

Perspectives of how senior leaders can affect the outcome of projects may depend on the role of the person evaluating the circumstances.

The Influence of Senior Leaders in Successful Change

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Last fall I was invited to advise and facilitate planning teams from varied organizations across North America and Europe. During this process, I noticed something that seemed important. When the most senior leader was in the room with his/her sleeves rolled up and was ready to work with the team, the quality of the conversations and work was far better than in meetings where leaders “sent their regrets” or weren’t even part of the planning process. The difference seemed simple. It was as if the presence of the senior leader caused the team members to whisper the mantra, “Let’s do something productive and make this meeting really count.” On the other hand, in the leaderless meetings, the energy level was much lower and the meetings were less focused on getting work accomplished.

I decided to conduct a survey to investigate the impact senior leaders had on the eventual outcome of major changes. My intent was to identify specific behaviors of senior leaders that would differentiate successful and unsuccessful changes. I shared access to the Web-based survey with a diverse group of contacts who receive my e-zine or monitor my social media sites. A total of 165 respondents participated in that initial survey.

Those first results were intriguing, and I decided to conduct a second study to expand the findings. I enlisted the assistance of an ASQ advisory team to tune up the survey instrument and assist with statistical analyses

of both data sets. Furthermore, *The Journal for Quality and Participation* team secured the involvement of ASQ's Human Development and Leadership (HD&L) Division, which invited its members to take the second survey (engaging 64 more respondents).

This article reports the findings for the two surveys and provides a preliminary interpretation of those results. Clearly, this exploratory research may have raised as many questions as it answered, but it does indicate that the direct presence of senior leaders can influence the effectiveness of change initiatives. It also sets the stage for others to take this research further. Table 1 provides a summary of the survey findings, including the results of statistical analyses of each senior leader behavior's relationship on project success.

Survey Design Differences

Eight senior leader behaviors were considered in both surveys. Although the specific wording associated with each of those behaviors was modified slightly to fit the survey structure most effectively (see the sidebar, "Senior Leader Behaviors Studied"), conclusions related to respondents' ratings could be compared with reasonable reliability.

The following revisions, however, were incorporated to change the focus of the survey a bit:

- *Respondent role in project.* The original survey provided six options to describe a participant's role. When the second survey was created, the design team was concerned that there was not clear enough differentiation among those roles. Additionally, those descriptions did not fit the language most commonly associated with Lean Six Sigma projects, which was believed to reflect the perspective of many of the HD&L members. As a result, four different options, along with an "other" category, were offered in the second survey.
- *Project considerations.* The original survey asked respondents to evaluate one project and categorize it either successful or unsuccessful. Respondents could choose to focus on a change that was a big success or one that was a huge failure. (I did not give people the option of focusing on "a somewhat

successful" change.) The breakdown indicated that 65 percent of the respondents focused on a successful project, and 35 percent reported on one that had failed. The second survey used a different approach, where respondents were asked to assess multiple projects of both types (successful and unsuccessful). In the first case, respondents focused their analysis of senior leader behaviors exclusively on either a successful or an unsuccessful project. In contrast, the second survey's participants evaluated all eight senior leader behaviors under two distinct conditions—how those characteristics had fit multiple projects that had been successful, and how they had fit multiple projects that had not been successful.

- *Rating scale.* The original survey used a seven-point scale that was anchored on both ends and at the center point with descriptions for the first seven senior leader behaviors. The eighth behavior used a simple yes/somewhat/no scale. The new survey used a three-point, frequency-based scale for all eight senior leader behaviors. The scales are shown in Table 1.

Respondent Role in Project

The roles held by the participants in the original survey were found to be statistically significantly related to the success of the projects. When the respondents reported that they had served in a senior leader or project sponsor role, they were 38 percent more likely to declare that the project had been successful. Managers and employees who served on the project team and were included in the change planning reported that their projects were successful 54 percent of the time (and not successful 46 percent of the time). In sharp contrast, however, managers and employees who served on the project team and were not included in the change planning indicated that only 20 percent of their projects were successful (and 80 percent were not).

