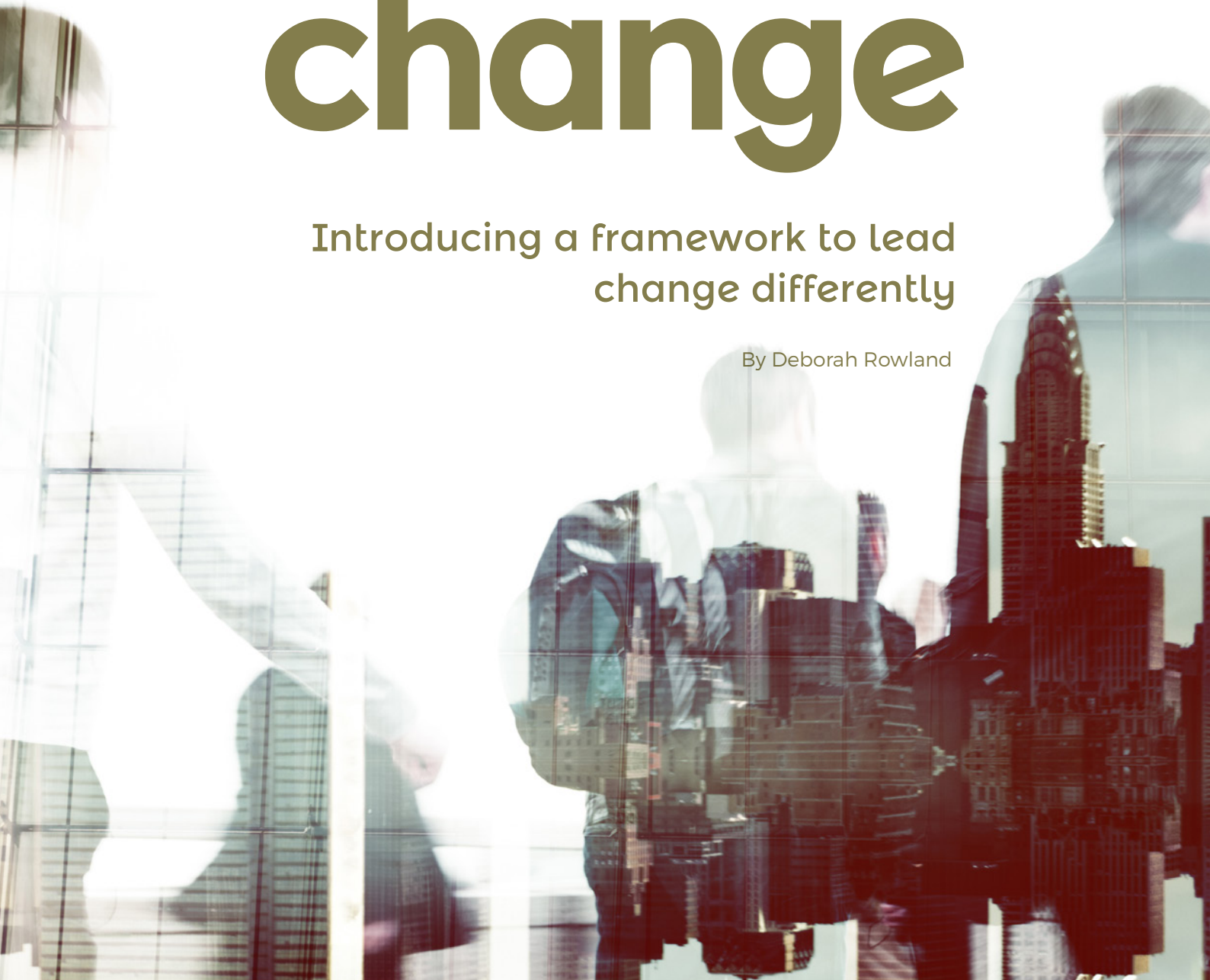


# How to Lead mindful change

Introducing a framework to lead  
change differently

By Deborah Rowland



We were about to do something we had never done before. I invited the group of leaders – 36 top executives from RWE, a 100-year-old energy company with 65,000 employees -- to stand and walk slowly in silence through a physical map of their organisation and its dramatically changing context

There was a lot at stake. RWE was facing unprecedented and disruptive change. There could be no revival of the business model that had built its success. It must change or die.

