

# Executive Excellence

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## The Two Key Rules of Change

Outside, the plant was impressive. Headquarters was perched on the lush green banks of a peaceful rolling river. It was a stark contrast to the turbulence inside.

A newly appointed President had retained Brady & Associates to layout a roadmap for changing the culture at the plant and conduct a companywide employee attitude survey. We worked with senior management to custom design a training plan based on the survey results and focus groups.

My team and I were scheduled to meet with the entire senior staff to lay out the details of the plan, and as we entered the executive suite I ran into the President who was on her way out. "Hi John. So it starts today, does it? You can't change people you know. I wish you luck."

She was gone before I could respond. My stomach dropped and I knew we were in trouble. Just five days earlier she had delivered an impassioned speech championing the need to change the plant culture. In spite of the obvious setback created by her absence we met with her senior team.

We forged ahead with the senior sessions to prepare leaders to 'own' the process. We discussed the employee survey results, the cycle of change, attitudes and awareness of change, employee reactions to it, and the responsibilities of leadership.

At Brady & Associates we've found that successful organizational change starts at the top, and we recommended individual leadership coaching for senior leaders and there were no takers. Based on first impressions we knew it was going to be tough sledding with this team.

After several weeks we started middle management meetings. We encountered skepticism, anxiety, fear and anger and heard a torrent of criticism about the senior team including "They don't listen; they keep us in the dark; they don't follow up; they're always fighting among themselves, etc."

As the program reached the union level criticism of the management team boiled over. Meetings were almost combat zones and at one point an employee jumped up on a table and railed against the company for five minutes. The rank and file were not happy campers.

To make matters worse the president and senior team were AWOL. Some middle managers took out their frustrations on their support staff, others griped to anyone who would listen, some retreated to their caves and others went on vacation. It wasn't exactly fertile ground for sowing the seeds of organizational change.

Luckily, there were exceptions. Two senior managers were determined to overcome the depth of hostility leveled at their team and asked for coaching to bridge the communication gap. They made concerted efforts to create opportunities for open dialogue with employees. They persevered and their commitment began the slow process of earning people's trust. Small victories in a long battle.

Employees asked for more training on communication and conflict resolution.

Many still dwelled on fixing blame rather than finding solutions, but there was a budding mood of acceptance and cautious optimism.

During employee sessions we highlighted the positive changes and efforts being made by some of the management team and encouraged employees to meet them half-way. There were signs that the message was getting through, but a cadre of hardcore critics with 'wait and see' attitudes remained.

The program pressed on and a few more senior managers ramped up their efforts to start a meaningful dialogue with employees. People were starting to warm up, but the president was invisible. The change process was at the proverbial crossroads.

During our third month on the job, the president summoned me to her office...

*Continued...*



Brady & Associates provides senior leaders with proven, practical organizational solutions. We design unique coaching and training programs based on our client's business goals, objectives and culture to achieve competitive advantage. We specialize in challenging organizational transitions. Our motto is "We will find a way or we will make one." ✓ [www.brady-associates.com](http://www.brady-associates.com)

## “Example is leadership...”

...She went ballistic and read me the riot act because of the negative feedback coming out of employee sessions. She expressed serious doubts and disappointment about the program. “People aren’t getting it!” she exclaimed.

I offered diplomatically to facilitate a meeting to work through the issues with her and her senior staff. She snapped, “I’m paying you to get results not sit around and discuss leadership. We have *real work* to do!”

It was painful experience, but we knew we were on the verge of a major *breakthrough* or *breakdown*. Rather than give up, we redoubled our efforts. People began to cautiously tear down organizational barriers.

The next stage of our plan involved holding employee workshops to discuss the company’s core values. It was a critical step in establishing a common bond and sense of purpose. We knew we seriously needed someone or some special event to keep the momentum going.

Our first values workshop started with a particularly cranky crew on the graveyard shift. Without notice or fanfare the president walked in and said, “Hi everyone. May I join you?” Needless to say, I was rather apprehensive.

She sat down and listened as her people vented about hollow company values like “employees are our most important asset.” To break the ice, I asked her to share a little about her background so people could get to know her. She was happy to do it and probably won some friends in the process. Eventually, someone asked her about her vision for the plant. She really opened up and had a great exchange which included a lot of give and take. She delivered.

At meeting’s end one employee pulled the president aside and said, “Thanks for coming. I’ve been here for ten years. This is the first time anyone really listened to us.”

She continued to play an active role in meetings and answer questions. Word got out, and people were genuinely surprised and impressed. The more she involved herself the more confident she became. Her personal connection with the employees was the tipping point we needed for a successful change process.

Later, I visited the president to thank her for her support. “Have you got a few minutes?” she asked. I sat down. Her eyes welled with tears. “You know, I’ve really enjoyed meeting with folks,” she began. “How did I get so far away from people? I used to talk to them. I used to know what was going on...” It was a cathartic moment as her voice trailed off.

After a quiet pause I said, “Can I ask you a question?” She nodded. “Where does change start?” She pointed to her heart but could say nothing. She didn’t have to; it was her leadership epiphany.

In the following days and weeks she was ‘on fire’, energized from the inside out. She was a quick study. To invigorate the program she publicly rewarded employees who moved the organizational change forward and also privately gave those ‘on the fence’ a month to get fully engaged. She was determined to foster genuine commitment.

She also recognized that her organization couldn’t change overnight. To sustain the process she committed to long-term reinforcement training led internally by her managers and employees.

After we completed our work I met with the president and we had a friendly chat. I complimented her on the great example she’d set for the plant and as I was leaving she gave me a gentle pat on the back and said, “I get it. Leadership is our *real work*.”

### Summary – The Two Key Rules of Change

Rule One – **Successful change always starts at the top.** It begins with you and your senior leaders. Dr. Albert Schweitzer said, “*Example is leadership. It is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the only thing.*”

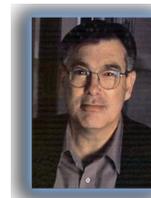
When employees see senior leaders walking the talk you’ve won half the battle. Then the challenge is to engage your middle managers and cascade the process through the entire organization.

Rule Two – **Successful change has to involve everyone in a participative process.** Why? Because most people view change as loss. *All change is loss, and all loss is mourned.* During the change process people experience <sup>1</sup>five stages:

- Denial (This can’t be happening to me!)
- Anger (It’s ‘their’ fault. Why is this happening to me?)
- Bargaining (I’ll change if...)
- Depression (I don’t care what happens anymore.)
- Acceptance (I’m ready for whatever comes.)

Over time we’ve observed some leaders that try to bypass the first four stages and ‘sell’ people into changing behaviors as if they were promoting U.S. Savings Bonds or the United Way. It can’t be done and only delays or derails the process.

Effective leaders create successful change through their strong, proactive example and by enlisting their people in an open, participative change process! ↵



John Brady is founder of Brady & Associates, a consulting firm specializing in leadership and organizational change. He came to consulting after over twenty years as a senior executive in Fortune 500 companies, and has spent two decades as a trusted advisor and coach to top executives in major corporations internationally. Brady holds an MBA in organizational systems development and a PhD in organizational psychology. According to one client, “Brady is the Yoda of organizational change.”

<sup>1</sup> Kubler-Ross, E (2005) *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*. Simon & Schuster Ltd; and Scire, P (2007). “Applying Grief Stages to Organizational Change.”