Improving our individual skills to lead change can be challenging. What does it take to apply new ways of leading complex, continuous change and help our organisations navigate attention in the real world? Imagine an organisation that has a rich history, but is outfitted with outdated equipment and a traditional hierarchical culture. Employees are slotted into narrow jobs, most of which allow little opportunity for creativity. The culture that we see in famous start-ups differs greatly from traditional industry counterparts. They are entrepreneurial and understand that change is constant — they have flexibility hardwired into their DNA.

The roles in such companies are loosely defined, and people are dedicated to learning. Strategies shift as new ideas are explored or competitors make moves.

Does size really matter? Which of these examples (the aforementioned organisation or a Silicon Valley startup) would be more receptive to adopting new approaches to leading complex, continuous change? The answer is obvious. When rigid organisations face complex change challenges, they want to control how they respond — structuring a long-term plan and regular progress metrics so that leaders can intervene when issues arise. They want to keep things under control. Then again, what makes Singapore, one of the best countries in the world to do business, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit? One of the secrets lies in being a country whose business landscape is extremely entrepreneurial. About 180,000 local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) make up 99 per cent of the enterprises in Singapore, which contributes to nearly half of the country’s GDP.

Leaving room for change Entrepreneurial organisations expect change to happen and design for it. They leave room for people to react, without central guidance. Big decisions about major new projects, acquisitions, or company strategies are made centrally with a lot of input, but there is little or no micromanagement. People know what they bring to the table, but they don’t know what work they will be doing in the future because priorities will change. With little or a low-level of organisational hierarchy, people are more concerned about the well-being and continued existence of the organisation than accumulating power and influence.

When faced with change, these entrepreneurial companies do not try to formulate projects with precise budgets, deadlines, and metrics. They start working on things and see what happens. No one feels like he or she is working on a production line under tight constraints. Everyone is free to comment and contribute in the best way he or she knows how. It is not that entrepreneurial organisations are better than more tightly structured companies, but when it comes to being ready for complex, continuous change, the entrepreneurial organisation has the clear advantage.

Finding your fit If you are in a tightly structured company, does it mean that the organisation is doomed for failure? Not necessarily so. Organisations should develop the capability to become ambidextrous — by operating in a tightly structured manner when they need to and in a looser fashion when that is called for. There is nothing to stop an organisation from becoming one. Most likely, leaders who say “we can’t” or “we won’t”.

A study conducted by CCL on how top leaders were governed found that within the Singapore public service sector, emerging leaders are intentionally rotated among statutory boards, agencies and ministries. The purpose of these horizontal moves is to prepare leaders to handle a diversity of governmental operations and broaden their strategic perspectives. To achieve breakthroughs in organisational agility, leaders need to help their organisations learn by discovering, deciding, doing, and discerning. Leaders need to support greater ambiguity because no one else has permission to change the rules. Once an organisation gains greater insights into what works and what doesn’t, more permanent rule changes can be considered.

Only then will true breakthroughs in responding to complex, continuous change occur.

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