

QUARTERBACKING REAL AND RAPID ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENT

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As the global economy increases competition, organizations are under growing pressure to rapidly improve performance. Why do some organizations rise to the challenge while others falter? In our book *The Two-Minute Drill: Lessons on Rapid Organizational Improvement from America's Greatest Game*, we have chronicled our research on over 1,000 change initiatives, finding that in each case, *leadership is the single greatest predictor of successful performance improvement!* In this study, we also found that a successful improvement effort is usually characterized by the following attributes:

- A clear definition of winning focused on a specific desired outcome.
- An effective assessment of a team's strengths and weaknesses and how they match up with the changes they are attempting to make.
- A sense of urgency and importance surrounding the effort.
- A clearly defined, time-sensitive game plan to drive change.
- Having the right players on the team with clearly defined assignments and ready to play.
- Effective teamwork and execution of the actions leading to better performance.
- Ongoing measurement and monitoring of the change process from start to finish.
- Celebrating success and learning from the change activity itself.

After reviewing this list, we would like to engage your imagination and introduce you to a powerful metaphor in helping you lead change: think about your next organizational change as a two-minute drill (TMD) from American football. A TMD is a disciplined offense strategy to score quickly when a team is behind on the scoreboard late in a close game with time running out. If the team is successful in executing the two-minute drill it will win.

Coaches will tell you that typically 7 out of 10 TMDs put points on the board. Our observation is a simple one: Successful organizational change or improvement is run like a two-minute drill. Examples:

- A *Fortune* 1000 service organization redesigns and executes a new sales strategy with an 18 percent improvement in sales within six months.
- A financial services company implements changes in its supply chain creating a 16 percent cost savings in 45 days.
- A manufacturing plant shaves 15 percent out of cost of sales in three months to respond to customer price reduction demands.

In each of these cases, organizations employed improvement processes with an eye toward rapid and effective change following the principles of a TMD and were led by highly effective leaders! These leaders not only increased the likelihood of success, they also accelerated the improvement process, helping their organizations “come from behind” and score.

The Quarterback Position: The Place for Leadership

On a football field, the quarterback is the leadership force that influences all the other critical success fac-

A two-minute drill is a disciplined strategy to score quickly.

Change leaders must energize and infuse a passion for winning.

tors. Change leaders must know and understand the change process, but, equally important, they must energize and infuse a passion for winning. In this sense, leaders become “quarterbacks” of the change process. Change initiatives in too many organizations have become bureaucratic, rigid, routine-driven, and antiseptic affairs that frequently lack leadership. For successful change to occur, effective leadership is required at each step of the process, and the quarterback is the key to any successful two-minute drill in the game of football or organizational change.

A few critical leadership imperatives have emerged from our study of successful change leaders. We call them “TMD Momentum Building Leadership Imperatives.” Here are the 10 momentum builders that separate real change leaders from the rest of the pack:

Imperative #1: Come energized to play at a new level.

Have you ever noticed that when a football game is on the line, some quarterbacks suddenly “shift gears” into a higher level of intensity? They seem to have greater strength, focus, and energy when their team is behind on the scoreboard. This same practice is frequently demonstrated by highly successful change leaders. When improvements are necessary, they come to work with a new level of intensity and energy that enables them to drive the change process forward. Effective leaders recognize this need and begin change initiatives by preparing themselves to marshal their own energy level and focus. They might do this by taking better control of their work schedule, getting extra sleep, min-

imizing meetings, getting more exercise, or planning better. Successful TMD quarterbacks develop the ability to infuse their teams with energy, excitement, and passion by their actions. When real change is needed, people want to know that their leaders know what they are doing and are motivated and energized to do it!

Approaching change with a “business as usual” attitude will have a debilitating effect on the team’s performance.

Imperative #2: Seize control of the game.

Great quarterbacks are famous for “taking control of the game” through personal actions. Workplace change is no different. When change is necessary, leaders must step up to take control of the change process. This practice shows up in the leader’s actions to influence, be engaged in, and monitor every phase of the change process. These actions can include publicly endorsing the effort, selecting team members, tying the effort to specific outcomes, measuring performance, asking tough questions, providing resources, holding others accountable for progress, ensuring execution, and generating excitement.

Yet in many organizations, leaders frequently delegate or even abdicate their responsibility for driving change to teams, black belts, consultants, facilitators, and subordinates. When a business leader turns control of the change game over to others, it increases the likelihood that the effort will not be properly led or taken seriously. The equivalent in a football game is sending the trainer, equipment manager, or even water boy onto the field to quarterback the team. In a football game this would be ludicrous, but in business the practice is far too common.

