

Musings from



Musings from Gate 44 is a series of papers written from one of the most sacred reflective places in a consultant's life – the airport. As we depart our client's cities, we are often decompressing, celebrating, venting, strategizing and reflecting on behalf of those we serve. We're inviting you into our private thoughts about...you. "You" means those of you leading complex organizations trying to grow, change, improve and compete. These "musings" are stimulated by patterns we see over and over again as we work. Our hope is that letting you into our inner thoughts will help you grapple with the issues that frustrate your noblest aspirations and thwart what you seek to achieve. (We hope we'll also have a chance to laugh gently together at some of the silly things organizations can do.)

Anatomy of a Revolutionary

By Ron A. Carucci

Geez, I hate these security procedures. Who the heck can remember to remove any toiletries in containers larger than three ounces? And if it isn't bad enough that I get to have my personal belongings strewn all over the table and scrutinized as though I were smuggling contraband for a terrorist cell, I also get to stand barefoot and beltless in front of a guy whose need for power is being satiated with every second of my rising anxiety. As the last call for my flight chimes repeatedly in the background, I am biting back snide comments that will surely only motivate my tormentor to be even more thorough. As I hastily collect my things and get dressed, he looks at me and says, "Hey, I didn't make the rules, I just have to implement them. If you want things to change, write your Congressman."

As I walked away, I thought about how that comment paralleled what I had seen earlier today with my client's executive team. They are in the middle of massive changes in strategy and organization, and it's clear that some on the team can stomach it, and some can't. Some are wired to lead a revolution, while others are wired to just "do their jobs" and write their Congressmen. They act as powerless as the security guy in the airport – hunkered down in the job and unable to make any change no matter how much heat the job attracts. Thinking about this gave me even greater respect for my client, a man who has demonstrated the sustained courage to take on unprecedented change in his organization despite resistance, unforeseen setbacks, financial performance shortfalls and undeserved sniping from the analysts. As revolutionaries go, I think he's an exemplar.

As you consider your next wave of sweeping change, and wonder whether or not you have a sufficient quotient of revolutionary DNA in your midst, here are some thoughts on characteristics to look for in yourselves and others who lead.

forward motion for leaders and organizations

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What Do Revolutionaries Look Like?

Revolutionaries are an odd mix of personality types. Some are fun to work with, some insufferable. Some are flexible, some are rigid and moody. Some have thick skin, some are especially temperamental and fragile. Some are smart, some are average. Despite the bewilderingly broad range of people who specialize in dramatic change, there are some predictable and recognizable patterns that set genuine revolutionary leaders apart.

The virtues of integrity and trustworthiness are universal necessities when it comes to winning and maintaining the confidence of others in the face of significant transition. Beyond those qualities, the wish list of things people want to see in leaders of big change is a long one. It includes having a can-do attitude and being flexible, reliable, consistent, committed, daring, open-minded, hard working, visionary, positive, confident, friendly, respectful, supported by others, politically savvy, intelligent, articulate, self-aware and adventurous. As we combined these traits with our observations of organizational leaders who successfully lead complex change, we distilled the list down to five that seemed most consistent across both the wish list and our observations. These five are:

- Results orientation
- Intellectual curiosity
- Optimism
- Self-confidence
- Ambition

This list is by no means exhaustive; rather it is a good starter-set of characteristics you should look for in yourself or in leaders you are considering charging with the pursuit of transformational change. When any of these are over-extended or under-represented, the process of change and the relationships with those around you almost always suffer. We will look at how the right amount, too much, or too little of each characteristic affects both the initiative at hand and the people you are leading.

Most people rise to positions of leadership because of strong personal attributes that set them apart from others who may be of equal technical competence. When faced with new challenges, a leader's natural instincts are to rely heavily on her strengths, those unique capabilities that have earmarked past successes, while at the same time doing as much as possible to camouflage her weaknesses, those personal limitations that have historically been thorns in her side. Frequently, these limitations are either under-developed capabilities that have gone unattended while she focused on her strengths, or they are strengths that have been pushed into overdrive, thus exceeding their usefulness and becoming a liability. The stress of large scale change tends to reveal the leader's limitations. Depending on how a leader manifests them, the five qualities of effective revolutionaries – results orientation, intellectual curiosity, optimism, self-confidence, and ambition – can be either strengths or limitations, and they can make or break the success of the outcomes being pursued. Let's look at each in turn and discuss the strengths and limitations of each attribute along with the cost of not manifesting the attribute at all.

