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LEADING THROUGH CHANGE IN EXPERIMENT STATIONS

BUILDING TRUST, BUY-IN, AND HOPE THROUGH
ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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Context

Why experiment station leaders should care about organizational change

Experiment stations live inside continuous change, even when leaders do not label it that way.

Funding shifts, staffing changes, reporting expectations, partnerships, compliance demands, and public scrutiny all require adaptation.

Evidence alone is rarely enough. People also ask whether change is fair, credible, and worth investing in.

Poor change leadership damages morale, trust, retention, and mission execution.

Why this matters here

Even in a science and operations environment, the success of change still turns on human response.

The leadership challenge

Leaders have to manage both the technical logic of change and the human meaning of change.

The opportunity

This session offers a usable framework and six tools that peers can carry back into their own stations.

Framing

A leadership pathway of discovery

The ideas in the book emerged from a long pathway through operations, management, teaching, research, administration, and formal leadership development.

A central lesson was that technical quality does not automatically produce organizational movement.

Over time, truth, trust, buy in, resistance, communication, and reinforcement became visible as one connected system.

The pathway matters only because it helps explain why these tools are practical rather than abstract.

What my pathway contributes

The book grew from lived leadership questions, then sharpened through formal study of organizational change and development processes.

Integrated framework

The book in one sequence



Trust sits underneath everything. Communication runs through everything.

- Leaders often begin in the middle by announcing implementation before enough work has been done on truth, trust, and buy in.
- The sequence matters because each stage strengthens the next stage.

Six tools

Tool 1. Tell the truth and explain why

- Effective change begins with a credible reason for change.
- People do not need every detail on day one, but they do need an honest explanation of what problem is being addressed, why change is necessary now, and what principles will guide the effort.
- Without a truthful why, employees fill the vacuum with rumor and fear.

Leadership test

Can a station manager, scientist, staff member, or partner explain the why in language that sounds both honest and coherent?

Practical warning

Speed does not remove the need for truth. The more disruptive the change, the more truth matters.

What to avoid

Announcement without explanation, and explanation without credible principles.

Six tools

Tool 2. Build trust and genuine buy-in

Compliance is not the same as buy in.

Fear and hierarchy can produce motion quickly, but they rarely produce durable commitment.

Trust grows through consistency, openness, competence, and visible fairness.

In this context, buy in may not mean total agreement. It may mean that people decide the direction is necessary and leadership is worth following through the discomfort.

What builds trust

Consistency, honest communication, visible fairness, and evidence that leadership understands the human consequences of change.

What weakens trust

Arbitrary decisions, secrecy, mixed messages, and fake listening.

Portable idea

Truth leads to trust, and trust leads to buy in.

Six tools

Tool 3. Create a communication architecture

- One announcement is not communication.
- Change communication needs cadence, repetition, multiple channels, and clear ownership.
- People absorb disruptive information unevenly. Some need a large group setting, others need direct supervisor conversation or written follow up.
- Leaders should design where questions go, how often updates occur, who translates change locally, and how feedback visibly affects the process.

A simple architecture

1. State the reason for change clearly.
2. Repeat it through multiple channels.
3. Create a route for questions and concerns.
4. Show what changed because people spoke up.

Six tools

Tool 4. Expect change aversion and guide the transition

Resistance is often a human response to disrupted expectations, threatened competence, changed identity, or perceived loss of control.

Leaders make things worse when they interpret every resistance signal as disloyalty.

The goal is not to remove all discomfort. The goal is to help people move through discomfort without becoming trapped in it.

Leadership response: create space for questions, distinguish understandable concern from destructive behavior, clarify what is changing and what is not, and acknowledge the emotional side of transition.

