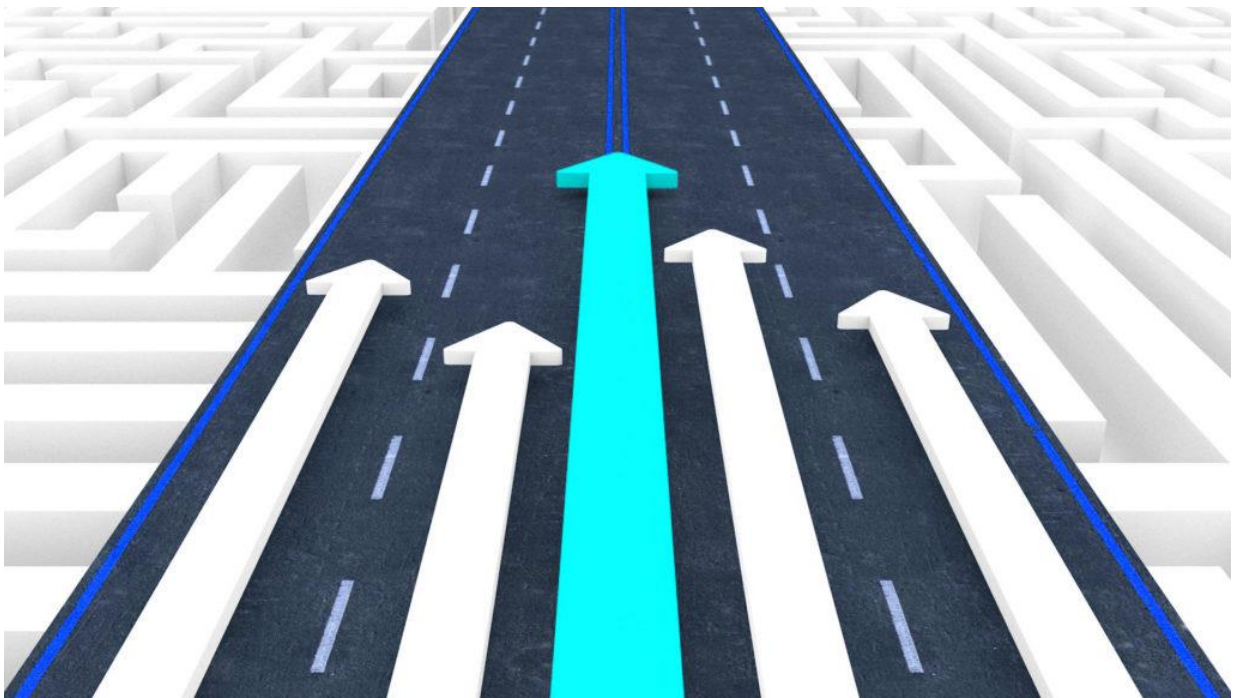# We need change leaders to save lives: How can you be one?

By Paul M. Mastrangelo

Generically, change leaders are those who are willing to engage in the new behaviors and do so publicly so that others know about it. Notably, change leaders are not afraid to challenge other people's expectations that everything should stay the same, and change leaders are respected enough that at least some other people will follow their lead. And like the lesson from the famous YouTube video of how one man started an entire crowd dancing, it's not just the first person publicly doing a new thing, but the "first followers" who are, of course, also leaders.

In the case of coronavirus, workers will need to know with certainty that it is not only OK to stay home, but it is preferable that they stay home – at a minimum when they are sick or someone they interact with is sick. Perhaps a (temporary) work-from-home policy is possible even for healthy workers to stay away from a riskier workplace.

How does a worker really know that staying home in certain situations is what the boss wants? Proof comes in many forms, the least of which is verbal communication. Hearing those words is a start, but actions will speak louder. The policy for when staying home is acceptable should be created or revisited so that it is very clear. Managers at all levels need to hear that the policy is in place because it has a business purpose of saving lives, maximizing total work time, and ultimately keeping money coming through the door over the long haul.

But most importantly, those visible change leaders need to use the policy. If the CEO announces that he will be working from home twice a week and that he expects his team to do the same, that will help. If the CEO goes on to demand a work schedule from all departments that enables as many employees as possible to work from home twice a week, that helps even more.

More than managers

Change leaders are not just managers, however, and if managers recognize those who lead without formal authority, then there can be some collaboration among them to create more visibility. When the non-managers become first followers and are praised for doing so, a lot of would be followers will take heed.

Now obviously some workers in some workplaces will always need to be at work, but with planning and cooperation from the entire team, contingencies can be made for those times when someone is forced to call in sick. Some of those contingencies might need to be radically different from a typical business operation, such as a restaurant closing their dining area and only serving take-out customers, but if doing so prevents both zero revenue and massive turnover, the benefits may temporarily outweigh the costs. A drastic effort to retain staff despite their need for excessive time off will build loyalty and engagement once this outbreak has passed.