Results Orientation – Get the Job Done Right and Fast

In its healthy state, results orientation drives leaders to achieve the highest possible levels of performance. It provides constant focus on outcomes and motivates closure on decisions. A healthy level of results orientation helps leaders maintain the level of determination and perseverance needed to make the initiative happen without dropping the ball on current commitments and performance targets. This is a delicate balancing act which requires getting and keeping the attention of key constituents who are steeped in their own priorities and may not be particularly interested in change.

When overplayed, results orientation leads to an intolerance of ambiguity and a hunger for immediate gratification. This causes leaders to make hasty decisions and rush past the need to wait for optimal solutions to fully emerge. During periods of complex change, uncertainty is a reality and pushing for closure too quickly can result in sub-optimal decisions and incomplete solutions that only address symptoms. This can also promote collusion among members of the leader's team who, burned out from a relentless pace and workload, are begging for mercy but are unable to garner their leader's patience and leniency.

In one information technology firm, we watched a senior leader's impatience and drive for closure lead to excessive financial waste. The company was faced with numerous antiquated platforms that required upgrades or replacements to compete successfully in its current



markets. Because it had ignored the need for so long, any solution introduced great complexity. No sooner did the organization head down one path, reorganizing the staff and allocating monies, than the leader's need for immediate gratification took over as he abandoned one effort and started over with another. This continued for three years with little progress made in bringing the technology up to current market standards. Eventually, his staff stopped taking him seriously. Leaders who possess a strong results orientation must balance it with extra patience, a comfort with ambiguity, and planned meaningful pauses in their progress to ensure that they are not merely putting Band Aids on situations requiring major surgery.

On the other hand, when leaders lack a sufficient degree of results orientation, a different set of unfortunate consequences ensue. First, initiatives drag on indefinitely, often to a permanent state of incompleteness. Unimportant distractions push back deadlines, and again those accountable for the initiative come to conclude their leader is not serious. As a consequence, they feign progress and commitment. If the leader fails to demonstrate results orientation early on, then the initiative will likely lose credibility within the organization and, subsequently, the needed support from important constituents. One person told us this about her leader:

This guy can't seem to get anything done. No matter how small we make the milestones, he just doesn't seem to feel any sense of urgency about getting this thing finished. It's clear the rest of the organization has stopped waiting for this project and has found other ways to solve the problems this guy was supposed to solve. Whenever he has to do a progress update at the executive staff meeting, I watch others roll their eyes. I don't know what else to do to light a fire under him. And my biggest fear is that when someone finally holds a gun to his head, he'll point the finger at me as though I've dropped the ball.

In addition to the obvious ways a lack of results orientation can derail the initiative, it also has toxic effects on relationships. You can see that the person in the example above is already feeling greater ownership for the project than her leader. This is a dangerous place to be, as it may foster unhealthy dependency on the leader while further numbing the leader's already desensitized sense of urgency. Finally, the person's fear of being blamed for the failure may move her to become defensive, making her concerned with her own image at the expense of her leader's needs.

Intellectual Curiosity – Seeing the Possibilities

The ability to imagine how things might be different than they are is at the core of the truly prophetic leader. The willingness to test tried-and-true methods in the hope of discovering better ways to satisfy constituents, produce new offerings, and capture hearts and minds is the heartbeat of real innovation and courageous risk taking. This attribute can be summed up as intellectual curiosity, the capacity to think about the current reality in new ways. It is here that a picture of what could be forms in the mind of the leader as she embarks on the path of change. This intellectual curiosity is an invigorating characteristic that lends a sense of adventure to the initiative and opens up possibilities to push the boundaries of convention. It also provides a greater opportunity for the initiative to deliver optimal outcomes rather than "more of the same, only different."

Unfortunately, what often happens to a leader who has a strong bent toward intellectual curiosity is that she becomes overly enamored with the process of experimentation and gets caught up in change simply for the sake of change, with no clear purpose. Multiple initiatives get launched in the organization and curiosity becomes a near obsession, resulting in an indiscriminate unraveling of parts of the organization that were already functioning well. Organizations of all kinds from corporations to civic groups to churches are littered with painful stories in which leaders disrupted meaningful work by applying new technologies that were really just fads. It's easy to take a new intellectual model and see what appear to be patterns that fit everywhere. The intellectually curious leader, gifted in imagining many possible alternatives to what currently exists, must ground herself in reality, putting boundaries around the change she embarks on and establishing a team to keep the change on track toward a clearly defined goal.