A few moments earlier, their CEO, Peter Terium, had picked up 30 white cubes and placed them one by one on the ground in the middle of the circle of participants. Each of the cubes represented either an internal element of RWE, such as one of the business units, its leadership culture, or the Board, or, they represented an external influencing element, such as climate change, politicians, customers and the media.

The CEO's task had been to place the cubes on the ground in relationship to each other, as a representation of the complex interconnected energy system he and his top leaders needed to transition to. The goal of the new leadership programme was to allow

the most senior 360 leaders to really see, touch and feel the dynamic complexity of the system they needed to lead into a radically new future.

Some of the group moved the cubes slightly, as they felt that the actual system was a little messier on the ground than their CEO would like them to think. That was fine, the goal was not accuracy and precision, the objective was to develop the sensibilities of leaders to tune into a large complex system that was currently under much stress and uncertainty. And one participant suddenly demonstrated this very forcibly.

### **FEELING BEFORE THINKING**

Dropping to the floor in distress he sat slumped next to the organisational element that was facing the starkest future. This business unit was facing decline and closure - at significant human cost.

Later, as we sat debriefing the experience, he described his moment of deep sadness as like being at someone's funeral. Such heartfelt disclosure -- in a business setting -- was quite a feat in the rational, logical, engineering-dominated culture of

energy production and supply. But the deeper connection that this emotional contact brought within the group built trust, openness, courage and a far deeper appreciation of the human cost of their change.

This leader had given a great gift to the group. He had (in the moment, unknowingly) pointed out the price that was going to have to be paid to grant this organisation a future. This price of decommissioning the very entity whose generations of leaders had for decades built this company's success, was rationally understood in the business but, until this point, the necessity of this ending had never been so openly felt and collectively faced.

Not only did the incident help the leaders see the entire complexity and enormity of the change task their CEO was facing, it also enabled them to voice their personal fears in the face of uncertainty. It is an example of the power of a radically different approach to leading change – something I call Still Moving, which is also the title of my new book.

### **A WAKE-UP CALL FOR LEADING CHANGE DIFFERENTLY**

In my work assisting leaders navigate large complex transition, I define



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In the 2017 Thinkers50 Radar Deborah Rowland was named as one of the new generation of management thinkers changing the world of business.

Co-author of *Sustaining Change: Leadership That Works* (Wiley, 2008), and now author, *Still Moving: How to Lead Mindful Change* (Wiley, 2017), Deborah is a leading thinker, speaker, writer, coach and practitioner in the field of leading large complex change. She has personally led change in major global organizations including Shell, Gucci Group, BBC Worldwide and PepsiCo.

She also founded and grew a consulting firm that pioneered original research in the field, the latest efforts of which were accepted as a paper at the 2016 Academy of Management.

change as the “disturbance of repeating patterns”. Unless leaders can pay as equal attention to the system-changing process through which they bring in change, as they do to its outcomes, my research has shown that their efforts will be doomed to fail, or, at best, be incredibly irksome and hard work. Leaders and their organisations will get busily acting, yet, not moving to a new place.

I have long been curious about how to lead true change, change that gets to the source of the routines that hold the current system (or department, team, individual) in place. We are often blind to that source – how our own point of perception, or emotional state, is in fact creating the very situation we are trying to change. Too often we think that change is about changing the world outside of us.

My latest research calls for a radically different and much needed way of leading change, an approach that recognises that all sustainable movement starts on the inside.

Given the premium that is now placed upon building the capacity to face disruptive change, what kind of leadership is required to make change? And, how can this kind of leadership be best cultivated?

**BEING BEFORE DOING**

I have found that the answer does not lie in more change tool kits and initiatives. We have enough of those “doing change to people” programmes that just seem to overwhelmingly layer on more work. Rather, the answer lies in fostering a different quality of leadership, one that combines both inner and outer skills, and one which starts with a leader’s ability to work on their inner game – their way of being.