How Do Perceived Social Norms Lead Individuals to Conform?

Social psychologist Robert Cialdini correctly points out that individuals frequently base their own behavior on social norms: what other people do and what other people say ought to be done. When just three people are seen looking up at the sky, nearly every passer-by will feel pressured to also look up. Canned laughter on your favorite TV show is there for the same reason. Of course we know that laws, rules, and even expectations

tell you what you ought to do, even when some are not abiding by those dictions. That's why some drivers are obeying the speed limit even when most are not.

The power of peers

But the strongest pressure on an individual is when there is a match between what ought to be done and what is being done by many others.

Leveraging social norms is a critical part of changing an organizational culture because so many behaviors are not dictated by a formal authority figure, like the boss. In contrast, peers are the ones who create and police much of what individuals do. Anyone who has successfully kept the workplace microwave free of dried up crusty things (usually not the boss) will understand that a peer's plea for help or some corny routine can have a big effect on how others behave. For example, imagine a peer-enforced "Sneeze Police" that reminds all to use their arm to cover their mouths, to throw out tissues immediately, and to wash their hands when the bell goes off. It's laughable, but if you and your peers create the rules, you are all likely to follow them. Remember, you can always point out a group of people (three or more!) who are doing something to show others that a new behavior is catching on.

How Do Subtle Shifts in the Social Environment Encourage Individuals to Change Their Own Behavior?

The renowned culture researcher and consultant, Edgar Schein, wrote that the best way to persuade an individual to engage in some new behavior is to leverage the things that the individual dislikes about the current behavior. Find the dissatisfaction with the status quo, and then introduce an alternative that alleviates that dissatisfaction. Additionally, one can influence a person by redefining something that the person identifies with so that the definition now includes the new behavior.

A new kind of hero

One application of these concepts is addressing the hero mindset of employees who would go to work even if a limb were dangling off. Obviously, that definition of heroism needs to change to prevent the spread of the coronavirus among teammates and customers. Luckily, most employees would dislike the old hero mindset if they understood that they were risking the health of the coworkers, associates, and customers with whom they work.

Change leaders need to define a new brand of heroes who can be as productive and helpful as possible, but without endangering other people and the business itself. These "anti-virus work heroes" make advanced preparations in case they get sick or have to care for others who are sick. Those preparations might include taking home a laptop each day to enable remote work, communicating to others the details of assignments that might need to be passed on to others, or creating a phone chain to alert coworkers of unplanned absenteeism. Most importantly, change leaders need to redefine "the right thing to do" when people first feel symptoms or realized they may have been exposed to the sickness. The right thing means staying home to protect others.

What Predictable Stages Exist When Individuals Change Their Own Behavior?

One last consideration when seeking organizational change is to plan for individuals to change at different rates. There is clear empirical evidence that people go through stages of change roughly equivalent to I won't, I might, I will, I have, and I do. The first three stages are cognitive in nature. Just getting people to consider making a change involves emphasizing the benefits of the new behavior. Having them consider what might make things work involves identifying all the reasons for NOT doing things differently, and then countering each reason with an alternative plan. From there, social support helps to get good intentions into initial attempts and eventually a new habit.

Making employees feel that they can really stay home when needed will be more difficult for some jobs that lack generous paid time off or sick days. Many employees are likely to say "I won't stay home if I am able to go into work" because they don't feel they have a choice. The only way to counter that reason is for employers to provide new options for remote work, and if that is not possible, then to create extra paid time off and sick days. Yes, that is a financial hardship for small businesses, but these are necessary precautions to make the best of a very bad situation.

We have learned that this virus can create havoc with our health, our lifestyle, and our economy, and that to only rely on hope is not only lazy, but lethal.

STAY PREPARED

One simple and inexpensive preparation you can implement right now is to start employees thinking about work processes and behaviors in place now that would put your business at risk for a COVID outbreak. We are offering two ways of doing so.

1. In March, using the WHO recommendations, CultureIQ created an **Organizational Virus Protection Assessment** to assess behavioral risk factors that will need to be addressed if the virus were to spread further within the US. Since then, we've also created a **Coronavirus Business Resilience Survey** to cover all work scenarios during COVID: remote work, on-site and return to work. Please use these assessments to consider where your organization is most vulnerable, and where it is strongest.

2. CultureIQ has also created a lighthearted **Keep-Us-Safe Quiz** that is designed to educate employees about healthy and risky work behaviors while creating some buzz or "water cooler" talk about precautions that can be organized now. Please use this as a follow up to the first assessment OR as an initial step in ensuring your staff is considering their safety and the safety of others. Try to emphasize the fact that everyone needs to have each others' backs – we have to protect our teammates.