Imperative #3: Communicate above the roar of the crowd.

Organizations are generally very noisy places, and the noise level rapidly rises when change is brought to the organizational playing field. Between hallway gossip, e-mails, meetings, formal proclamations, data overload, political haggling, training programs, performance reviews, feedback sessions, newsletters, and Web boards, organizational information can turn into a “communications roar.” It is interesting to note that one of the primary reasons managers fail to get desired results during periods of rapid organizational change is their in-

Organizations are very noisy places, and the noise level rapidly rises during change.

ability to communicate effectively. Managers must communicate goals, required actions, individual roles, time lines, and a myriad of things that are necessary to keep their team focused and informed.

This is not unlike a quarterback starting a two-minute drill in a hostile stadium where the roar of the partisan crowd attempts to drown out the quarterback in both the huddle and at the line of scrimmage. Great quarterbacks always find creative ways to ensure that everyone knows the priorities, plan of attack, the current status, and their own responsibilities, as communication breakdowns will cause any change effort to founder.

Imperative #4: Create ownership of the drive.

In our research we found that one of the most critical leadership behaviors necessary for successful change is the leader’s ability to create ownership of and accountability for the change process with their people. While leaders need control of the overall change process, they must create a level of commitment and ownership among the people responsible for the design and execution. In organizations, it is common to hear managers say things like, “Nobody else seems to give a hoot about what we’re trying to do,” or, “Does anybody else realize this change is really needed?”

These statements reveal that a leader has failed to create ownership of the change process among team members. Successful leaders create an environment where individu-

Successful change leaders provide a steady dose of encouragement and positive feedback.

als have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, where their input is encouraged and valued, and where they have a say in both creating and executing the plan for improvement. Any change effort that does not have buy-in and shared ownership will struggle to reach its full potential.

Imperative #5: Keep the play clock in your head.

One of the most notable attributes of a two-minute drill in a football game is how many plays can be run and how far the ball can be moved in a relatively short period of time. Successful quarterbacks and business leaders share this attribute in that they tend to be extremely time sensitive. In business, people are overwhelmed with meetings, e-mail, and paperwork consuming much of their time and energy. Effective change leaders demonstrate extreme sensitivity to time resources consumed by yet more meetings, e-mail, paperwork, training, and other activities that are necessary in planning and executing change. They keep a running clock in mind of how time is being spent and if progress is being made along established time lines. Without the effective use of time, change efforts can overwhelm participants, lose momentum, and fall into stalemate.

Imperative #6: Make adjustments on the field fast.

As the world moves faster, the ability to successfully carry out a task quickly becomes even more critical. Mistakes,

fumbles, and breakdowns can lead to a loss of momentum, endangering the ability of a team to achieve its goal. It is imperative to make adjustments quickly when things are not working as planned. One of the most important findings about successful leaders of change is the simple fact that they tend to be very timely in making decisions, solving problems, removing roadblocks, and fighting the tyranny of the urgent. On the football field when the game is on the line, executing under pressure equates to making decisions, managing huddles, calling plays, and managing the clock. All these decisions must be made quickly. In business, the wrong people might be on a project, analysis paralysis might set in, or excessive meetings might cause the effort to stagnate. These types of situations often go unnoticed until the cumulative negative effect takes momentum out of the drive. Effective change leaders make adjustments quickly to maintain momentum and progress.

Imperative #7: Have the courage to take a hit, but avoid being sacked.

One of the worst things that can happen in a football two-minute drill is a quarterback sack. Not only does it cost time, lose yards, and waste a down, it also wreaks havoc on that critical element of momentum. In many organizations, change leaders operate in an environment where some people do not want to see a change succeed and are willing to undermine it. Accordingly, a skilled change leader is proficient at avoiding the sack and dealing effectively with potential opposition.

Successful leaders of change have the courage to do the right thing when change is truly needed. This can lead to taking a hit. Sacks or hits in the workplace can come in a wide variety of forms driven by factors such as workforce resistance, lack of supervisory support, political rivalry, unhealthy competition, or lack of resources. Sometimes it is tough to see the sack coming, but the effective quarterback has a knack for doing so. Typically, this improves with experience, but keeping your eyes open and monitoring your peripheral vision for “defenders”—potential opponents—is imperative. Unfortunately, sacks do happen in both football and business, requiring the quarterback have the courage and strength to get up and keep leading.

Imperative #8: Find a way to win.