The case for “mindfulness” (simply defined as the increased awareness that arises from paying attention, intentionally, in the present moment,

and non-judgmentally) has exploded in recent years. Largely with the aim to reduce workplace stress, improve cognitive functioning, build greater empathy, and enhance creativity, there has been no rigorous empirical study into the relationship between mindfulness, change leadership and change outcomes - until now.

To combat the almost mindless take up of mindfulness, in 2015 I led a major global research inquiry spanning five continents. The study examined both the outer practices and the inner capacities required to be a great change leader. In total, from 65 senior leaders across multiple industries, we gleaned 88 in-depth behavioural-event-based stories of change implementation.

Through coding and analysis of the story transcripts we found that a particular combination of leadership qualities is significantly correlated with successful change outcomes, in fact, it explained over 52% of the reason why big change either succeeds or fails.

And what’s more, it was the inner state of a leader that made the most difference to change outcomes. Getting into the right place personally explained almost half of the difference between great and poor change leadership.

**LEADING CHANGE REQUIRES STILL MOVING**

Movement first starts in cultivating stillness, and I found that four inner capacities clearly differentiated successful change leadership, a combination of both mindfulness and systemic skills:

1. Staying Present: the ability to be non-judgmentally present and not thrown by experience – a noticing skill
2. Curious & Intentional Responding: the capacity to consciously choose how to

respond to experience, and not impulsively react to it – a choosing skill

3. Tuning Into the System: an empathic capacity to be able to tune into systemic dynamics (don't take everything personally!) – a perceiving skill
4. Acknowledge the Whole: a capacity to place all that happens (in particular, difficulty) as being necessary for change and transition - an integrating skill

Four external practices (i.e., visible behaviours) also stood out as being essential for successful change leadership and which were significantly enhanced by the inner capacities:

1. Attractor: an ability to align people behind shared purpose and intention – meaning matters
2. Edge & Tension: the ability to confront reality and amplify disturbance - truth is a turn on
3. Container: the ability to channel the inevitable anxiety in a change process towards purposeful energy - safety strengthens

4. Transforming Space: the ability to spot and change repeating patterns as they happen – we only have the now.

As useful as these individual capabilities are, however, it is when they are put together that the success rate of change increases dramatically.

The top leaders of change in our research were able to put all of these inner and outer skills together. And they were contrasted with the less successful leaders who possessed non-mindful, egocentric, and pace-setting behaviour. We can all “lose it” when under pressure, but great change leaders consciously could put their reactive impulses to one side and play a bigger game. The distinction was clear. Still (inner quality of being) Moving (external quality of doing) leadership is essential for bringing about change in today's uncertain and turbulent context.

Moreover, this kind of leadership cannot be learned in “offline” training courses and taught leadership development programs. I found it could only be learned through skilful and guided experience-based learning within real-life

contexts (<https://hbr.org/2016/10/why-leadership-development-isnt-developing-leaders>). This challenges the traditional industry of provider-based leadership development, and suggests that investment for leading change skills development be switched into well-moderated and coached “online” experience.

In summary, leading change successfully today requires a challenging combination of skills, which can only be cultivated in experiential development contexts. Are we up for it?

We only have to look around us to see how the cost of change failure is increasing. We have a world still reeling from the aftermath of its worst global economic recession since World War II, challenged by the continual threat of terrorism, rocked by political upheavals spurred by a growing backlash against economic globalization and its governing elite, and facing environmental concerns that threaten the survival of the planet.

It's clear that the price of not being able to lead successful change in today's context has become too dangerously high to ignore its process.



“Still Moving is an inspiring, practical and provocative take on the power of mindful leadership to reshape our world.”

**Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer, MIT**

“What makes a successful change agent in a world of exponential change? I have long argued that learning to live with ambiguity will be one of the keys to success. Still Moving will show you how.”

**Paul Polman, CEO, Unilever**

“A compelling and practical guide to the leadership of change. By sharing her self-reflection and brave journey into her past, Deborah inspires us all to become more conscious and embracing of our own life narratives.”

**Ann Sarnoff, President, BBC Worldwide North America**