Change Agent Lessons from Star Wars

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A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, a trilogy was born that's become one of the most beloved and enduring movie franchises of all time. There were epic battles, reluctant heroes, supervillains, a plucky princess, and a motley crew of faithful sidekicks. That trilogy, of course, is *Star Wars*. It's a big year for *Star Wars* once again now that the seventh installment in the franchise, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, is opening in theaters this December. Disney has also announced that major *Star Wars* attractions are being added to some of its theme parks.

Star Wars was a movie that my friends and I watched over and over again. We were regulars at midnight showings, mouthing every line, cheering wildly at Han Solo and booing loudly at Darth Vader along with giddy audiences young and old. Now I think about *Star Wars* with great anticipation...and I also think about the leadership lessons the movie holds for today's change agents.

Talent managers and learning leaders are often tasked with leading change efforts designed to increase efficiencies, improve engagement, merge cultures, or accelerate performance. Managing change and cultural transformation is the one area in which learning leaders and HR are most likely to partner. Yet few leaders rate their organizations as highly effective at managing change and most work in an organization with no change strategy in place. The issue of "anticipating and reacting to nature and the speed of change" has been identified as a top human capital issue, and a critical capability gap by CEOs.

Here are four lessons from *Star Wars* that may help talent managers as they carry the light-saber of change in their own galaxy.

Consider your perspective

"You will find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view." So says Obi-Wan Kenobi. And whether you're a pirate or a hero depends on perspective. Han Solo and Lando Calrissian became respected generals after aiding the Alliance in the fight against the Empire, but started out as disreputable smugglers and pirates.

Becoming a more effective change leader means assessing and adjusting underlying mindsets about the change or the Empire's cause. Identifying some of the deepest, below the surface thoughts, feelings, assumptions, and beliefs is usually a precondition of behavioral change—and is too often a process that's underestimated when assessing individuals' change readiness. For example, many organizations have a history of failure with past change efforts. Addressing such mindsets, such as "this is just another flavor of the month" or "this too shall pass," is an important step towards enlisting change commitment and buy-in.

In the push to make decisions and produce results quickly, it's also easy to bypass people who will have the task of implementing changes and whose cooperation is key to success. Effective change agents must keep asking: "Whose perspective is being left out?" and "Who else should be in the room?" Taking time to capture and understand each stakeholder's concerns and learning to trust others' motivations and intentions is time well spent. It's also critical for change agents to take the time to examine their *own* mindset or aversion to change, before leading the charge. After all, people won't believe the message of a sound change strategy if they don't believe the messenger.

Don't give in to the Dark Side

In an early part of *The Empire Strikes Back*, Darth Vader used the Force to choke Admiral

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Ozzel to death after his attempt to wipe out the Rebel Alliance was detected and foiled. He then thrust countless officers into new roles and responsibilities without the opportunity to learn them and threw the Imperial Fleet into organizational disarray. Vader's army lived in absolute fear that if they made a mistake or spoke out of turn, Vader would use the force to choke the life out of them, too.

In any major change effort, mistakes, fear, and some degree of failure are inevitable —especially in times where quick decisions are needed and information is incomplete. Change does not happen by decree, and much so-called resistance is often more about performance anxiety—"Can I really do what's expected of me?"—than poor motivation or a Rebel showing resistance to the Cause. Change expectations should allow for a learning curve and a performance dip after a change is introduced.

Change leaders can minimize performance declines and ramp up proficiency by openly addressing fears or performance concerns and ensuring that additional resource support is provided right after a change is introduced. For example, Toyota has been known to deploy temporary SWAT teams to provide immediate resource support to areas where major manufacturing changes are occurring. Change is more successful when individuals are confident that they can attain change goals, that they can give and receive feedback, and that they can meet performance expectations.
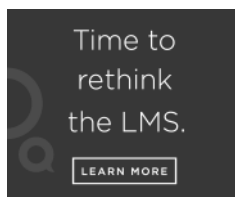
Connect, you must

The characters in *Star Wars* are closely connected, even though they're spread across a galactic backdrop. Lando was an old friend of Han and Chewbacca, Luke and Leia are long-lost siblings, and the droids are super connectors who are connected to everyone. Even in remote destinations like Cloud City, connections are everywhere. Yet many organizations are characterized by their level of disconnectedness.

A big part of change leadership is about helping people feel connected and engaged. Change management is about more than the actions of a single charismatic leader or standalone leadership development or change programs. The job of a change leader is to push capability and change responsiveness throughout an entire organization so that capability is present at all times. Developing a network of change-ready employees will not only meet capability challenges, but it will also promote a culture defined by flexibility, empowerment, and connectivity, which are key factors associated with employee engagement.

Finish what you start

Luke is frequently impatient, steers off course, and in *The Empire Strikes Back*, ignores the advice of Yoda and Ben to rush off and face Darth Vader before completing his training. It's a bad decision that costs him his sense of identity, his confidence, and even his hand. He recovers and learns from the experience. But what ultimately gets him through is the completion of his Jedi training, where he learned enough to successfully confront Vader and the Emperor.

Follow-up and follow-through are often underestimated as critical success factors in change implementation. Many efforts fail because leaders jump too quickly from one change effort to the next or because they try to make too many changes at once and fail to cascade them effectively through the organization. "Quick fixes are an oxymoron," says Margaret Wheatley. "If leaders would learn anything from the past many years, it's that there are no quick fixes." Change agents can add value by helping leaders' recognize that change requires time to take hold and be sustainable.

Final thoughts

The fundamental truth within the *Star Wars* trilogy is that it takes mastery to become an agent for good. Leading organizational change for a good and better future is a challenge for talent managers and demands mastery of change agent roles. The future belongs to change-capable leaders and agile organizations. Whether your organization is targeting a new growth agenda, refocusing its strategic priorities, or building its leadership pipeline, the ability to navigate change is the ultimate competitive advantage in today's global marketplace. As talent managers, we have a responsibility to step up and fully embrace our role as a strategic change agent.
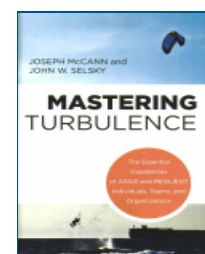
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One way to start is by expanding your own connections and leveraging the knowledge of successful change agents, mentors, and coaches within your own network. After all, when Princess Leia was in trouble, she did what every excellent leader and change agent does, she asked for help. "Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi; you're my only hope." Never be afraid to apply the Princess Leia principle and ask for help when leading change or facing seemingly impossible odds.

Of course, the *Star Wars* trilogy holds many more valuable lessons for even the most seasoned change leaders. Whatever lessons stand out for you, may the force be with you on your next change quest and leadership journey.

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