

Grace Judson



Change Leadership and the Emotions of Change

*a leadership resource
from Grace Judson*

~ musings on the intersection of life, leadership, and individuality ~



Change Leadership & the Emotions of Change

Introduction

*Remember to
PRACTICE!*

Thank you for requesting this download, which is the handout for the Change Leadership program. (Note that by requesting it, you'll also receive my weekly articles on leadership and life – because leadership skills *are* life skills. Of course you can unsubscribe at any time.)

I hope you'll use this handout as a reference guide for your adventures in leading change.

Throughout this document, you'll see me repeating one thing over and over again:

PRACTICE

Practice the tools, and practice them in low-stakes / non-crucial situations. Get used to using them.

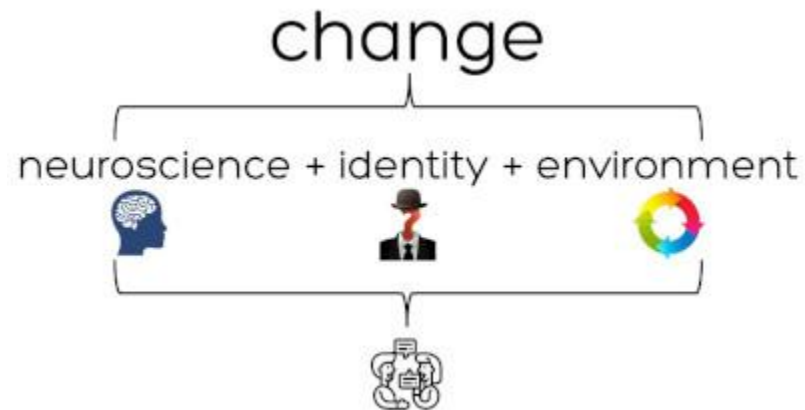
That way, when you *really* need them, you'll be familiar with them. It's the equivalent of learning how to use a hammer safely, so you don't whack your thumb.

And with that, let's dive in.

The Three Factors of All Change

First, let's take a quick look at the three factors at play in *every* change, whether successful or not.

All change includes all three, regardless of whether the change succeeds or fails.





NEUROSCIENCE

The primary purpose of the brain is to keep us safe, physically, emotionally, psychologically.

But change is inherently uncertain and therefore inherently unsafe. Even for people who often embrace change, it can be challenging when the change is outside of their control.

Is that entirely rational? Of course not. Sometimes safety requires us to change! But the deep-down wiring of our brain doesn't like that, and will often resort to the "fight-freeze-flight-fawn" response when faced with change.

Especially, as I said, a change that's unexpected and/or change we feel we have no control over.



IDENTITY

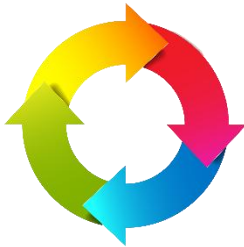
Research maven and organizational psychologist Adam Grant said it best:

"Research shows that when people are resistant to change, it helps to reinforce what will stay the same. Visions for change are more compelling when they include visions of continuity. Although our strategy might evolve, our identity will endure."

(I really like Grant's work because it's both accessible and 100% backed by rigorous research.)

It may seem odd to think of identity in relation to change. But especially post-pandemic — given that many if not most of us did at least some re-evaluation of what we were doing and why — people want to feel aligned with the organization they work for. A change that appears to threaten that identity, and therefore that alignment, is likely to run into problems.

ENVIRONMENT



We're all familiar with the advice to put our gym clothes where we'll fall over them in the morning, if we want to develop a workout habit.

That's an environmental change.

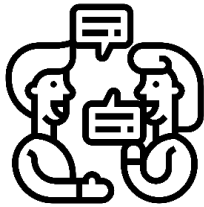
What we often overlook, though, is that — regardless of the change we might want to make — our current environment is perfectly designed to keep us exactly where we are: unchanging.

Making even the smallest tweak in the environment — as long as we make it with the intention that it's to support the change we want — will help keep focus on that change. Interestingly, the environmental tweak doesn't even have to be obviously related to

the change, as long as we establish that the change is why we're making the tweak.

AND THEN THERE'S HOW WE TALK ABOUT CHANGE

There's a fourth icon in that diagram, and that's the one that either does or doesn't support the change: how we talk about it.

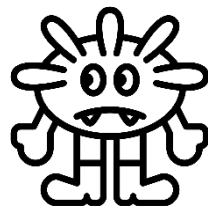


As I said in the program, what we think of as “communication” is usually more accurately called “communi-telling.”

