

Leading change entrepreneurially – the challenges of middle management

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Who am I?

- Senior academic leadership experience
- Dean, Arts and Creative Industries, Edinburgh Napier University
- Previously Head of School / Subject at Edinburgh Napier and Queen Margaret Universities
- Led major change projects
- Previously worked in theatre and events including senior administrative and production roles
- Mix teaching with coaching and leadership development facilitation

Content

- **P**rophet / **P**urpose
- **I**nfluence
- **R**isk appetite / **R**esilience
- **A**gility
- **T**eams
- **E**mpower
- **S**trategy / **S**elf-care



Prophet

People don't follow spreadsheets - they follow stories.

Entrepreneurial leaders demonstrate a strong vision:

- A clear picture - what the future looks and feels like
- A reason - why it matters
- A path - how we might get there
- Emotion - hope, excitement, purpose

Use vivid, concrete imagery: "Imagine a world where our students never have to..."; "Picture a workplace where every person..."; If people can see it, they can follow it. Be a storyteller – reframe the challenges of change.

To keep the vision alive:

- Repeat the message in different ways
- Align goals, metrics, and processes with the vision
- Use symbolism or rituals to reinforce it
- Tell stories of early wins that confirm the direction





Purpose

A powerful vision flows from *why* you exist, not just where you want to go.

Ask:

- *What is the deepest impact we want to have as a team?*
- *If we achieved our mission perfectly, what would the world look like?*

You need to tie the future to meaning that already resonates. Revisiting the purpose is one of the ways to most quickly bring your teams on board.



Prophet and Purpose

Does your team have a strong purpose? Is this reinforced during change?

Have you articulated a clear vision of the future?



Influence

- Focus on your brand / niche.
 - How can you differentiate yourself from others?
 - How do you build/solidify your credentials?
- Identify who you need to network with.
- Identify who holds influence.
- Look for people you can learn from – e.g. find a mentor.
- Strategically say yes to new projects – what value do you add?
- Attend organisation wide events / networking events.
- Open conversations with people you might not usually engage with.
- Show curiosity to transform a connection into a relationship.
- Understand what drives other people / teams (remember their KPIs may be different).



Influence

- What influence do you feel you have in your institution?
- What is one thing you will do to improve this?

Risk Appetite

Remember risk is unavoidable not bad.

- Unskew the scales:
 - What are the downsides of not doing anything?
 - What's the worst that can happen? Can we handle it?
- Know that fear isn't a stop sign
 - When you and your team feel fear, reflect on it. What is causing that fear and how can you allay it? How do you show your team that it is okay to take risks?
- Ignore others
 - Don't follow other people's behaviours / opinions just because that is what is expected.

(Hunt-Davis, B. & Beveridge, H. 2020, Will it make the boat go faster? 2nd. Ed., Matador)

- Experiment within safe boundaries
- Use evidence to inform initiatives



Risk Appetite

Know what type of risk it is

- Risks we can afford to take
 - only potentially small consequences
- Risks we cannot afford to take
 - the potential negative consequences are too grave
- Risks we can afford not to take
 - Where there are other routes to achieve the same goal
- Risks we cannot afford not to take
 - If we achieve it, then it might be life-changing, and we can live with any consequences if we don't.

(Hunt-Davis, B. & Beveridge, H. 2020, *Will it make the boat go faster?* 2nd. Ed., Matador)



Risk Appetite

What is the risk appetite of you and your team?

How does this map to the institution?

What challenges does this bring?





Resilience

Weekly Resilience Check-In

1. What's working?
2. What feels difficult?
3. What support or clarity do we need?
4. What small win can we aim for this week?

Stop–Start–Continue Exercises

Helps teams focus on what to drop, adopt, and maintain.

Scenario Planning (Lightweight)

Explore best-case, worst-case, and expected scenarios. This reduces anxiety by making the unknown feel more manageable.

Strengths Mapping

Identify team strengths and leverage them intentionally during the transition.

Agility

Entrepreneurial teams create a **micro-environment** where they work differently.

- Set your own team norms and ways of working
- Decide how you break down work
- Control your internal communication flows
- Establish faster feedback loops with customers/users

Don't wait for the entire organisation to reform itself but start with your team culture.

- Identify what **MUST** happen vs. what's unnecessary
- Pre-engage key stakeholders early
- Build relationships with “gatekeeper” teams
- Give teams freedom to test new ideas, with light governance and quick decision-making.
- Use short innovation cycles rather than committees.



Team

- Clear **vision and purpose**
- Having the **right crew**
- **Learning** and **reflective**
- **Diverse** and inclusive
- Creative and **innovative**
- **Accepting of failure**
- **Co-creating culture and dynamics**
- **Collaborating** and connecting
- Psychological safety



Empowerment = Agency

Universities thrive on intellectual autonomy and entrepreneurial leadership taps into that strength.

- **Involve** staff, and students, in co-designing change initiatives.
- Give departments **ownership** of innovations that align with institutional goals.
- Recognise and **reward creativity**, not just compliance.
- **Let your team innovate:** Create space for staff to identify pain points and design creative solutions (as “intrapreneurs”).
- **Provide autonomy and resources:** Give teams freedom to test new ideas, with light governance and quick decision-making.



Teams

- Do you see opportunities in your team you can build on?
- Do you see barriers to being entrepreneurial?
- In this change, do your team feel they have agency?
- How can you enhance this?





Strategy

- Change needs strategy.
- Replace rigid, top-down plans with adaptive roadmaps that evolve based on learning and market signals.
- Consider vector goals not KPIs
- Treat strategy as a living document - regularly revisit and pivot when needed.
- Review strategy in line with your purpose
- Understand your capacity and scale of projects:
 - Small fail fast projects, lower risk, multiple projects
 - Large-scale, longer-term impact, less risk tolerance, fewer projects



Groups

- What is the problem your change/initiative is trying to solve?
- What is your vision, the ultimate impact you want to make?
- What are the key steps you need to get there?

Self care

- Put on your oxygen mask first?
- Don't wait for an emergency to practice self and team care
- Remember you set the team culture and expectations.



Self care

- What are your energy levels?
 - Make the space for recovery – daily, weekly etc.
 - Our best ideas come when we are resting or playing. What works for you? Invest in it and make it a habit.
 - C.I.A. (Control; influence; accept)
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- Reflect regularly on your own and the team's energy levels.
 - Invest in other people's well being. (Do you know what other people need?)



Conclusion

- Managing in the middle brings challenges.
- Being able to think entrepreneurially helps you navigate these challenges.



Thank you

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