The results for the second survey were quite different. The participants' roles were noticeably more consistent—although no statistically significant relationship was identified (so, the

Table 1: Senior Leadership Influence on Change Survey Results

Senior leader behavior	Original survey			Statistically significant relationship?	New survey		
	Percent top-two box ratings		Statistically significant relationship?		Percent top box ratings		Statistically significant relationship?
	Successful project	Unsuccessful project			Successful project	Unsuccessful project	
Respondent role in project	N/A	N/A	Yes		N/A	N/A	No
Assessment of organizational readiness	38	14	Yes		18	16	No
Active demonstration of support	73	19	Yes		40	35	No
Change process	37	9	Yes		18	16	No
Trust in team	68	19	Yes		34	24	Yes
Stakeholder preparation	63	17	Yes		34	23	No
Stakeholder support	39	17	Yes		23	13	No
Readiness of superiors	71	28	Yes		33	27	Yes
Learnings application	58*	23*	Yes		25	21	No
Respondent roles							
Senior sponsor	18	12		Sponsor/champion	6	4	
Project leader	22	17		Leader/change agent	47	42	
Consultant	25	21		Team member	20	31	
Manager/employee (including planning)	26	22		Combination of roles	17	15	
Manager/employee (not including planning)	6	24		Other	9	9	
Technical advisor	3	3					
*Values represent "Yes" only Ratings scale: 7 = to a very high degree; 6, 5, 4 = somewhat; 3, 2, 1 = not at all				Ratings scale: 1 = In all cases, 2 = In some cases, 3 = In none of the cases			

respondent’s role was not related to his/her view of project success). It appears that the ASQ HD&L members are more likely to be serving in stable roles when they are involved in change projects. This may be associated with their unique professional experience when compared with the more diverse respondents of the original survey.

This unexpected finding also may be associated with differences in perceptions of the importance of the eight senior leader behaviors evaluated in the two surveys. In general, the group responding to the first survey was much more likely to perceive that the senior leader behaviors related directly to project success. When involved more intensely, those participants were more likely to view the project results as favorable and to consider their

personal behaviors as being more engaged. On the other hand, the second survey’s participants found that the senior leaders had less of an influence on project success; only two senior leader behaviors related at a statistically significant level to the success of the change effort.

Common Ground

One of the behaviors that was acknowledged as essential to change success in both surveys was the senior leader’s demonstrated trust in the team. This characteristic is evidenced by a willingness to give the team operational freedom without micromanagement and to support the team’s recommendations. The respondents of the first survey were 3.5 times as likely to consider

this behavior to be present for successful projects. Similarly, the results for the second survey indicated that this was a favorable approach, but its importance was less pronounced.

The second senior leader behavior that both groups identified as statistically significantly important involved the “readiness of superiors.” This characteristic looked at the extent to which the most senior leader kept his/her bosses in the loop. In this case, the results indicated that managers/executives, including board members when applicable, need to be advised in advance of planned changes. This results in support for the change process from the highest levels of the organization.

General Perspective— Original Survey Responses

The members of the broad group that participated in the first survey indicated there were statistically significant relationships for all six of the other senior leader behaviors. The largest gaps between successful and unsuccessful projects, as indicated by the percent of top-two box ratings, occurred for the following two characteristics:

- *Active demonstration of support.* This group believes that senior leaders who prominently display their interest in the team’s work and its members’ contributions were much more likely to foster favorable outcomes (73 percent of the respondents reported that this behavior was connected to project success).
- *Stakeholder preparation.* Similarly, when senior leaders invested time and effort in laying a foundation for the change with affected stakeholders, the initial survey respondents reported that 63 percent of the projects were successful and only 17 percent were not successful.

Three other senior leader behaviors—assessment of organizational readiness, change process, and stakeholder support—also were statistically significantly related, but they received fewer top-two box ratings. This appears to indicate that they are important to a lesser degree.

The final senior leader behavior—learning application—was rated using a different scale. In this case, respondents could only choose one of three responses—yes, somewhat, or no. A total of 58 percent of the responses indicated that the senior leaders had applied what they had learned from successful projects, whereas only 23 percent were applying the learnings of unsuccessful projects.

ASQ HD&L Members’ Outlook— Second Survey Responses

As previously mentioned, the members of the HD&L Division reported closer results for the six senior leader behaviors that were not statistically significant. In other words, they did not find these



behaviors differentiated between change project success and failure.

It may be worth noting that approximately half of the participants for this second survey reported they had served in the project sponsor or project leader role—possibly viewing themselves as the senior leaders whose behaviors were being evaluated. This may have created a halo effect—a somewhat optimistic view of the situation. Another explanation might be attributed to a concept known as positive illusion—the tendency to see ourselves in a more favorable light than evidence might indicate. In all likelihood, these participants presume that senior leaders will display the behaviors described in this survey and, therefore, an analysis of the causes of projects’ success versus failure needs to delve into even deeper considerations.

