

TARKENTON

IDEAS AT WORK

Change Management as a Catalyst for Innovation

Takeaways

- A culture of innovation starts with leadership
- Break down development silos
- Your journey map visualizes your ultimate goal

Both on the football field and in business, I've been fortunate enough to be around some incredible leaders. There was Bud Grant, but also coaches like Vince Lombardi and Don Shula. Outside of football, I got to learn from business geniuses like Sam Walton, Steve Jobs, and Bernie Marcus.

They were all very different, and yet they all managed to achieve incredible success. For all their differences, one common quality was a relentless drive to get better. Great leaders know how to innovate and stay ahead of the competition.

This article lays out a vision for why these kinds of "change leaders" are so important, and how you can lead your organization through innovation and change.



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Change Management as a Catalyst for Innovation

Fear of missing out (FOMO) isn't an anxiety exclusively reserved for teenagers. Business leaders grapple with it too as we make big decisions on how to best prepare and respond to seismic market and industry change such as the ethical use of generative AI, first-party data, and growing privacy concerns, or how to best attract and retain an exceedingly independent workforce. As the pace of change continues to accelerate, leaders face intense pressure to make the right decisions, on the right strategy, at the right time.



Yet new technology and drastic changes to problem solving or project management present their own set of challenges. Following proven practices and familiar processes is not only comfortable, it's also reliable and predictable. Thus, resistance to change can collide head-on with the drive for innovation. And this resistance is often built into company culture.

How do you steward your company, protect ROI, and still break down the obstacles that stand in the way of innovation and key opportunities for growth? It starts with adopting a Change Leadership mindset.

Innovation Starts With Change Leaders

Innovation will never be a powerful driver of growth unless change is embraced from the top. You cannot ask your team to pursue change until you demonstrate a Change Leadership mindset yourself. Such a mindset – whether it's found in leaders, teams, or organizations as a whole – is characterized by:

- ✓ Casting a clear and compelling vision
- ✓ Leading with the urgency of a insurgent
- ✓ Playing offense
- ✓ Moving quickly and nimbly
- ✓ Rooting out bloated bureaucracy everywhere it's encountered
- ✓ Truly embracing change as an opportunity, not a threat

Change leaders make a conscious decision to lead change versus being forced to change.

Building a Change-Friendly Culture

Understanding that people create teams, teams create culture, and culture defines the trajectory of a company, Change Leadership must also extend to every corner of your organization. Who you hire, how you lead, and what you reward will determine whether your Change Leadership mindset propels real growth.

That involves empowering risk-taking, allowing failure as a route to learning, breaking down barriers, and encouraging flexibility – all while keeping your eye on the ultimate destination.

Of course, it's important to prioritize hiring people who are forward-thinking, comfortable, and confident in shaping (and reshaping) best practices and finding solutions instead of waiting for someone to tell them what to do. It's also essential to retrain your current team to embrace change.



Promote Intrapreneurship

At Tarkenton, we encourage everyone on our team to be “intrapreneurs.” If someone in our company, no matter their role, responsibility, or influence, puts forth a great idea or independently creates a product or service that gains traction, we want to hear about it. We’ll test it out. We’ll put some budget behind it and encourage them to go own it. Then we see what happens. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn’t. But we give them the space to build something of their own within the company. Not only does this provide a terrific incubator for new ideas, but it also helps retain the most innovative and creative team members. They know they can flex their entrepreneurial muscle without having to leave.

Change leaders know that not every new idea will work, but that's never an excuse to table a good idea. Plenty of businesses have died on the vine from a corporate culture that claims to favor innovation but does nothing to reward, encourage, or promote it. Make sure your team knows that failure is just another word for "valuable lesson."

Break Down the Silos with One Source of Truth

One big challenge for Change Leaders is ensuring continuity and consistent excellence throughout a project. Typical product development life cycles often travel through a series of silos. As product development moves through validation, prototyping, development, launch, marketing, and improvement, different teams are involved. In a deeply siloed organization, once one team is done with their part, they send it over to the next team and then shift their focus to the next thing. Such processes often lack continuity in leadership and vision, which can lead to disappointing results.

Many of us learned this phenomenon in elementary school when we played the “phone game”: the game where you whisper into the next person's ear all the way around the class and then compare the original phrase to what was whispered into the last person’s ear.



So what’s the solution to breaking down some of these silos? One way is finding one "source of truth," someone who’s involved and committed throughout the entire product development cycle.

The source of truth is likely to be one individual or champion, such as the project leader or product owner who can be involved in each step of the process. The source of truth has invested their time and commitment to the outcome throughout the cycle, without dropping off the project at a critical point.

With the product champion in place, innovation can thrive while ensuring you reach your long-term goals.

Use a Visual Blueprint to Provide Clarity

Looking to the future without getting locked into a rigid long-term plan can be another challenge for Change Leaders. In this situation, a journey mapping exercise that produces a visual blueprint can provide clarity and confidence to a change-challenged organization.

In a journey mapping exercise, you establish a clear end-goal; this is your ultimate destination. It could be the completion of a single project, or reaching a new benchmark in the company's growth. Then the entire team might brainstorm ideas of how you’re going to get there and the critical path of decisions, tasks and deadlines. The visual blueprint should contain all the key actors, the critical moments, and the necessary technologies.

But the key for Change Leaders is to build a journey map that allows for innovation and flexibility. You know what you want to achieve – but your team may well find a better, faster, cheaper, or more powerful way to get there.

We've built visual journey maps for clients that are covered with sticky notes and red pencil edits by the end of the journey. As long as your team knows the final destination, they have the freedom to innovate and experiment along the way. In fact, change leadership cultures often achieve far more than the initial map imagined, thanks to "permission" from the top.

Use the Entire Lane

All leaders are susceptible to getting stuck in old habits. Think of your daily commute – a drive that's so familiar you can almost close your eyes as you drive it. You know where every pothole and merging lane is without even looking. You tend to drive in the same grooves every day.

Change leaders refuse to drive in the familiar grooves. They don't get "stuck in a rut," they don't stall out, and they don't sit in a traffic jam of competitors driving to the same place, on the same route. Instead, they are open to finding new paths to reach their destination – and no matter what road they are on, they use the entire lane.

New technology and new workplace trends can immobilize even the most successful business leader. Building a Change Leadership culture throughout your organization can help ensure you truly leverage the opportunities of innovation and unleash the full potential of your team.



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Will Adams works directly with Tarkenton's partners to identify and understand their organizational needs. He then assembles a cross-functional team to develop and deliver the solutions to meet the needs of the partner. Since joining Tarkenton in 2010, Will has helped develop new partnerships, plan strategic growth initiatives, and mentor organizational leaders.