In one small consumer electronics manufacturing company we worked with, the COO was charged with ambitious growth objectives. Chomping at the bit to get rolling, he hired a large consulting firm to help size up all the potential market opportunities and identify each of the organizational adjustments that would be required. When the research was done, the consulting firm identified eleven options the organization could choose from to pursue growth. Some were discrete and included new products and customers, some could work in tandem with others and included product extensions and broadening existing customer bases. Each of the eleven options was accompanied by a series of large initiatives that would install the needed technology, systems, structures, and staff to make the option viable, complete with suggested timeframes to implement each one. The consulting firm prudently recommended that the leader choose just one or two of the options and the corresponding initiatives to start with and, once results were visible, revisit the potential of the remaining options. He agreed at first, but within weeks of starting, he was asking about the other options. Before long, he had expanded the scope of the work to include what amounted to eight of the eleven options and nearly all of the accompanying initiatives. The organization quickly reached a state of future shock, the point at which change came too fast to be assimilated. The board of directors intervened because too many capital expenditures were being requested simultaneously, and eventually the scope of the work was significantly scaled back and given to a new leader. The consulting firm was kept on, giving the “we tried to stop him” speech to the new leader.

In cases where intellectual curiosity is limited, leaders tend to dream up only minor modifications to existing issues and, at best, variations on a theme of one or two well-bounded ideas. This can make the lives of those around the leader very difficult. In the absence of an inspiring picture to paint for the organization, people often wind up in the position of creating a vision for the leader. Unable to envision productive changes to make, the leader must continuously be propped up to sound credible and compelling. What usually comes out of his mouth is a diffuse picture of a vaguely nice-sounding future. Ultimately, the minor modifications originally suggested by the leader are what actually get done.

Intellectually incurious leaders are also commonly inflexible in their view of the world and their approach to work. They are comfortable with established routine and uncomfortable with the notion of deviating from it.

Optimism – The Future Is Bright

Maintaining a hopeful, positive perspective during risky change efforts is essential. Leaders have to believe that life will be better despite the turmoil and stress of change. Surely no one would enthusiastically follow a cynical or pessimistic leader who painted a picture of an uncertain future. Leaders who are optimistic about the potential outcomes of their initiatives spread a contagious energy throughout the organization, building commitment and determination among those who lead alongside them. It also helps others to know that in the face of difficult and distressing data, their leader won't cave in from despair.

However, taking this strength to an extreme actually results in the leader losing credibility because she is seen as naive about the obstacles that might impede progress. Extremely optimistic people tend to believe the best of others' intentions, so they can't imagine others not wanting to participate. Even when faced with legitimate problems, these leaders turn to the “do whatever it takes” response, depleting resources and frustrating people who simply want their concerns heard. Blind naïveté actually winds up infecting the workforce with doubt and cynicism because people conclude this leader is out of touch with reality. At best, the overly optimistic leader stirs up hype that appears to be genuine commitment but is actually only superficial energy and bandwagonism. Often people around this type of leader are put into the position of being prophets of doom, continuously pointing out the potential fatal traps of where their leader is headed. Falling on deaf ears, these gloomy forecasts get such courageous people pigeonholed as an impediment to, rather than an enabler of, progress.

A woman spearheading the implementation of a new performance management process in an advertising agency fell victim to her own naive optimism. She was so passionate about the need for such a process that she was oblivious to the rest of the organization's indifference to and mockery of her work. Her excitement seemed to escalate as those around her grew more unreceptive. However, she would do such things as tell people in the art department how enthusiastic others in the organization were about the process, obtusely assuming they wouldn't validate the claim. She interpreted people's tolerance of her twenty-minute staff meeting presentation as enthusiasm. Not realizing the implications of introducing such a process in an organization averse to structured approaches to anything, she forged ahead, confident she could win

them over. While she may have converted a few into believers, the project ultimately died under its own weight.

Overly optimistic leaders must build in reality checks throughout their initiatives. They must go out of their way to confront resistance and identify roadblocks. They must temper their “pep talk” instincts with realistic discussions of the challenges, mistakes, and risks associated with the initiative. This helps ensure clearer judgment in their decision-making and helps maintain their credibility with those who must live with the changes.

Finally, the absence of optimism is stifling. In situations where the leader is the grim reaper, exhaling a death cloud over all potential new initiatives, he will lose the serious attention of others. His ability to effect change will be limited and people will either not welcome or will choose not to participate in the effort once the leader's toxic disposition is seen for what it is.

