

## **Unlock change with big beliefs, blue skies, burning platforms and baby steps**

**By Wayne Visser**

*You'll need a range of strategies to overcome the inevitable and much-underestimated resistance to sustainable organisational change. Here's how to make it happen.*

I know I've been banging on about "changing the world" in this series about unlocking change, but let's be honest, for most of us, that is a bit like shooting for the stars. In practice, the moon we're most likely to hit is changing our own organisations. Easy to say, hard to do. If there is one reason why organisational change fails, it's because we underestimate resistance to change. As Hunter Lovins once told me, "Only a baby with a wet diaper wants changing, and even then, it cries throughout the process."

Resistance to change comes from inertia – and inertia happens because, as Bob Doppelt, author of *From Me to We*, puts it, change is like an iceberg. It is futile to keep pushing against what is above the surface – the things we can see and control directly, such as rules, policies and procedures. Shifting the volume and weight of what lies below the surface – our habits, attitudes, beliefs and values – is the real secret to making change happen.

Unfortunately, this requires the intrinsic drivers of human behaviour to be rewired, which is what makes it so much more difficult. And yet, when we succeed, the scale and speed of change can be profound. Turning carpet company Interface into the first truly restorative business on the planet began with founder Ray Anderson's "spear in the chest" revelation. Changing his worldview was the first step in changing his organisation.

Change was possible because Anderson was able to combine decades of experience as an industry leader with the fire-in-the-belly that came from his conversion to a new belief system. And, as with Steve Jobs, if a leader has true conviction, he or she can create a "reality distortion field" in which others get swept up in the cause.

Sadly, these missionary-type leaders with their big beliefs are about as common as Greenpeace activists serving on the management boards of oil companies. Most organisations have to rely on three other strategies to overcome inertia: burning platforms, blue skies and baby steps, which echo the elements of Gleicher's formula for change.

Let's start with baby steps, because this is usually the easiest strategy. Most organisations do not need much persuasion to commission a pilot facility, construct a demonstration project or develop a showcase product, especially with the giddy prospect of good PR-spin. In fact, sustainability reports are practically burping with all the "low-hanging fruit" that these companies have gorged themselves on.

The reason these baby steps for sustainability have never become giant leaps for humankind is because there is no real incentive to stride out. For that, we need the other two strategies, starting with blue skies. The fact is, as humans, we are always "chasing the blue". But first we have to be convinced that where we are going is sunnier. Yet, for most people in most parts of the world – as crazy as it seems – we don't believe that a sustainable future is necessarily a better future.

Veteran environmentalist Jonathan Porritt is hoping he can still change our minds. His new book, *The Future We Made*, sketches a vision of a what he calls a genuinely sustainable world in 2050 and why it is so much better than today. It's a change management tactic that we could all learn from – the kind of thinking that inspired Elon Musk to invent Tesla Motors. Until then, nobody believed that electric cars could be not only green, but fast and cool too.

A blue skies strategy means being willing to take a risk as a leader, to set big hairy audacious goals. Whether it is Unilever's plan to double in size, while reducing its environmental footprint and helping

a billion people out of poverty, or Google's ambition to make all the world's knowledge free and accessible, blue-sky leaders know that we are only inspired by reaching for an impossible dream. That's why we desperately need more Apollo-like sustainability missions that the public can get genuinely excited about.

The combination of big beliefs, baby steps and blue sky strategies will almost certainly get us moving forward, but if we want a pace to match the urgency of our global challenges, organisations need a burning platform. Someone else's burning platform – HIV/Aids in South Africa, Amazon destruction in Brazil, or corruption in Russia – won't do the trick. Impacts that are far away, or in the future, are like smouldering fires in the distance: noteworthy but not action-worthy. People need to feel the heat: directly, personally, here and now. For organisations and leaders, that might mean lighting a few fires.

In summary, if you're trying to make change happen in your organisation, use burning platforms to create the urgency for change, blue skies to create the reasons to change, baby steps to create the momentum for change, and big beliefs to sustain the energy for change.

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