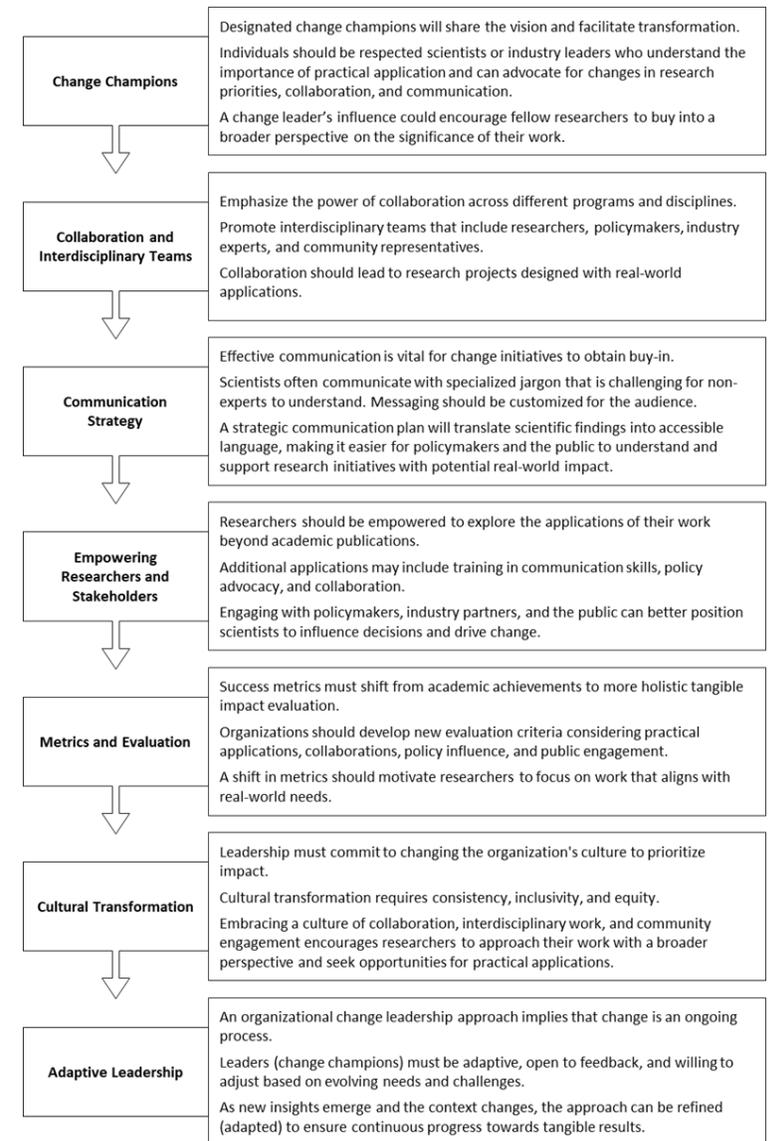


Figure 1. An organizational change leadership approach for scientists wishing to ensure that their research and outcomes have a tangible impact, meeting the contemporary needs of society. First published in Hubbart (2023c).

Six tools

Tool 5. Lead change as a process with visible wins

- Effective change leadership requires process discipline, not only tone and personality.
- A practical sequence is preparation, implementation, and follow through.
- Visible wins matter because abstract change loses credibility over time.
- In experiment stations, wins may include a clarified workflow, a functioning pilot, a repaired communication gap, or a new support resource employees asked for.

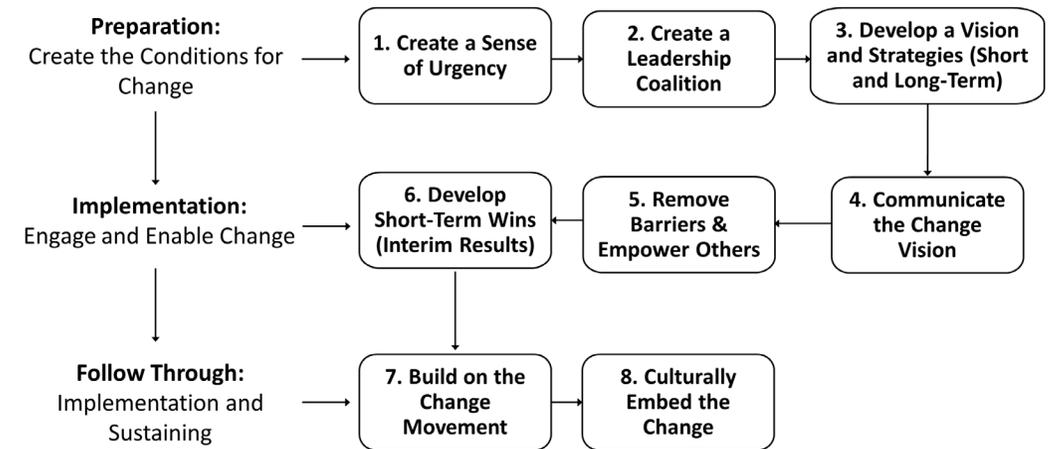


Figure. The three phases of organizational change are Preparation, Implementation, and Follow Through (left). Eight-phased integrated steps for organizational change (right), revised and recreated from Kotter (2012), first published in Hubbart (2023a).

