WHEN EVERYTHING NEEDS TO CHANGE

AMBASSADOR INSIGHTS

SEPTEMBER 2021

Developed collaboratively by the

**LEAP OF REASON
AMBASSADORS COMMUNITY**

WHEN EVERYTHING NEEDS TO CHANGE

Scenario: You've collected the data from your organization's stakeholders. You've analyzed it six ways to Sunday and made a list of strategies, actions, and tactics that need review. Unfortunately, you keep arriving at the same bottom-line conclusion: Everything needs to change!

Now what? How will your stakeholders react? Will they choke? Be offended? Do nothing? Or step up?

If you're an organizational leader (or a consultant) facing a similar scenario, you won't want to miss these tips about sharing not-so-great news from a recent online discussion in the Leap Ambassadors Community.

1. PUT IT ALL ON THE TABLE.

Consultant **Sandra Velthuis** has come across this situation in her work. She says, "Don't beat about the bush! You must communicate sensitively, but the team needs to see the full list initially and then the list can be organized into phases."

The quotation "Bad news isn't wine. It doesn't improve with age" is attributed to **Colin Powell** and serves as a reminder to social-sector leaders. In We need to talk… Tips for sharing bad news with your team, **Lisa Kogan-Praska** shares some guidelines on how to communicate with your stakeholders.

"Do no harm" is a mantra **Shirley Marcus Allen** used when she was a partner at Venture Philanthropy Partners. She says, "It's important to be constructive and respectful when delivering news, especially bad news. If the goal is to help the organization develop a path forward toward high performance, then condensing the list into 8-10 major categories might be a good place to start."

In How to Turn Around a Failing Organization, **Matt Shoup** says, "Expose what is right, excellent, and functional first." Although the scenario indicates "everything needs to change," is that really true? Can you find one or two areas where the organization is moving in a positive direction?

2. START WITH THE "WHY," AGREE ON THE GOALS, AND SET A TIMELINE.

Lou Salza wonders if it's better to start with "why"? "Can the team come up with the different categories [for change] after a review of their mission? This could set some priorities as well as parameters."

Margot Rogers asks, "Do they agree on the goal? If there's agreement on the goal, you might get more buy-in, especially if they can see the path to get there. If you can turn an organization around in five to seven years, I think we'd all say that is a success. If they don't agree on the goal, there's likely more fundamental work to do."

Chip Edelsberg, who has led and served as a consultant to foundations, agrees. "What does success look like? How will the foundation members know success when they see it? And thirdly, so what?... that is, when the foundation has instances of knowing its grantees have achieved the outcomes/results/impact to which the foundation aspires, will the foundation be satisfied with its philanthropy?"

According to **Meridith Polin**, flexibility is key. "A prioritization activity helps identify areas to work on and when, and you can find different, creative ways to facilitate such an activity, based on team dynamics, organizational culture, project budget, and appetite for change."

Linda Fowells suggests that leadership and staff need to own their change process. "As a consultant, I usually suggest a few areas that I think should be first, based on my assessment and their priorities. but the team drives the decisions about where to start and together we map out the first few steps of the plan. While I agree they should have a general sense of all the areas that need attention, too much detail can be overwhelming and demoralizing. Start with and celebrate small wins!"

3. FIND OTHERS TO TALK TO.

Chris Shearer advises that nonprofit or foundation leaders reach out to other organizations. He says, "If you can pull it off, I'd suggest that a board chair speak to their chair, a CEO talk with their CEO, and a panel of program officers talk to their program officers. In other words, peer-to-peer explanations of the process toward change and the strategic benefits at all levels of the foundation will be the most compelling. You might find a few willing volunteers among those who have become field advocates among the

already converted who can speak to the pace of transition and resulting, measurable improved outcomes."

Marcus Allen says, "Benchmarking several high-performing foundations that are similar in size and mission would give the decision maker(s) the data needed to choose a particular solution alternative. Employing Shearer's suggestion of CEO-to-CEO conversations or a panel of program officers sharing best practices would clearly demonstrate the organizational change needed to move forward."

Similarly, referencing successful case examples can be helpful in inspiring and sustaining change. For instance, here are some funders who are willing to support their grantees' learning and improvement and open to learning and improving themselves.

4. JUST DO IT.

Team members may have a different reaction that you expect. Salza has lived experience in transforming an organization, and he says, "I respectfully question the assumption that they will choke and do nothing if you level your honest assessment. We can't change what we're willing to tolerate. What do they or you have to lose?"

Shaheer Mustafa became Hopewell's President and CEO in 2016 as the organization was re-envisioning itself for the 21st century. He says, "Leading a turnaround effort can undoubtedly be overwhelming and one part of what can make it so challenging is trying to get the sequencing of activities just right. While it's important to consider the implications of what to do when, sometimes you just need to start with one thing. There's a saying, 'Nothing changes until something changes.' That rings very true when leading a turnaround. Often a singular action can result in a cascade of change; all it took was one shift to set it all in motion."

Discussions like these aren't easy, but courageous, adaptive leaders are the ones who take deep breaths and get started.

WHEN EVERYTHING NEEDS TO CHANGE

leapambassadors.org

AMBASSADORS
LEAP
COMMUNITY