

Leading through Transitions



“Our emotional wake determines the story that is told about each of us.”¹ What great insight for leaders leading through transitions—personal, team, or organizational. If I were to ask those you lead to describe your emotional wake, what would they say? How leaders deal with change splashes on to those around them and impacts the culture, energy, and feeling of the team. For example, do you provide perspective and vision, or are you in survival mode just coping and trying to make it through another week? Are you finding opportunity and challenge in the changes required for your business, or are you exhibiting anxiety and worry? Are you engaging others in finding new solutions, or staying with the way you’ve always done it?

The tricky part for leaders in transition is that they are often receiving change for themselves while at the same time trying to lead others through change. This can be both challenging and exhausting. The typical response is to double down, buckle up, and work harder. This works for a short time. A big burst of energy can get leaders through some things. But transitions take longer. As with running, a runner can’t sprint a whole marathon. If leaders try this approach, the result is typically some level of personal burnout and fatigue, as well as disengagement for those she leads. The leader’s “emotional wake” takes on negative rather than positive energy at that point.

For some years, I’ve been coaching leaders how to positively fuel their emotional wake by managing themselves and their resilience. Years ago, I heard Jim Loehr discuss with a group of senior executives how to sustain high performance in the face of ever-increasing pressure and rapid change. He compared leaders to corporate athletes. The difference, he noted, was that athletes plan their rest and recovery but leaders don’t. He later wrote: “A successful approach to sustained high performance must pull together all of these elements and consider the person as a whole. Our integrated theory of performance management addresses the body, the emotions, the mind, and the spirit.”² Leaders must proactively manage each of the following areas of their life to have the capacity to lead during transition:

- **Physical** (Energy and Capacity): Take a walk, breathe, exercise, take some alone time, plan healthy snacks
- **Mental** (Knowledge and Skill): Read to learn, seek feedback, try a mental challenge, read for fun, schedule time to do one of your hobbies
- **Spiritual** (Identity and Purpose): Create personal goals, mediate, read wisdom literature, review your purpose or mission, spend time in nature
- **Emotional** (Feelings and Emotions): Create a gratitude journal, celebrate accomplishments, plan time with a friend, establish boundaries, learn to say “No”

- **Social** (Relationships and Expectations): Ask for help, plan a virtual lunch, write a thank you note, network, schedule an outing

Proactively engaging all parts of self creates energy and the emotional fuel necessary to be fully present, receive change, and effectively lead in transition.

Alvin Toffler, a writer and futurist said, “Our moral responsibility is not to stop the future, but to shape it. To channel our destiny in humane directions and to ease the trauma of transition.” This is the role of leadership! To shape the future and ease the trauma of transition, leaders need energy to enable change to happen. Working harder isn’t enough. Successful leaders take time to engage all parts of themselves and allow their employees to do the same. Maybe in your next team meeting you could ask, “What is one practice you have adopted to increase your personal resilience?” And “What’s getting in the way of bringing your whole self to work?” Not only will this give your team permission to refuel because they see this is important to you, but it will also give you ideas to add to your personal resilience practices.

#change, #leadership, #changethewayyouchange

¹ Susan Scott, “Fierce Conversations”

² Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, “The Making of a Corporate Athlete,”
<https://hbr.org/2001/01/the-making-of-a-corporate-athlete>