Self-Confidence – I Can Do This

Having confidence in one's self, one's ideas, and one's decisions is vital when attempting to launch a new initiative. Leaders must believe they have the ability to influence their organization in a positive way. Anyone who has ever attempted to lead an organization of any size through change knows the top position can be a lonely one. Self-doubt and second-guessing only compound such feelings of loneliness. Large, complex initiatives often require difficult decisions that are unpopular when implemented, inviting the scorn of others and the isolation that comes to leaders who make tough calls. Confident leaders are able to withstand the feelings of alienation and rejection that accompany such decisions. Without confidence, these leaders would cave in to the pressures from others to leave things as they are or to shape the change in a way that is convenient or advantageous to them. Leaders with a healthy level of confidence are able to gauge more accurately if they are pushing their organization too hard or not enough. They know when to stand up for their convictions in the face of resistance, and they are confident enough to admit when their judgment has been misguided.

Unfortunately, if a leader's confidence grows beyond what is appropriate, she winds up believing she can influence people or circumstances that she in fact cannot. She begins to believe she is impervious to errors in judgment. She gets further and further away from a healthy sense of caution, concluding that if success has taken her this far, how could she ever fail? The danger here is that as she conveys this sense of being impervious, people will tire of trying to convince her otherwise, leaving her to her own demise.



Her attempts to influence people and circumstances wind up offending and alienating, and her narcissism becomes the rope with which people are willing, even eager, to see her hang herself.

A division president of a smaller business unit in a wholesale food manufacturing company was promoted to run the company's largest business unit. Known for his cowboy leadership style and acknowledged for his great success in growing the small manufacturing unit, he was confidently viewed by top executives as someone who would be equally successful in this service arm of the company. He was equally confident. However, this business unit was dramatically different from the manufacturing unit, generating three times the revenue with a workforce twice the size. Discounting these major differences, he began to embark on the same growth strategy he'd employed in his previous assignment, ignoring the counsel of the senior executives who reported to him. Despite their caution and disregarding the fact that they ran the operating units of the business, he proceeded to restructure the company to resemble that of his former business unit, still sure that the transplanted strategy would yield similar results despite significant marketplace differences. The more his senior staff pushed back, the more he excluded them from decisions. Early indications are that, at best, the strategy will produce small to moderate growth in one area while having little or no impact on the majority of the company. He has gone through three sets of consultants, each of whom has tried to point out the potential pitfalls of his approach.

Confident leaders must guard against overconfidence by continually including others in their decisions and listening closely to messages of caution or warning. These leaders should also regularly test their assumptions about their effectiveness and the progress of the initiative with a variety of people, especially those who seem most cautious. They must strike a balance between second-guessing themselves and ignoring potential flaws in their thinking or shortcomings in their ability to influence.

When leaders suffer from low-levels of self-confidence, the initiative, and the relationships around them, are



surely at risk. In one financial services firm, a promising young woman, very bright and viewed as having high potential, was tormented by a lack of self-confidence. She second-guessed her decisions, constantly worried what others thought of her, and questioned whether or not the organization would recant on her proposed career path if they found out she was so insecure. She was given a project to lead as a stretch assignment to help develop her leadership ability. Sadly, her incessant doubt led to her worst fear: others doubting her ability. Because she was unable to implement any of her brilliant plans, the project was passed on to another manager. Despite numerous attempts to reassure her, her teammates were unable to build her confidence level.

Ambition – The Need to Succeed

Successful leaders have a sense of drive. They are self-propelled toward goals and are not easily swayed from their task. Given the enormous difficulty surrounding any change effort, ambition is an important attribute when we are faced with what appear to be insurmountable obstacles. Leaders who need a great deal of external stimuli to motivate them to overcome challenging circumstances do not typically succeed when leading major initiatives. Effective leaders can draw their energy from within and maintain their drive despite the lack of external encouragement. A healthy dose of ambition fuels a leader's tenacity to "take the hill" when approaching difficult initiatives or circumstances that might otherwise be intimidating. The leader is able to maintain simultaneous views of the personal as well as the organizational benefits the initiative will reap. It is important that the leader have some clearly established incentives – rewards she will personally gain as well as rewards others will gain. This enables the leader to stay focused on the initiative should distractions begin to draw her attention away. Ambition becomes precarious when the leader's attention is seductively captivated by the potential personal rather than organizational benefits of a successful initiative. Judgment becomes severely impaired and the leader takes on a Don Quixote attitude of pompous heroism. She develops a sense

of entitlement, looking for the rewards to her career as a result of her work. Once the ego has tasted the delight of increased power and recognition, its appetite for more can become insatiable. The leader becomes overly directive and curt and is experienced as abrasive. She becomes less interested in the change initiative itself and pursues ways to broadcast its impact, depicting herself as the pivotal nucleus of success. She may even take credit for the work of others. Any suggestion from others that the initiative is failing, support is fading, or there are potential delays is met with hostility and threats. People are therefore forced to spare no expense or resource to meet the leader's demands or risk severe vengeance if they fall short of expectations.