Six tools

Tool 6. Replace fear with reinforcement

Leaders transmit their own fears into organizations more often than they realize.

Secretive, reactive, suspicious, or punitive behavior creates downward spirals of trust and performance.

Positive reinforcement does not mean avoiding standards. It means combining clarity and accountability with respect, recognition, and conditions in which people can succeed.

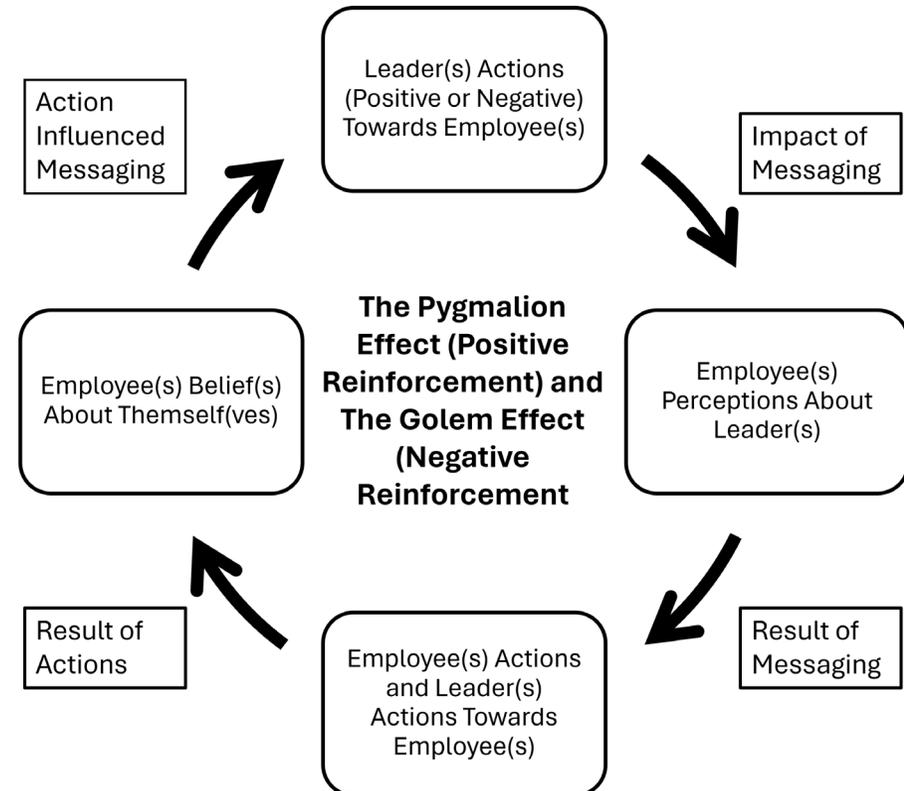


Figure. A feedback system illustrating leader feedback to reception and outcomes of subordinates resulting in positive or negative employee productivity. First published in Hubbart (2024e).

Recovery

When change has already gone too directive

- Some leaders inherit or enter change efforts that were already mishandled.
- Trust repair cannot be performed as a cosmetic exercise.
- Recovery requires naming the strain honestly, listening carefully, and showing visible course correction.
- If listening occurs but nothing changes, cynicism hardens. If leaders make real adjustments, recovery becomes possible.

Repair actions

Clarify workload, revisit pace, widen participation, and correct communication failures.

What employees notice

Whether listening is real or performative.

Core idea

Recovery is possible, but it requires humility.

Durability

Sustaining change, trust, and hope

Many change efforts fail later, when follow through weakens.

Sustainability requires reinforcement, progress monitoring, continued communication, and correction in the open.

Hope is not wishful thinking. It is the credible sense that effort is leading somewhere better, more stable, or more meaningful.

