

## A Dialogue between Hippocrates and Socrates: #1 To lead or not to lead

**Hippocrates** (*addressing Athenian crowd*): The days of Athenian dominance are over. We need to make big changes in our society if we are to prevent the dictators of Sparta, Egypt, or, Olympus forbid, the Persians to take our land and control the way we live our lives. I have a plan to return Athens to the pinnacle of modern society. As you decide who might lead you in this great endeavour, I ask you to consider how I have improved the health of this great city. It is time for each of you, whether landowner or servant, to consider what you need to do differently to join me in this exceptional quest to recover the glory of this extraordinary city, the cradle of global democracy. (*The crowd cheer enthusiastically and then disperse*)

**Socrates** (*appearing from the dispersing crowd*): Hail great Hippocrates! These are indeed fine words. One might even say 'heroic'. But Athens is today a thriving city-state, whose citizens are as comfortable as any in history, and probably more so than any others for more than a thousand years. If we are indeed to consider what each of us should do differently, then let me ask, what will you do differently?

**H**: Thank you Socrates. Your questions are as challenging as ever! My promise to each of you is that I shall learn from the mistakes of previous leaders of Athens; I shall apply the knowledge I have learned from my creation of the field of medicine; and I shall crack down on all resistance to our great quest. I will lead us to success.

**S**: It is encouraging that we can call upon your experience and knowledge. But if I have concerns about your strategy, am I to be 'cracked down on'?

**H**: Of course not. I'm sure Socrates that you are a progressive thinker, and so you will be considered as a key partner in our change. I will look to leaders like you to join me in ensuring alignment to our goals amongst all Athenians.

**S**: I would, of course, be honoured to be thought of as a leader in Athens. However, I do not think that I could claim this without gaining the assent of the people. By the way, have you considered that your goals for the city might not be accepted by the people?

**H**: The many books that I have read have warned me to watch out for those who resist change. It seems, after all that you are one of those people, perhaps even a ring-leader.

**S**: It seems clear to me that you see this change as basically simple. No doubt you aim to simply instruct your lieutenants that this is the right direction, and they will drive their troops to ensure that it happens on the ground. I thought that you were seeking to protect Athens from dictators, yet it seems that you plan to use the tools of those dictators to enslave your fellow citizens. If you are seeking to preserve the world's first democracy, please tell me how you can do this whilst behaving as a dictator?

**H**: I had hoped to involve you in my leadership team as I return Athens to its number one position. However, you are clearly Hades-bent on undermining this great initiative. Therefore, I insist that you come with me to my home at once, so that I can prevent you from poisoning the rest of our exceptional city. Let us talk once more when we are there.

[*Exit Hippocrates*]

**S**: (*following some way behind*) I look forward to talking with you further. Perhaps this way I can help you to avoid a catastrophe as you lead our great city. I wonder, why do you want to lead Athens – is it for your glory, that of the gods or for the city and the people of Athens?

## Chapter 1: Heroism – the scourge of sustainable change

Since 2001, research by RFLC and Transcend has shown the critical importance of the way in which change is led. If, like Hippocrates in the dialogue, you decide to ‘lead from the front’, brooking no ‘resistance’ from your people and directing the change ‘heroically’, then you have already begun to stack the odds against successful change. It can be tempting as a leader to underestimate the difficulty and complexity associated with a significant change. What looks like simple process and structural realignment combined with right-sizing of resources in the Boardroom, can feel like the destruction of the existing psychological contract, resulting in a frightening array of new technology and a constant risk of unemployment for those on the shop-floor. The further you remain from the front-line, the simpler the change may seem and the more tempted you will be to try to drive it through. You need to overcome the inevitable temptation to control things tightly, seeking a constant stream of ‘quick wins’ and always communicating megaphonically through e-mail, voicemail and set-piece speeches. As Master Yoda in Star Wars might say: “The way to the dark side this is!” Deborah Rowland and Malcolm Higgs, in their book ‘Sustaining Change’ have defined this set of leader-centric practices as Shaping Leadership. They found that these practices accounted for **53%** of the reason why change efforts failed. Perhaps you don’t want to be an heroic leader after all?!

So if the traditional image of a heroic, omnipresent, catalytic leader can be so damaging, how can you lead to maximise the chances of success. As a leadership team, you need to be clear about the direction that you are heading, and the reasons *why* you are heading there. Also you need a few simple rules which become the non-negotiables of your change journey. In essence, you need to ‘Frame’ the change, such that your people understand the ‘what’ and the ‘why’, whilst leaving sufficient latitude for them to engage in designing and delivering the ‘how’. If you engage with your people early and often, and listen to their hopes and concerns for the change, you are more likely to see the complexity and ambiguity at the heart of the process. This should lead you to involve yet more people, not so that you can persuade them to take your predefined path, but so you can co-develop the way forward with them. A consequence of a more collaborative leadership style is that you will not be the one expected to know everything or make every decision. Here the research shows that you should focus on building the capability of your people to deal with change. In this way, the capability to deal with change will sit where it is needed, not in the hands of a few leaders, or worse, a small army of ever-present consultants!

This seductive combination of *framing change* and *building capacity* has led Transcend to identify four Change Leadership Practices (CLP), of which we will hear much more in the coming chapters. And if *shaping* leadership is such a bad idea, being responsible for more than half of the reasons for failed change, what contribution do these CLPs make to the success equation? In fact, the CLPs account for almost the same level of change success (52%) as *Shaping* does for change failure (53%)! So, as you embark on your change journey, you can maximise your chances of success and minimise your chances of failure, by adopting a style of leadership which *frames* the overall change and focuses on building the capacity for change amongst your people, and avoiding a controlling, shaping, heroic style.

Heroes have their place in literature, but they are villains in the battle for sustainable change in our modern, complex and interconnected world.

## Leading Change: Some Do's and Don'ts



**Work with others to create a common vision and direction.**



**Help others to see why things need to change, and why going back is no option.**



**Share the overall plan as widely as possible and encourage dialogue.**



**Give people space to do what's needed, and coach them to improve.**



**Make sure the organisation's systems and processes support change – or make them!**



**DON'T expect others to do exactly what you do – let them find their own way.**



**DON'T just hold others individually accountable for delivering results – succeed as a team.**



**DON'T personally control what gets done – trust your people to make the right choices.**



**DON'T be omnipresent, you don't need to drive the change yourself.**



**DON'T be a hero – they achieve spectacular results with high collateral damage!**