The respondents of the first survey were demographically dissimilar to the second group. Only 40 percent of them reported having served as the senior sponsor or project leader for the successful changes. A noticeably smaller percent (29) categorized themselves in those roles for the unsuccessful projects. Given the notable difference in these

SENIOR LEADER BEHAVIORS STUDIED

The eight senior leader behaviors used in the two surveys are listed below with short descriptions:

- **Assessment of organizational readiness**—Did the senior leader assess the organization's readiness for change?
- **Active demonstration of support**—Did the senior leader demonstrate his/her strong support for the change from beginning to end?
- **Change process**—Did the leader encourage people to use a single change management approach when talking about the change?
- **Trust in team**—Did the leader demonstrate trust in the people to whom he/she assigned or delegated responsibility for the project?
- **Stakeholder preparation**—Did the leader make sure that a significant number of stakeholders knew why this change was critically important to the organization before he/she ever talked about particular plans for the change?
- **Stakeholder support**—Did this leader only start projects that stakeholders could see were critically important to the organization?
- **Readiness of superiors**—Did this leader make sure that the people to whom he/she reported (e.g., the board or senior leaders/executives at the corporate headquarters) were in the loop and supported this change?
- **Learnings application**—Did the senior leader learn anything about the change process that he/she was able to apply to future projects?

demographics, it is not surprising that the two surveys' results were different.

Points to Ponder

Strong leadership support seems to be worthwhile throughout the life cycle of a change project. The evidence of this support may vary greatly, running the gamut from attending every team meeting to ensuring that stakeholders and higher levels of management are onboard completely. The key probably is reflected in Deming's principle of "constant sea of purpose." Clear evidence of this ongoing commitment to the change is more valuable than occasional announcements or rah-rah speeches!

A senior leader's ability to demonstrate unwavering trust in a team sets the stage for individual professional growth and the acceptance of reasonable risk. Only when senior leaders clearly express and show their confidence in team members' abilities to analyze issues and make appropriate decisions regarding needed changes can the organization reach its fullest potential. Several comments from the first survey, shown in next column, make it clear that a lack of trust can be detrimental and definitely doesn't build a collaborative approach to change:

- "SMEs' recommendations were always questioned. Leaders developed parts of the system with limited outside input."
- "... but showed little patience with their expressed concerns for the change. The CEO was going to drive this change to be done on time come hell or high water. The result was an ample amount of both."
- "Demonstrated very strong support initially, but focus evaporated."
- "Employees are now accustomed to hearing re-organization, and don't trust any plans."

The influence of senior leaders' actions can be important during both the planning and implementation stages of the change. For instance, input and suggestions should be welcomed while plans are being developed, tapping into the wisdom and experience of those who will be affected by the change. This demonstrates trust and builds engagement and acceptance.

As implementation approaches, senior leaders set the stage for change by emphasizing its importance and urgency. Furthermore, all stakeholders, including staff members at higher levels of the organization, must be kept informed of progress—either when successes are achieved or setbacks

occur. This creates a shared sense of purpose and unites support for the change.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The results of these two studies weren't as neat and tidy as might have been hoped! Two groups did not come to the exact same conclusions, and it appears that their roles in the change projects may have influenced their perspectives. Additional research certainly seems appropriate, and here are just a few areas that might be worth investigating.

- *What constitutes a successful change project?* Neither of these surveys asked respondents to define the parameters of successful change in specific terms or metrics. It might be informative to frame future analyses of effective senior leader behaviors against a more structured dividing line between success and failure.
- *What distinguishes the effective application of these eight senior leader behaviors?* Note only generalized descriptions of the actions were included in these two surveys. It might be interesting to dig more deeply into the exact characteristics that differentiate their application.
- *What other factors may be equally important to senior leader behaviors?* What is the interaction between senior leader behaviors and these other factors? It is unclear just how far senior leader behaviors can go in overcoming other factors that frequently are present in the change process. For instance, can truly motivational leadership overcome technical issues with the change? How long will people persist to have a positive

mindset about changes when constant road-blocks occur? The answers to these and other similar questions could provide valuable insight for senior leaders into how to stage and support change projects.

- *How can we eliminate the respondent's potential personal biases associated with the role he/she has in the change being evaluated?* A subsequent study might focus more on senior leaders' self-reports and examining those comments against more objective data about the success of the projects.

More Online

To review the specific questions and detailed results from the first survey, go to www.rickmaurer.com/leadsurvey or www.rickmaurer.com/squandered-opportunities. For graphs of the response percentages, comparing successful to unsuccessful projects for the second survey, go to www.asq.org/pub/jqp.



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Rick Maurer is an adviser to people who lead change in large organizations. He recently released the new paperback edition of his classic book Beyond the Wall of Resistance: Why 70% of All Changes Still Fail—and What You Can Do About It. You can access free tools on leading change from Maurer's website at www.rickmaurer.com.