Winning quarterbacks find creative ways to win, whether it involves scrambling, using a pump fake, calling an audible at the line of scrimmage, or blocking downfield for a running back. When change is needed, change leaders demonstrate their willingness to look for creative solutions and new and better ways of doing things. Creativity must be sanctioned and then stimulated. Leaders must be willing to listen and observe all the things surrounding them during the change process if they are to make full use of the talents of their team in finding winning solutions. Good quarterbacks listen when a teammate comes back to the huddle with a suggestion on what might work in a given situation on the football field. That same skill is required for leading change and finding ways to improve. When leaders do not stimulate creativity and innovation and demonstrate character during change, they throw away opportunities that can increase the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Imperative #9: Be a cheerleader.

A frequently overlooked practice of successful quarterbacks is their tendency to be cheerleaders for their team. This is especially true in situations when their

team is behind. Most of us have seen quarterbacks cheer for team members when they have made a big play or encourage teammates after a dropped pass on the playing field. Successful quarterbacks look for ways to motivate team members, especially during two-minute drills. By nature, most managers are looking for things that could be done better or that need to be fixed. However, during periods of change managers can easily and unknowingly provide their people with an unhealthy dose of criticism and negative feedback. Conversely, successful change leaders counterbalance this tendency by providing a steady dose of praise, encouragement, and positive feedback. They also look for meaningful ways to cheer for and encourage their team to keep the change process moving forward. When people receive only negative feedback, criticism, or no feedback at all during a change, it damages their desire to win.

Imperative #10: Maintain your composure and poise.

The ability to execute under pressure and demonstrate poise has always been an admirable trait of effective leaders, but nowhere is this more true than when change

EXHIBIT 1. TMD LEADERSHIP MOMENTUM BUILDER CHECKLIST

Answer each of the following questions as they pertain to leading change in your organization:

When approaching change do I . . .

MOMENTUM BUILDER	YES	NO
1. Come energized and ready to play at a new level?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Seize control of the factors that affect the outcome of the change and improvement process?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Communicate effectively above the roar of the crowd during the change process?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Create ownership of the improvement drive?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Demonstrate extreme time sensitivity?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Make adjustments quickly to the factors that threaten to derail or slow down our change efforts?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Have the courage to take a hit when resistance to change occurs, while avoiding unnecessary sacks?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Look for creative and innovative ways to ensure success?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Serve as a cheerleader to team members in providing praise and positive feedback when deserved?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Maintain my composure and poise during the change process?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

is required. We have all heard people say things like “he just lost it,” “she just couldn’t hold it all together,” and “they went off the deep end” to describe leaders who lost their poise and composure. The problem with not being poised during change is twofold. First, losing it has a detrimental effect on the leader’s ability to process information and make effective decisions. Second, loss of composure has a detrimental effect on the morale and confidence of team members. When things are going well it is easy to demonstrate composure and poise. Composure means that a leader is able to function effectively and lead by example even though crazy things are happening all around. This imperative becomes critical as your people will follow your example—and panic always begets panic.

Calling All Quarterbacks

Quarterbacks are judged on a wide variety of measures that include their passing yards, completion percentage, touchdowns, and interceptions. But the most important overall statistic from a team’s perspective is their win-loss percentage: Do the quarterback and the team win more games than they lose? What is your win-loss percentage when it comes to implementing change and making improvements? Are you undefeated? 8–3? 6–5? 0–11? What number would you attach to this important metric? If sportscasters were making the call, how would they describe your performance as the quarterback and leader of your team on a recent change initiative?

The 10 TMD momentum-building leadership imperatives we’ve discussed are all skills that can be developed by any leader who is serious about improving the ability to drive change. Momentum is the key to keeping any change effort moving forward, and when leaders do not demonstrate these *momentum builders*, they unknowingly create *momentum busters* by their every action or inaction.

As a development challenge, take several minutes to perform a self-assessment (See Exhibit 1) to determine the extent to which your leadership style is building or busting momentum. Any “No” response is an opportunity to improve and accelerate your change efforts. Remem-

ber the words of legendary Penn State coach Joe Paterno, who said, “*The will to win is important, but the will to prepare is vital!*” So be a successful quarterback of real and rapid change by preparing to apply these practices to your next change effort when you and your team find yourselves behind on your organizational scoreboard.



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The findings reported in this article are chronicled in their book, "The Two-Minute Drill: Lessons on Rapid Organizational Improvement from America's Greatest Game." Visit their Web site at <http://twominutedrill.org>.