provide this support. Don't expect your boss to meet all of these needs -- seek other resources. Professional networks and association activities are a great place to find teachers and mentors.

While it's important to have a teacher, being a teacher is necessary to manage change. Continue sharpening your skills and developing expertise that you can share with others. Encourage those around you to try new things and don't blame them for failing. Reward good efforts, even if the outcomes fall short of expectations. Recognize, acknowledge, and celebrate accomplishments, not just at the end of a project, but during those hard "stuck in the middle" times. Encourage questions and keep explaining. When you can't find the way to help them understand, find someone who can. Set people up to succeed by helping them determine reasonable goals and providing tools to increase their skills. Take pride in their accomplishments without stealing the glory. For instance, during a major re-engineering project at my facility, our management team held a weekly meeting devoted to planning and operationalizing the change. One day, when we still had a lot of work to do and our collective energy was low, I retrieved our entire project plan from the computer, enlarged the font, made five copies, and brought them to the meeting along with the biggest black markers I could find. We spent the first 20 minutes reading aloud each step we had already completed and drawing thick black lines through them. We had pages and pages of black lines. Not only did we feel great about what we had accomplished, we felt confident that we could tackle the next page of tasks. Sometimes you have to risk the ridiculous to lead change.

## **Finding the Right Tools**

No one would start learning to play the piano without some type of keyboard and music.

The types of instruments vary from an electric keyboard found in a discount warehouse to a Steinway grand piano. Music can be sheet music, a printed instructional series, computer software, or sounds that you reproduce. The selection of tools is reliant on how much money you want to spend, what method your teacher prefers, and your current skill level. Just as these tools and their appropriate selection are important in learning to play the piano, selecting and acquiring tools is important in managing or leading change.

The market is flooded with "change" tools. Visit any bookstore and you will see walls and walls of books dealing with change, from trendy self-help titles to scholarly tomes. The mail is full of flyers promoting seminars in managing change and its effects. Software programs that help detail each step of a project and predict the time and resources required are out there. Increasing your ability to manage change requires an investment in some of these resources. Making appropriate choices may be a matter of taking some risks and asking questions (See "For Further Reading"). Seek out resources that your teachers suggest: find out what authors they quote or what research they reference. When attending a seminar, check to see what resources are used to develop the material and ask instructors what additional resources they would recommend. Like most other fields of study, the same experts are cited repeatedly. Read or listen to their advice and discuss what you learn with your network of colleagues and teachers. Finally, use judgement: If an espoused theory doesn't make sense or is not well supported, move on.

Project management software designed to manage the steps of change can be a great tool as long as it is seen as a means to a goal and not the goal itself. Timelines and Gantt charts are important planning tools, but they don't motivate change and they can't communicate vision. Used as a planning tool, software is an excellent way to build structure in a project, help plan sequential steps, project required resources, and visualize contingencies. If change seems overwhelming, working through a structured project plan can help break the work into manageable chunks. But the best software and the greatest information resources don't create change and can only support your efforts. The real change happens when you begin to practice.

## **Practice, Practice, Practice!**

Like playing the piano, riding a horse, swimming, or any other activity, change is something you do. To excel at change takes practice. Playing the piano requires a combination of timing, interpretation, technical expertise, and expression. Similarly, change requires creativity, flexibility, communication, and vision. Becoming more creative can be learned through conscious development. Once the fear of failure is reduced or eliminated, the opportunities to be creative increase. Being exposed to other creative people and their work broadens your outlook. For instance, listening to music, reading literature, or learning about painting or sculpture can make you a more creative problem solver at work. Flexibility can be increased by increased understanding of other perspectives through active listening and questioning. By focusing on the bigger picture, you can allow more flexibility in the details. A key characteristic of a leader is his or her ability to create, sustain, and communicate a vision.

Seeing the future clearly and in detail, describing it to others, and moving steadily towards the future are keys to leadership. It requires being passionate about the vision and communicating both vision and passion to others who will feel the impact.

Leading change requires changing. It promises new skills, new challenges, and new failures. Change is a personal commitment that keeps you in the mainstream of your career and your life. Don't sit in the audience watching others perform, wondering how they find the time and energy to accept a new challenge. Volunteer for another project or attend another meeting. Get up on the stage and play.

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## For Further Reading

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