

When the Change Needs to Be You

By Nicki Roth

When I start to work with a new leader, I ask them to describe their most pressing organizational challenges. With few exceptions, their answers include “all of them”: the staff, the team, the partners, the volunteers, and the community. Then I ask my final question. “If, after I do my assessment, it turns out that you are part of the problem, are you willing to make some changes?” “Absolutely! Whatever I need to do for the organization! Without hesitation.” Easier said than done.

As leaders, human beings, and problem solvers our first strategies to effect change will be to lock in on everything other than ourselves. So how do nonprofit leaders fairly assess whether or not they are the change that needs to happen? And then, what do they do about it?

Two stories, part one

Betheny was hired as the executive director of a large metropolitan children’s services agency after it had suffered significant setbacks and a public image nightmare. She was selected for her deep experience with overhauling large systems, and her open and engaging style. The county in which the agency worked hoped that she could make some tough decisions, get the house in order, and handle the media in heartfelt ways.

Things started out very well because of Betheny’s core leadership strengths: listening to and considering multiple points of view, engaging staff in critical discussions, speaking honestly with politicians and reporters. But after a year things began to stall and Betheny seemed incapable of moving the staff forward.

Raul was stuck, too. After five years of trying to pull together the leadership team to align with and implement a new housing services strategy at his organization, his funders had reached their limit. They insisted that the organization produce the targeted results within the next six months or else something drastic would need to occur. They were banking on his deep subject matter expertise and savvy community relationship skills to turn things around.

As he urgently presented the dire ultimatum to the team and the staff, Raul was met with an uproar of finger pointing. While everyone seemed to know who or what needed to change, nobody volunteered to change themselves. Raul struggled to pinpoint where the most critical change needed to occur.

Betheny and Raul are not unusual. Both leaders had good track records of meeting tough challenges in their previous roles. When I met each of them they were eloquent about a whole

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host of issues, including their own strengths and limitations. But when I asked what they thought needed to happen to move things forward, changing their own leadership behaviors never made the list, which brings us to the first step in behavior change: honest self-assessment.

How do you know the change has to come from you?

Honest self-assessment starts with asking the right questions. Explore your need to change by answering the following:

- Have you received feedback that you need to shift gears? Have you heard specific recommendations like “you need to be more decisive” or “you need to focus more attention on the daily management issues”?
- Do you dread walking into specific meetings or interacting with certain individuals? Do you find yourself making excuses to not show up?
- Do you feel frustrated or powerless in getting others to make necessary changes?
- Have you set yourself apart from everyone else? Are you asking others to do one thing and you are doing another?
- Is there buzz in the office about you that makes you feel defensive, disheartened or angry?

If you answered yes to any/all of these questions then it’s likely that you are the one that needs to make some changes.

So what can you do?

The first question you need to answer is: Am I sincerely willing to make changes in my leadership behavior? You need to move past the knee-jerk response of “absolutely” and fully imagine yourself at the beginning of a learning process.

Picture yourself finally tackling that skill set you’ve been avoiding, for example, public speaking. You will learn how to speak to large audiences with great passion about your cause. You will conquer your stage fright and learn how to vary your voice and tell a good story. Are you finally willing to take this on now? If so, great. If not, that’s okay too. There can be no successful behavior change if you are not motivated and committed. So don’t give lip service to something that is not going to happen. Find other solutions or resources.

If your answer is “yes, I am ready to change” here are some guidelines.

- *Take small bites.* Human beings change one small step at a time. When we set goals and plans for significant changes our biggest mistake is that we bite off too much. Just think about the last time you tried to lose weight or stick to an exercise routine. Pick one or two small but potent new actions. If your goal is to run a tightly facilitated meeting, just commit to starting and ending on time or having only four agenda items. Or if your goal is to meet twice a month with each of your direct reports, use Wednesday mornings as your 10-minute check in with each person.
- *Get supportive help and feedback.* Select a trusted advisor or role model with whom to share your ideas and practices. Describe your behavior change plans and ask for help and feedback about how you’re doing. With each attempt at the new action, debrief and tweak, and then try again. Your trusted advisor becomes your “safe place” to practice before going live as well as a safe place to process that helps you get comfortable and ultimately integrate a new habit.

- *Turn to your team.* If you're comfortable, engage your team in your development plan. Tell them what you plan to do differently, ask them to praise you when they see you doing it well, and invite them to gently redirect your efforts when you miss the mark. Making your aspirations public reinforces your commitment to follow through. The secondary benefit to this is that you're modeling continued growth and vulnerability for the other leaders.
- *Keep going.* Once you have mastered one new behavior, try another one. Keep taking small bites. Before you know it you will have expanded your leadership repertoire in ways you can't imagine today.

There is one warning here. Your new actions initially will be met with skepticism as your staff struggles to trust that this is real or sustainable. Don't back off. If your behavior becomes consistent it will become believable.

Two stories, part two

My work with Betheny became very focused because multiple thought paths easily distracted her. Her propensity towards endlessly listening to everybody on every issue had become a problem. Betheny struggled to close her door consistently so people were still able to get her attention. Together we agreed that she would attempt to curtail her open-door policy by clearly and firmly announcing her decisions and then allow for only three days of additional input.

Raul was aware of the divisive gossip around the office, but he was not intervening. After rehearsing his remarks with me, he met with the staff, acknowledged the destructive gossip, and described how he wanted it to stop and what the consequences would be if someone violated the new expectation. Within weeks he had called out several staff members, written up misconduct reports and ultimately had to dismiss a repeat offender. Not only did the gossip stop, but the respect for Raul skyrocketed.

Sadly, Betheny just could not sustain new habits. She claimed they just weren't in line with her core sense of self and she was willing to suffer the consequences. She was removed from her position. Conversely, Raul felt freed up and raring to go. His funders were delighted with the progress and extended their support.

At the root of making effective leadership changes is an accurate assessment of what needs to be different, loads of experimentation, feedback and support, and reinforcement for achieving improved outcomes. Even more fundamental is the motivation to change.

The moral of the story? Change is possible but you *really* have to want it.

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