

WOMEN OF WITNESS

TIPS TO BETTER RELATIONSHIPS



Change Leadership Today: Build Trust, Calm Anxiety & Drive Progress

Organizational Change: 6 Things You Must Do to Lead Effectively When Everything Is Shifting

By Dr. Alan Zimmerman

All progress is the result of change. But — and this is the part most leaders forget — not all change is progress. Some changes feel confusing, unnecessary, or even counter-productive. And some leadership behaviors, especially during turbulent times, end up creating more stress rather than clarity.

So how do you lead effectively in the midst of constant change?

After speaking to and consulting with thousands of people in organizations around the world, I've discovered six behaviors that separate the leaders people trust from the leaders people fear during times of transition.

These work in business... in nonprofits... in government... and in everyday life. And they will work for you.

1. Don't beat yourself up. You did not cause the disruptive changes in your industry. And no matter how smart or strategic you are, you cannot predict every curveball the marketplace is going to throw.

The nature of change is unpredictability. Think about the last decade:

Who predicted that “remote work” would go from a rare perk to a global standard almost overnight?

Who predicted that AI tools would reshape entire industries in less than 24 months?

Who predicted that retail, banking, entertainment, and education would all be forced to reinvent themselves simultaneously?

No one. Not you. Not me. Not even the so-called experts.

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Beating yourself up for not being omniscient serves no one. It drains your energy and right now your team needs your strength more than ever.

KEY TAKE-AWAY: Quit asking, “Why didn’t I see this coming?” Start asking, “What can I do now that will help us move forward?”

2. Keep your coworkers’ hopes alive. Hope is not a fluffy concept. Hope is a strategy — when it’s grounded in honesty.

Your people need to know:

You believe a better day is coming, and you see the obstacles clearly and realistically.

False optimism destroys trust.

But informed optimism builds it.

One of the most powerful things you can say to your team is:

“This is hard. Here’s what we know. Here’s what we don’t know. And here’s why I believe we can get through this together.”

People can handle difficulty.

What they cannot handle is being left in the dark.

KEY TAKE-AWAY: Paint a picture of the future — bright but believable.

3. Keep your employees fully informed. In times of change, uncertainty skyrockets. When uncertainty rises, productivity sinks. People don’t need perfect information. They need frequent and honest information. Otherwise, the rumor mill fills the vacuum — and rumors are always scarier than reality.

As I’ve said for years: “The certainty of misery is better than the misery of uncertainty.”

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Your team deserves to know:

What's happening

Why it's happening

How decisions will be made

What the next steps are

How it may affect them

Even if the news is tough, share it quickly, clearly, and personally.

KEY TAKE-AWAY: Communicate early and often. Silence creates fear — information creates confidence.

4. Tell the truth. This seems obvious, but in times of change, it's tempting to sugarcoat the message:

"It will calm down soon."

"This is the last reorganization."

"We're almost through it."

If those statements turn out to be false, trust erodes — and trust is your most valuable leadership currency.

People aren't children. They don't need spin. They need leaders who tell the truth with respect, clarity, and courage.

KEY TAKE-AWAY: Truth builds trust. Spin destroys it.

5. Reassure your people with your presence. In uncertain times, leaders often retreat to closed-door meetings with other senior leaders. The intention may be good — but the message it sends is terrible.

People need to see you.

They need to hear from you.

They need to feel your presence.

Dr. Bev Smallwood conducted a best-practices study on companies that retain their best employees. She found that 60–70% of retention is directly linked to management behavior. Not pay. Not perks. Behavior.

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The managers who:
walk the floor,
check in personally,
listen without rushing,
build real relationships,
...are the ones who keep their people — even in turbulent times.

Contrast that with the manager who replied to an employee's budget concerns by saying, "Here's my list of people who can do your job with that budget."

That kind of leadership destroys trust in seconds.

KEY TAKE-AWAY: Visibility is credibility. Be present, be accessible, and be human.

6. Cut and simplify the work. Most organizations cut headcount but forget to cut workload. And that is a recipe for burnout, resentment, and resignation.

There's a point where "doing more with less" becomes less of a strategy and more of a fantasy.

You can't pretend things are the same. But you can:

Reorder priorities.

Eliminate busywork.

Remove unnecessary reports, forms, or layers of approval.

Streamline procedures.

Empower people to take shortcuts in non-critical areas.

Invite employees to co-design how the new workload will be divided.

When Ameritech did exactly that — traveling city to city, asking field workers which reports they actually used — they eliminated 6 million pages of unnecessary reports.

People felt heard. They felt respected. And they felt relieved.

KEY TAKE-AWAY: Stop asking people to do the impossible. Cut the clutter so they can do the important.

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Final Thoughts...

Nobody likes going through change. Nobody enjoys the discomfort, uncertainty, or sacrifice that change demands.

But you can dramatically lower the fear and build extraordinary trust when you practice the six leadership behaviors above.

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