ARTICLE
CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Innovate with Urgency — Even When There’s No Crisis

by Ron Ashkenas
In the past few months, we’ve seen a stark contrast between the modest pace of typical change management projects and the rapid innovation that is stimulated by a crisis. Take, for example, a large retailer that in 2018 began working on the concept of curbside pickup as a way to reinvigorate deteriorating sales. The company launched a well-planned change initiative to introduce the concept across functions and to counter passive resistance. Leaders built a business case, sketched out the vision, mobilized stakeholders, created metrics for success, and started a pilot. But after 18 months
there still was not much enthusiasm or action toward developing the new offering. Then in 2020 the coronavirus forced the company’s stores to close, and, within a matter of days, curbside pickup was implemented across its locations.

The fundamental difference between the 18 months before the coronavirus and the weeks that followed was the sense of urgency precipitated by the crisis. The retailer’s customers demanded change, no matter what it took, or else they quite literally couldn’t shop there; executives stayed front and center from beginning to end; the future of the company was at stake.

This emotional and existential pressure is often much weaker or missing in organized change efforts. The project competes with other initiatives and goals for attention and resources; time frames are longer and more drawn out; the sponsoring executive doesn’t drive the project on a day-to-day basis; and customers are not clamoring for immediate results. These are just a few of the reasons that as many as two out of three major corporate change efforts do not achieve their stated objectives despite the more than $10 billion spent annually on change management consulting and support.

So as we look to the future, how do senior leaders create a sense of urgency for major innovations like systems introductions, new product rollouts, major process shifts and the like — without a crisis? Because the truth is that these projects are urgent and existential (or else you wouldn’t be investing in them); it’s just that they don’t always feel that way. What can leaders learn from the Covid experience to improve our ability to innovate at any time?

Based on my 35 years of consulting and coaching and my research for The HBR Leader’s Handbook, here are three ways to instill a greater sense of urgency in innovation.

**Engage in small experiments.** First, think about change not as a big project but as a series of small experiments — what we might call probes into the future — to quickly learn, through in-the-field experience, what works, what does not, and what it takes to get a result. These tests can be conducted in days or weeks, similar to the way lean startups use prototypes to better understand what customers want and will pay.

This quick approach has come naturally during the Covid crisis. Consider a nonprofit that helps high school students in economically disadvantaged areas engage in community service. They responded to Covid restrictions by testing ideas for “virtual service projects,” such as calling the elderly, making masks, and sending food and thank-you notes to health care workers. These small experiments then led the team to reimagine their whole approach, leading to plans for expanding their impact to more kids and more community members in the coming year.

But companies can build this kind of excitement with experiments in any environment. Unrelated to the coronavirus crisis, a consumer-packaged-goods food company that was trying to standardize the ingredients they used across a number of food categories started by quickly making small batches of
new formulations and tracking consumer reactions. They then kept iterating until they reached their larger goal.

These small experiments create a greater sense of immediacy and urgency than a long, drawn-out change process. They engage people in action right away that puts them emotionally on the line to find out how to really make change happen, rather than just asking them to create a pretty but untested presentation about what “might” work. And of course, the experiments also yield real results (good or bad) that more quickly shift the change effort from theory to reality.

**Set zesty goals.** In a crisis, goals are short term, high priority, and challenging, and there is a sense that they *must* be achieved. We call these attributes “zest factors.” Build these factors into your small experiments: Challenge people to take action in days or weeks at the most and give them the latitude to involve whoever is needed to make the effort successful. Most importantly, make sure the experiment is not just another task or project on top of everything else that they are doing, but something extraordinary, exciting, and positioned as critical for the organization.

The leaders of both the nonprofit and the food company intentionally built this kind of zest into their change efforts. As soon as Covid shut down the high schools where they were working, the nonprofit challenged its staff to engage students in virtual service projects in a matter of days, even though they didn’t know what that might look like. Staff members quickly generated their own ideas but also solicited suggestions from students and community organizations. As ideas were tested (with small experiments), senior leaders created opportunities for staff in different cities to quickly report out on what they were learning so that the best ideas could be replicated and built upon, and to give the staff a sense that they were “in it together.” And in the food company, the CEO challenged a cross-functional team from R&D, sourcing, and sales to actually get some reformulated products out to real customers, get their feedback, and figure out next steps within 100 days that would save millions of dollars but not compromise customer satisfaction. He also asked team members to personally report out on progress to the executive team each week, both to keep the pressure on and to give them visibility and the opportunity to ask for whatever they needed to make the effort a success.

Injecting zest into a change projects makes it clear that the effort is not “business as usual” or one more project on top of many others. The short-term drive to get a result forces people to treat it as a priority and find the time to jump in. Zest also creates peer pressure to work with others who are feeling the need to produce, and the unique sense of camaraderie or even fun that comes with the opportunity to really make a difference.

**Lean in and get personally involved.** In change efforts that lack urgency, senior leaders often kick off the initiative and then disappear, leaving the day-to-day work to change consultants or staff members. To recreate the kind of urgency that exists in a crisis, however, you need to be part of the process, stay involved with the teams, join them to celebrate the successes and deal with the disappointments, and help them pivot or solve problems. This may mean you need to revise
priorities so that the change experiments get the focus they need and so that your people don’t feel that they have a choice about getting on board or not.

In the examples cited here, the senior leaders were all-in, not just at the beginning, but throughout. In the nonprofit, the senior leader organized frequent Zoom calls with managers and staff from each city to keep the pressure on, but also to share learnings, reinforce the importance of their efforts, and cheer them on. She also held all-hands sessions with staff to keep everyone in the loop, and arranged for her boss, the CEO, to have individual meetings with students who were doing particularly creative service projects. In the CPG food company, the CEO and the heads of R&D and procurement all joined team meetings periodically to learn about progress, provide input, help solve problems, and make decisions on the spot (instead of waiting for the team leader to come to them). The CEO also highlighted the progress of the team in all-company sessions, and went out of his way to personally call people who were working on the effort and thank them for their contributions.

The continuing personal involvement of senior leaders sends a critical signal to people working on change projects that the effort is critical to the organization’s success, or even survival. It also increases the pressure to succeed by knowing that senior people are paying attention and counting on you to deliver.

While these steps sound simple and straightforward, they’re not easy, particularly if you’ve been accustomed to methodical, well-planned, and well-controlled change programs. They require you to be outrageously demanding and maybe even perceived as a little crazy. They require you to put yourself on the line to passionately inspire and ignite your people. And they challenge you to be comfortable with not knowing exactly what the experiments will uncover, how the changes will unfold, and what it will take to get there – but rather to have faith that you and your people will figure it out if you nudge them in the right direction. In other words, taking these steps is hard leadership work. But if we are to succeed at opening up and rebuilding our companies and our economy, this is what it will take to generate the urgency necessary for successful change.