A board director we were working with in a client organization undergoing major leadership transitions said of one candidate on the initial CEO succession list:

I've never seen so much ego in one person. This guy was out for the top spot and nothing was going to stop him. It didn't matter who he had to hurt, eliminate, or what he had to do. If it made him successful, or made him look successful, he'd do it. Happily, he never became a serious contender.

Ambitious leaders must force themselves to learn to manage success in bite-sized chunks. They must become very aware of how their ego is absorbing increased recognition and influence and watch out for the subtle, gradual increase in the desire for more. They must go out of their way to include others in recognition and even exclude themselves in order to spotlight the hard work of those less likely to get organization-wide acknowledgment and appreciation.

Leaders who have a minimal degree of ambition tend to be easily discouraged by difficult obstacles that surface during the initiative. They may also be motivated by factors other than the tangible or intangible rewards the initiative may bring. For instance, a leader who is not driven to advance his career may not be all that motivated to lead an initiative whose success may give rise to a promotion. Insufficient ambition may result in a leader adopting a "just get it finished" attitude toward a complex initiative. The path of least resistance will be very attractive to such a leader as well. People around this leader are then forced to act in a quality control manner, trying to prevent short-term thinking from rendering the results unsustainable.

Rites of Passage: Gratification and Regratification – Turning Liabilities into Assets

The old cliché “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” is actually wrong. While it is certainly true that well-grooved routines developed over time are habits hard to break, it is by no means impossible and definitely worth trying. Each of the attributes we’ve discussed – results orientation, intellectual curiosity, optimism, self-confidence, and ambition – as well as its over- or under-extended state, is a behavior serving some purpose in the life of its owner. If it weren’t serving some purpose or meeting some need, you wouldn’t do it. For example, over-extending results orientation to satisfy a need for immediate gratification and an intolerance of ambiguity helps a leader feel more in control. Excessive experimentation allows a leader to feel productive and to experience a significant sense of accomplishment, regardless of the results. A naive dismissal of resistance and obstacles, or unrestrained optimism, allows a leader to avoid rejection and maintain a blissful perspective of the world. Extreme self-confidence that creates a robust sense of imperviousness keeps a leader from facing personal limitations that might be too overwhelming to confront. And aggressive, heroic ambition can potentially accelerate the advancement of a career and increase personal wealth.

What’s important to recognize is that each of these needs is legitimate and, for the most part, we all have them. It’s perfectly reasonable to want to feel more in control, to feel productive, to not want to feel rejected or inadequate, and to desire career advancement. What is *not* reasonable is to adopt a set of behaviors that both will not truly meet this need, and at the same time, potentially hurt others. The challenge is to pause long enough to separate the need from the behavior chosen (consciously or unconsciously) to meet the need. The crucial question then becomes, “Is this behavior the only way to meet this need or could I learn to meet it in a different way that eliminates the negative consequences that this behavior produces?” If you can secure your own reasonable answers to this question along the journey of transformative change, you can likely succeed at realizing the aspirations you set out to achieve. But if you can’t, expect to preside over the defeat of the very revolutions you launch.



Be a Well-Centered Revolutionary

As we mentioned earlier, not all leaders are created equal. The combinations of these critical skills applied to the pursuit of important change in your organization must be considered very carefully. Even if there is an ideal balance of all five, their context must be evaluated. Your team’s and entire organization’s readiness for change and the history of successful or failed change efforts play a role in determining how to embark on transformation. The point here is simply this: you must first prepare yourself well to lead such change, and that will usually begin with changing yourself. Such visible demonstration of your own commitment to change will signal how seriously you take it and serve more to invite commitment than any words or campaigns you could wage. Look at how you and those you select to lead are wired and be willing to make some changes. After all, a well centered revolutionary, well prepared to guide transformation, will leave a legacy of great hope and a sustainable organization that will be thriving long past their season of leadership.

We’re about to board at Gate 44, so I have to shut down my laptop. I hope I’ve given you some things to think about as you consider what it takes to be a revolutionary leader. At the very least, stop before you begin your next cycle of change and examine your own leadership traits.

If you want to hear more, drop me a line at ron@passagesconsulting.com

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