Instead, we need to have *conversations* about change — whether that change is coming from leadership within the organization, a personal change we want to make, or it's coming at us from outside forces.

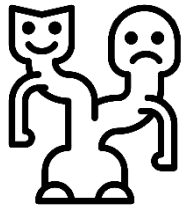
RESISTANCE!

Let's always remember that resistance is a *symptom*, not a thing unto itself. I call these the three Resistance Monsters.



It might be that ...

1. Someone has concerns about the likelihood of success, and ideas about how to make the change better. (The Helpful Monster)
2. Or they have personal concerns about how the change might impact them. (The Anxious Monster)



3. Or it could be a combination of both. (The Blended Monster)
And until you use the tools — and have the conversations — to find out what’s actually going on, you’ll never know!

Professional Empathy...

*Empathy is about
understanding,
not about
agreement.*

... is the ability to understand the feelings and perspectives of another person within the work environment. It’s essential for effective constructive feedback, motivating and engaging employees, and overcoming resistance to change.

Professional empathy is a tool — and an important one.

To use it effectively, we must disconnect it from popular ideas that equate it with *sympathy* (experiencing your own feelings of sadness, anger, or other emotions in response to someone else’s situation), *compassion* (willingness to do something to assist someone else in their struggle), or *agreement* (needs no definition!)

Empathy is simply the ability to understand where someone is coming from, why they might be feeling and/or thinking and/or acting the way they do.

It's not an invitation for anyone to dump their emotions or experience on you. It doesn't imply that you need to do anything in response, including changing your plans, beliefs, desires, or anything else.

It is simply *understanding*, which gives you greater *influence*.

All these Change Leadership tools help you learn more about the other person, help you decrease their (and your!) emotional reactivity to what's happening, and therefore help you help them move through difficult situations more easily and effectively.

In other words, they all help you develop and use your *professional empathy* as a leader.

“What’s the worst thing about this for you?”

This question is a simple yet remarkably powerful way to turn around an emotional firestorm — whether a full-on meltdown, a grim silence, or something in between — and start to make progress.

*And always
BE QUIET
and give them
space to respond
thoughtfully.*



HOW TO USE THE TOOL

Find the part of you that sincerely wants to know the answer. If you ask this question “because you learned it in a workshop on change leadership,” it will backfire on you. People know (*you* know) when someone is being insincere and operating from a script.

Use a quiet, easy, slow voice, pitched a little lower than normal.

And then *be quiet*. As a friend and colleague used to say to me, *Silence can be a full partner in the process*. Allow silence, give them time to think about the question, and let them have the space to speak.



OPTIONS FOR PRACTICE

As with any new tool, practice in low-stakes situations first. You wouldn't use a brand-new-to-you circular saw on a piece of rare, beautiful, expensive ebony wood (which goes for up to \$100 per board foot!). Don't use a brand-new-to-you communication tool in a tense, important meeting or negotiation.

Instead, try the question with a friend or family member who's venting about something that's important, perhaps, but not crucial.

Spouse had a bad day at work? “Sounds awful! What’s the worst thing about this for you?”

Teenager embroiled in a conflict with a friend? “I’m sorry to hear that — what’s the worst thing about this for you?”

And don’t forget that you can use this on *yourself* as well. If you’re the one with the dreadful day at work, or with challenges in an important relationship, or any other difficult situation, just ask: *Hey, self, what’s the worst thing about this for you?*

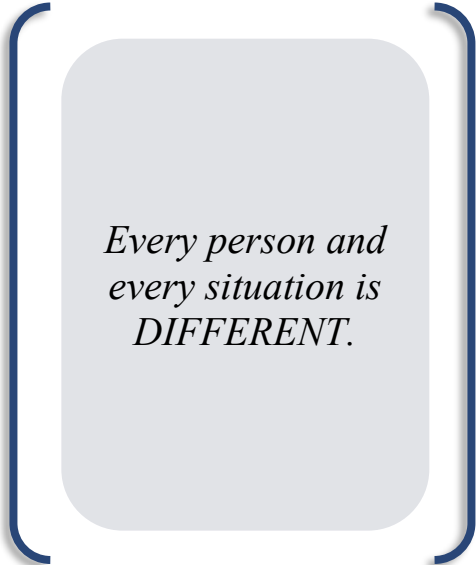
And then be quiet with yourself and listen to whatever comes up. Whatever it is, it will be what’s real for you, so no judgment!