For experiment station leaders, hope often comes from showing that change improves clarity, protects capacity, strengthens mission alignment, or positions the station system more effectively for the future.

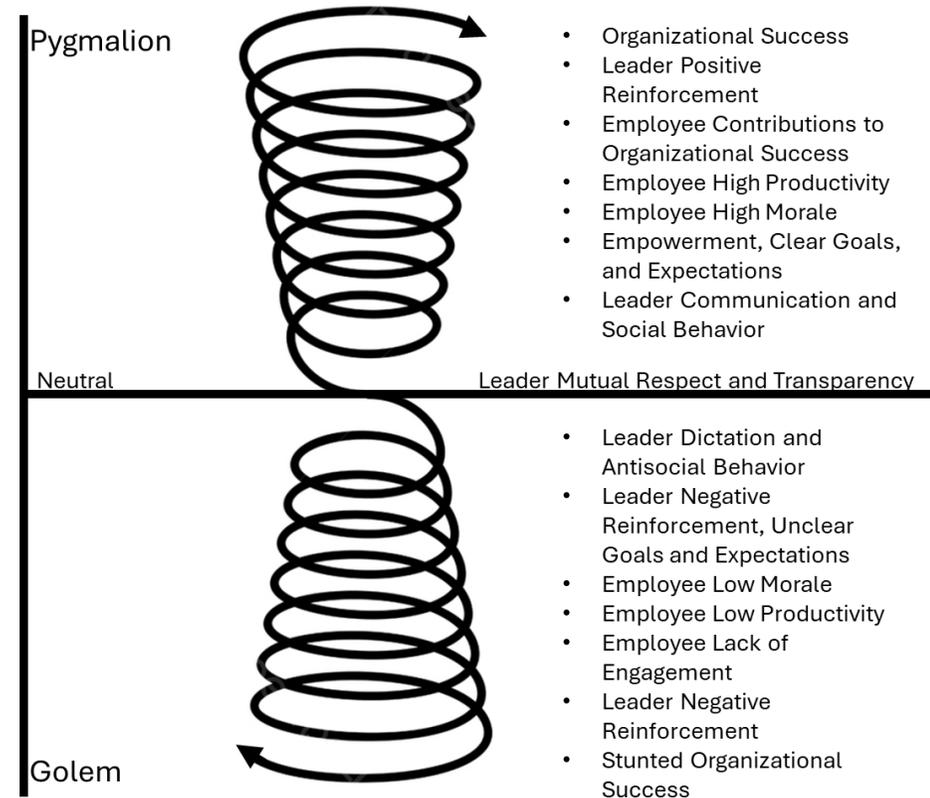


Figure. The upward (Pygmalion) and downward (Golem) spiral of positive and negative leadership behaviors, respectively, where a single loop corresponds to the feedback systems illustrated in Figure 1, and subsequent loops build on the cumulative impacts of the previous. First published in Hubbart, (2024c).

Application

Three experiment station scenarios

Station realignment or budget reset

Begin with truth. Explain the pressure and the rationale. Then build representation and fairness into the process early, because those closest to station operations often see consequences leaders will miss.

New shared reporting or compliance system

Training matters, but trust and pacing matter too. Employees want to know whether the system fits real work. Visible wins, local translation, and local champions are especially important.

Shift toward new partnerships or public priorities

Connect the change to mission rather than fashion. Scientists, managers, and staff invest more when change is framed honestly and tied to institutional purpose.

Takeaway

A short diagnostic checklist for leaders

Before and during change

- Are we telling the truth clearly enough?
- Have we created authentic opportunities for buy in?
- Where is change aversion likely coming from?
- Are our communication channels frequent, clear, and credible?

As change continues

- What are we reinforcing through our own behavior right now?
- What visible wins can we point to?
- Have we adjusted anything in response to feedback, and do people know that?
- Have we created a believable path toward stability, trust, and hope?

Conclusion

Closing thought

- Durable change is rarely built by pressure alone.
- It becomes more likely when leaders tell the truth, earn trust, create buy in, and reinforce contribution over time.

Truth earns trust. Trust enables buy in. Buy in makes durable change possible.

Parting Shot



The elephant in the room is the obvious problem no one wants to acknowledge. Perhaps the deeper truth is that many people cannot handle the truth once it is plainly spoken.

THANK YOU