

STAY THE COURSE

STEERING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH TURBULENT TIMES

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Stay the Course: Steering Transformation Through Turbulent Times

JOCELYN HANNA - PERFORMANCE FRONTIERS, 2018

**“It is the set of our sails
not the direction of the wind
that determines which way we
will go.”**

- Jim Rohn

Another day, [another leadership spill in Australian politics](#).

Political beliefs firmly aside, it is highly unlikely that this switch of party leaders will result in any true, meaningful change. Progress takes time. And with both political camps regularly ricocheting between leaders, increasingly it seems our politicians can't commit to any one direction for longer than a nanosecond. There are undoubtedly a host of contributing factors to this particular spill, but if we switch from a political lens to an organisational one, it brings to mind some human tendencies we see cropping up time and again in whole system transformation.

It is no secret that transformation efforts regularly flounder - with a plethora of examples in the widespread shift to [Agile](#). Some of the biggest barriers can be found in ourselves: our human nature. Progress takes time, there is often little immediate reward, and it is not always smooth sailing — in fact, it can be downright uncomfortable. For our reward-addicted, comfort-seeking human brains, this spells trouble. In the face of discomfort with little reward, we can be tempted to look for a quick-fix “solution” that makes us feel better, or even be lured back to the old ways that feel much safer.

The result? Fear-driven action, hunting scapegoats, axing leaders, haphazard or abandoned change efforts and, ultimately, stilted progress — sound familiar?

Humanising politicians probably won't win us any favours, but at least we can learn something from this chaos in the Coalition.

Transformation is about evolution and growth - as such, it will always be fraught with a level of discomfort and a degree of challenge. We can't let ourselves be driven by our most basic human instincts and destruct from the inside when the going gets tough.

As leaders, how do we stay the course and support our people to stick with transformation, even through trying times?

Share the story:

We often share the “what” and the “how” of transformation, but this can lead to people just going through the motions. If you want to motivate people to commit to your next stage of evolution, they need to be invested; they understand the “why” behind it.

Purpose is the North Star that anchors your transformation efforts. Consider: do you and your people have a deep understanding of the reasons behind the transformation, how the transformation aligns with your core purpose and vision for the future, and why this is the right path?

Rather than clinically outlining mere facts and percentages, try speaking to the hearts and minds of your people through [stories](#). Storytelling creates “oxytocin” in the brain, enhancing empathy, trust and cooperation. As such, stories motivate, influence and forge emotional connections, all increasing the chances of true transformation buy-in.

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Grit begins with you:

Leading transformation requires a lot of grit. Grit, as defined by leading researcher Angela Duckworth, is passion and sustained persistence applied over long periods of time towards a goal, even in the face of hardship, rejection or failure. On an individual level, it requires:

Conviction – a strong, passionate belief in the “why”, the bigger picture that fuels your drive.

Buoyancy – the ability to bounce back from adversity, embracing failure as essential to growth, and maintaining the belief that a brighter future is achievable through constant improvement.

Commitment – persevering for the long run and finishing what you start, with laser-like focus and sustained effort over time, no matter the obstacle.

You can test your levels of grit using Duckworth’s grit scale here: <http://angeladuckworth.com/grit-scale/>. But remember, grit is something you can grow. Check out some tips here: <https://www.inc.com/tanner-christensen/an-absolute-formula-for-developing-grit.html>

Beyond getting gritty yourself, you must also encourage grit in your people. As social creatures, we humans look to each other to guide our thinking and behaviours – it’s how cultures are built and broken. And as Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, organisations are the [lengthened shadows of their leaders](#). To encourage grit at every level, it is essential that you show up, personify and role model grit every day.

Turn off cruise control - get agile:

Grit is only half of the equation. Great leaders [balance grit with agility](#). Staying the course is not about plotting a straight line from point A to B. In this volatile, rapidly changing, uncertain contemporary world, it’s about steering through the fog, navigating rough seas and shifting tides, and taking a detour where necessary, all the while keeping your eyes to that brilliant horizon and your journey clearly anchored in your “why”.

Metaphors aside, agility means getting comfortable at the edge of uncertainty and learning how to pay attention to internal and external clues to inform action. It requires both critical and creative thinking: to recognise when something may not be working, to identify why, to rapidly generate creative solutions, and to advance with conviction when there is no “right” way forward.

Fail. Learn. Iterate.:

This goes hand in hand with an agile mindset. When mistakes or failures happen, and they will, don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Resist the impulse to take the easy way out - pointing fingers, writing off the whole transformation as a failure, and falling back into old habits. [Embrace failure as an opportunity to learn](#). Fail fast, learn quickly and iterate wherever you can.

Avoid any rash decisions by reminding yourself and your people of your anchor – the “why” behind your transformation. Regularly seek feedback at all levels to understand what is and isn’t working so you can improve iteratively. This enables you to

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stay proactive, and address any concerns before they become deep-seated issues.

Play the long and short game:

During times of transformation, “keeping your eyes on the horizon” ensures that you stay strategic, focused, and buoyant. However, you must also build in quick wins for the here and now if you have any hope of maintaining momentum.

As established earlier, on a neurobiological level we are built to seek reward and dislike discomfort. A level of discomfort is unavoidable through change, but discomfort can be significantly alleviated and a sense of reward magnified by breaking your transformation down into smaller parts. [Chunk progress](#) by giving your people goals that they’re almost able to achieve on their own, but are easily able to achieve with support. This way, the next step is always just within reach and your people are constantly growing and achieving, leading to a sense of [intrinsic reward](#) more powerful than any “carrot on a stick” measure.

Then, celebrate those wins! Share stories of success and watch the ripple effect of motivation grow.

Don’t ignore your naysayers:

A mainstay in all good transformation models is the importance of engaging a group of champions to build momentum, role modelling positive behaviours and influencing at every level. However, some fail to highlight the necessity of engaging your naysayers.

Those that question or resist transformation might be written off as troublemakers, existing as adversaries to be ignored or stamped out. But by doing so, we threaten their basic human desire to feel heard, risking their active rebellion. We also risk putting our blinkers on to the insight these “resisters” might possess. Unbeknownst to us, we

may have blind spots or biases that threaten to undermine our transformation efforts.

Empathy is the first step to any good design process. Reframe your “us vs. them” thinking and seek understanding. Remember, as a team, you’re in this together, and their resistance could be warranted. Consider these people in your team not as resisters or troublemakers, but as [guardians of the past](#) who see what needs to be protected. Listen carefully to their concerns, and ensure they are acknowledged and addressed. Build their confidence by weaving the stories of the past into your storytelling for the future, acknowledging that where we came from is an essential foundation for where we head next.

In summary, this won’t be the last leadership coup we witness in the hallowed halls of parliament. And this article is certainly not suggesting an alliance with either side. Instead, this article advocates for us all to be constantly on the lookout for reminders in our environment of the ways our human nature can both help and hinder transformation progress.

And in a world where progress is desperately needed, it should be critical and creative thinking rather than fear or discomfort that determines whether you stay the course, turn the wheel, or abandon ship on your journey of transformation.

Performance Frontiers is a company dedicated to human-led transformation. For almost two decades, our team of transformation and behavioural change specialists have partnered with leaders and organisations to spark, amplify and sustain change to achieve desired futures. If you’re interested in learning more about what we do, why not say [hello](#).