NOTE...

Interpersonal communication is an endless gray area.

I have to laugh when I write that, because I’m someone who *loves* certainty and rules, yet I intentionally teach *tools*, not *rules* — because tools are adaptable to different situations, and rules are not.

This means, though, that sometimes the tool you employ won’t work as expected. That’s okay. It doesn’t mean you failed, or that the tool doesn’t work. It simply means that in this specific situation, things went in a different direction. Observe what



*Every person and
every situation is
DIFFERENT.*

happened. Ask yourself what you might have done differently. Ask yourself what you learned.

And keep practicing!

The truly annoying question...

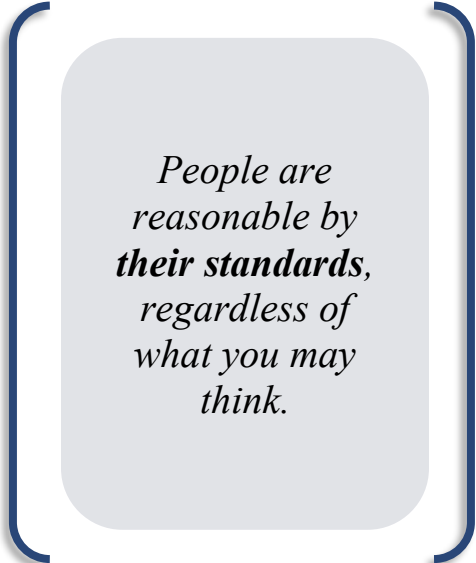
When I first introduced my husband to this question, he *hated* it.

He owns a technology business in an area that's largely populated by retirees. No knock whatsoever on retirees – someday I expect to be one! – and always remembering that correlation is not causation, let's just say he gets a lot of repetitive, beginner-level questions.

This question has helped him handle some tough situations with customers. I doubt he'll ever *love* the question, but he acknowledges how much it helps.

“Why would a reasonable person do, say, behave, or feel that way?”

When someone is behaving in a way we feel is irrational or frustrating, it's hard to think about them being “reasonable.”



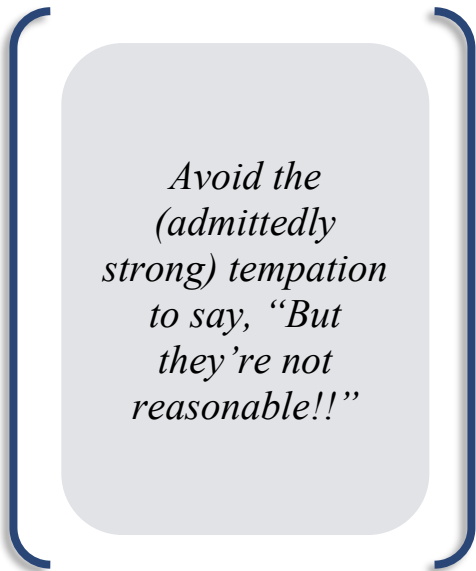
*People are
reasonable by
their standards,
regardless of
what you may
think.*

But as the quote I cited in the program (shown below) from Ozan Varol points out, when we disagree with someone, it's because we have different points of view — different perspectives. As hard as it may be to acknowledge, that doesn't make them wrong. (Ouch. Really, really hard in some situations.)

Here's that quote:

"If you disagree with someone, it's not because you're right and they're wrong. It's because they believe something that you don't believe. They have a different perspective that you're missing."

Also, as I pointed out in defining *professional empathy*, the more **understanding** you have, the more **influence** you are able to employ.



*Avoid the
(admittedly
strong) temptation
to say, "But
they're not
reasonable!!"*

HOW TO USE THE TOOL

When you're trying to help someone through their resistance to change (or any other challenging situation), and they're frustrating you, annoying you, or flat-out driving you crazy, *stop*.

Step away. Breathe!

And then ask yourself: *Why would a reasonable person behave the way they are?*

Give yourself time to imagine and make up stories about their experience.

And then move on to the next step: asking them about their experience, as I cover in the next section.

OPTIONS FOR PRACTICE

You can play with this just about any time, anywhere, with anyone, since it requires no actual interaction with other people.

Just think of a situation where someone's behavior seemed odd or "wrong." And then ask yourself the question — "Why would a reasonable person do that?"

It can help to do this with pen and paper. Writing releases the thoughts from circling around and around in your brain, allowing space for new ideas. You may find yourself surprised at what you come up with!

REMEMBER TO VALIDATE!

These are *only guesses* — stories, hypotheses, wild ideas.

Don't take action on any of your guesses without validating them.

Mirroring

*Please remember
that mirroring is
not physically
matching or
mimicking
someone's body
language!*

Mirroring is a fun, simple (almost too simple to be believed) way to get someone to “say more about that” — without actually saying “say more about that.”

Why not just ask that question? Because questions quickly put people on the defensive. Even “say more about that” (a classic coaching question) can make the person you’re working with immediately start censoring themselves, especially if they’re feeling at all vulnerable.

Mirroring is much more subtle.

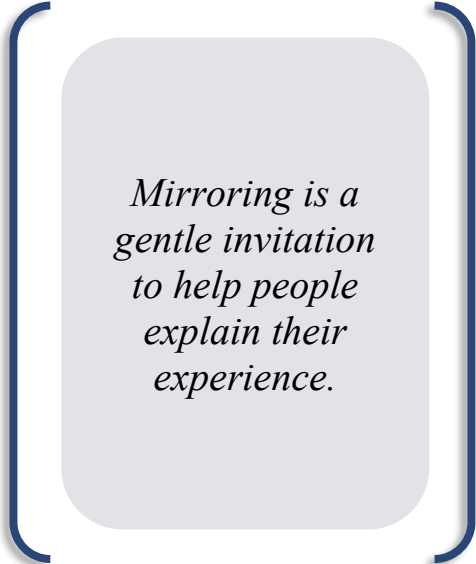
HOW TO USE THE TOOL

Simply repeat the last two or three words they said.

When you get more practice with it, you’ll find that certain phrases will jump out at you from the middle of their statement, and you can use those.

Let’s say they just said, “I’m just not sure about this new role. I don’t know if it’s the career direction I want.”

You mirror: “Career direction you want?”



Mirroring is a gentle invitation to help people explain their experience.

And then, as always, *be quiet*.

They will *inevitably* elaborate. It's the closest thing to a sure thing that you can get in this world: given the space (your silence), they will tell you more, and they'll do it without even being aware that you've prompted them.

It feels weird and awkward when you first do this — but then, learning something new always feels weird and awkward, as I mentioned in the workshop. (I wrote an article on that, which you can find [here](#).)

Don't forget that what you want to hear in response is "That's right!" — *not* "You're right." The former is what people say when you've truly nailed it; the latter is often code for "I'm tired of debating this, please go away now."

OPTIONS FOR PRACTICE

Repeating myself yet again: start in low-stakes situations.

Let's take a different example. Let's say your teenager is upset about something that happened at school, and asked that miraculous question "What's the worst thing about this for you?" And they replied, "I can't believe what my history teacher did! He's such a jerk!"

*And mirroring
can be a lot of
fun. Try it out in
social settings!*

You have a number of options, leaving out anything you might want to say about calling the history teacher names!

“Such a jerk?” Use this one if you want to know more about what the teacher did.

“History teacher?” This will get you more information about who this person is.

“What your teacher did?” This will get you more information about what actually happened.

See why I say this is better than asking, “Say more about that”?

It’s also ridiculously FUN. And people love you when you use it; you become the most interesting person in the room because you’re asking them about themselves, without ever appearing to do so.

This tool is from Chris Voss’s book [Never Split the Difference](#), which you can find on [Amazon](#). And if you want to hear Voss use this tool — or any of the others he teaches — just Google “Chris Voss podcast interviews.”

Looping

In **looping**, you repeat what you heard the other person say in order to be sure you got it right.

But you're *not* repeating word for word. No parrots required!

Instead, you *paraphrase* — you use your own words in re-stating their meaning.

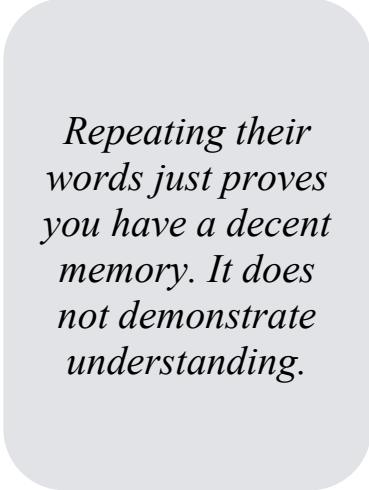
Anyone can repeat what someone says. Repeating their words doesn't mean you truly "get" anything they've said; it just means you have a good memory.

Since your goal is to confirm that you *do* get it — both so you have a better idea of how to respond and so they feel understood — paraphrasing in your own words is essential.

Note that sometimes you may have to interrupt them and say, "Hang on — can we press 'pause' for a moment so I can make sure I understand what you've said so far?"

OPTIONS FOR PRACTICE

(I know you don't need me to say "Low stakes situations first!")



Repeating their words just proves you have a decent memory. It does not demonstrate understanding.

*Be willing to be
told you've
gotten it wrong!
The goal is
always greater
understanding.*

Following on our example, you *mirrored* your teenager by saying, "What your teacher did?"

And they say, "Yes! She said my paper wasn't turned in on time, even though I'd told her that it was in my locker and I'd get it to her before the end of the day!"

Looping this back might sound like, "So you left your paper for history in your locker by mistake, and instead of being late to class you let her know you'd be sure to get it to her before the end of the school day, but she still marked it as a late paper — am I getting it?"

At this point, they will either say, "Yes! That's right!", or "No! What I mean is ..." and go on to tell you what they really meant.

Note that here, as with mirroring and labelling, you're still looking for **that's right** as the response.

Looping is probably the most challenging of all these tools to practice effectively, for one simple reason: like all of them, it requires you to listen carefully, but unlike the others, you have to listen *all the way through*. Mirroring and labelling only require you to catch the gist of how they might be feeling, or the three or so key words (or even just the last three or four words) they've said. In order to loop effectively — to paraphrase their meaning accurately — you have to be listening all the way through.

Practice. Practice. Practice!

Labelling

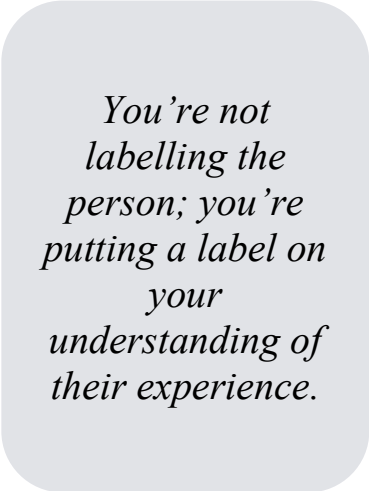
Oh, the joys of *labelling* people!

We don't typically think of labelling others as a good thing — and as I said in the program, you do want to be careful with this. Nonetheless, it's a useful and powerful tool.

Previously, you explored ideas about why this *unreasonable* person you're dealing with might actually be *reasonable* from their perspective — and what reasons they might have for doing, thinking, feeling, or saying whatever it might be. And you listened when they responded to that *magical question* and your skillful *mirroring* — and then you *looped* back what you heard.

Labelling is how you'll start to validate — or disprove — the ideas and hypotheses you've created.

Labelling is also useful when you want more details about almost anything, such as a question they've asked you. Why are they asking? what's the question behind the question? Use labelling!



*You're not
labelling the
person; you're
putting a label on
your
understanding of
their experience.*

It's essential to be conditional in your labels – make suggestions, not statements.

HOW TO USE THE TOOL

You've got a handful of ideas about what's going on for them. Asking blunt questions — “Hey, are you worried about keeping your job?” — is generally *not* going to get a good reaction. In fact, even in un-tense situations, direct questions about how someone feels or what their motivations are can go wrong very quickly, especially with people you may not know well (such as work colleagues). Questions like that tend to create defensiveness, not honest answers.

Instead, use labels that describe your idea or theory about what's going on.

“Sounds like you might be concerned about what's going to happen to your job.”

“Seems like you've really given this a lot of thought.”

Chris Voss recommends using that second option when someone is uncertain or waffling about a decision. It's wild how quickly the person will say, “Yes, yes, I have, and here's what I'm thinking!” Which, of course, is exactly what you want, so you can respond effectively. But if you ask directly, they're likely to close down.

OPTIONS FOR PRACTICE

I'll repeat myself: always practice first in low-impact, non-critical situations first.

Going back to “what’s the worst thing about this,” let’s try a new example. Let’s say your spouse says, “They’re really pushing this new productivity app down our throats. My boss is all over me and my team to switch over from the old way, but the thing keeps breaking every time I try.”

There are several options for labelling here. You could say, “Sounds like you’re really frustrated.” Or, “Sounds like you’re super annoyed with your boss.” And so on.

Or from our earlier example, your teenager says, as teens so often will, “I don’t want to talk about it!” (Yes, I know I said “what’s the worst thing about this” works with teenagers, but let’s face it: nothing works all the time with teens — or anyone else, for that matter.)

Your label might be, “Sounds like you’re really frustrated about something.” (Labelling *frustration* is a good bet whenever anyone is upset.)

Or you could say, “Sounds like you’re not interested in talking about it right now.” Yes, that seems like you’re just repeating the



Practice!

obvious thing they just said — but remember, the point here is to be clear that you are *listening* and that you *get it*.

Why would I suggest that? Remember, *professional empathy* isn't only useful in the office. Letting someone who's upset, but not ready or willing to talk about why, know that you understand can be a very real relief for them. Plus, oftentimes that's all they need to know in order to open up and tell all.

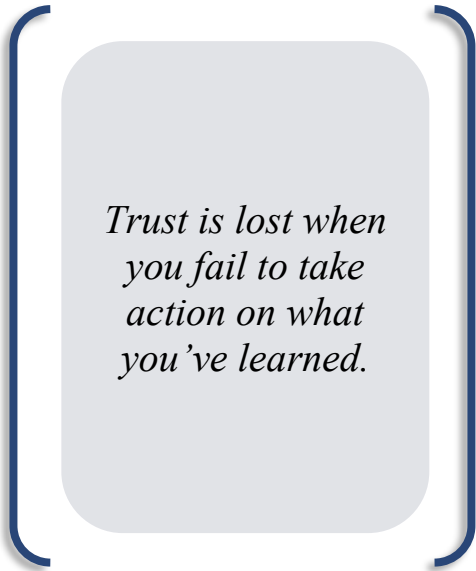
Remember that what you want to hear is “That’s right!” — *not* “You’re right.”

“You’re right” is what people say when they want you to stop bothering them and just go away.

“That’s right” is what people say when you’ve *really nailed* what they were thinking or feeling. Listen to interviews, listen to yourself, and you’ll hear it.

This tool is from Chris Voss’s book [Never Split the Difference](#), which you can [find on Amazon](#).

Action, please!



*Trust is lost when
you fail to take
action on what
you've learned.*

You can use each tool perfectly, gather all the information, get “That’s right!” in response to every label and loop — but if you don’t *do something*, it is, quite frankly, a waste of time. (Oops.)

The information is meant to be used. Remember the story I told about that heavily-siloed software company? I used the information I gathered to develop plans for *avoiding* risk and then, if it happened anyway, *mitigating* it. And that’s what got everyone to support what I was doing, especially when they saw me following through and following up as the project progressed.

You won’t get buy-in from your people, whoever those people are, if you don’t take action. Instead, you’ll lose their trust.

The good news is that the action to take will be obvious, if you’ve used the tools effectively and paid attention to what you’ve heard.

And your change will be better, more successful, and your people will be a lot less stressed — and a lot more supportive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: GRACE JUDSON

SO, WHY SHOULD YOU PAY ATTENTION TO ME?

I could give you the usual sort of backstory about how I spent twentysomething years working in tech and finance companies, sixteen of them in leadership. I experienced it all – technology change, culture change, corporate mergers, and more.

All true. But, well, yawn.

Because there are a gazillion consultants out there who say pretty much the same thing. Not very inspiring, eh?

SO – WHY ME, AND WHY LEADERSHIP?

I believe that true, humane leadership at all levels – understanding the individuality of leadership and the ways we're all leaders whether we have the title or not – is a real and significant competitive advantage.

I believe that humane leadership is key to healthy organizations with strong, supportive cultures.

I believe that humane leadership is the antidote to change fatigue and burnout.

I believe that leadership skills are *life* skills, not merely career skills.

Companies typically excel at strategic planning, task management, and resource allocation. But it takes a different skillset to address the people issues that arise.



That's where I can help.

And I do it with a sense of humor. Because if you can't have fun, if you can't be a little silly sometimes, what's the point? Leadership is serious stuff, *and* a little playfulness goes a long way to build trust, enhance learning, and just make everything more pleasant.

Want to learn more? [Click here](#) to read about training options, or [here](#) to read about consulting services.

I WORK WITH SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED COMPANIES...

... whose leaders want to *do better*. And I work with individuals who want to learn the skills of humane leadership.

WANT MORE?

Let's talk. Click [here](#) to send me an email describing your situation and what you'd like to accomplish.

Or just use the email address in the page footer below.

Or follow me on LinkedIn and Substack!

