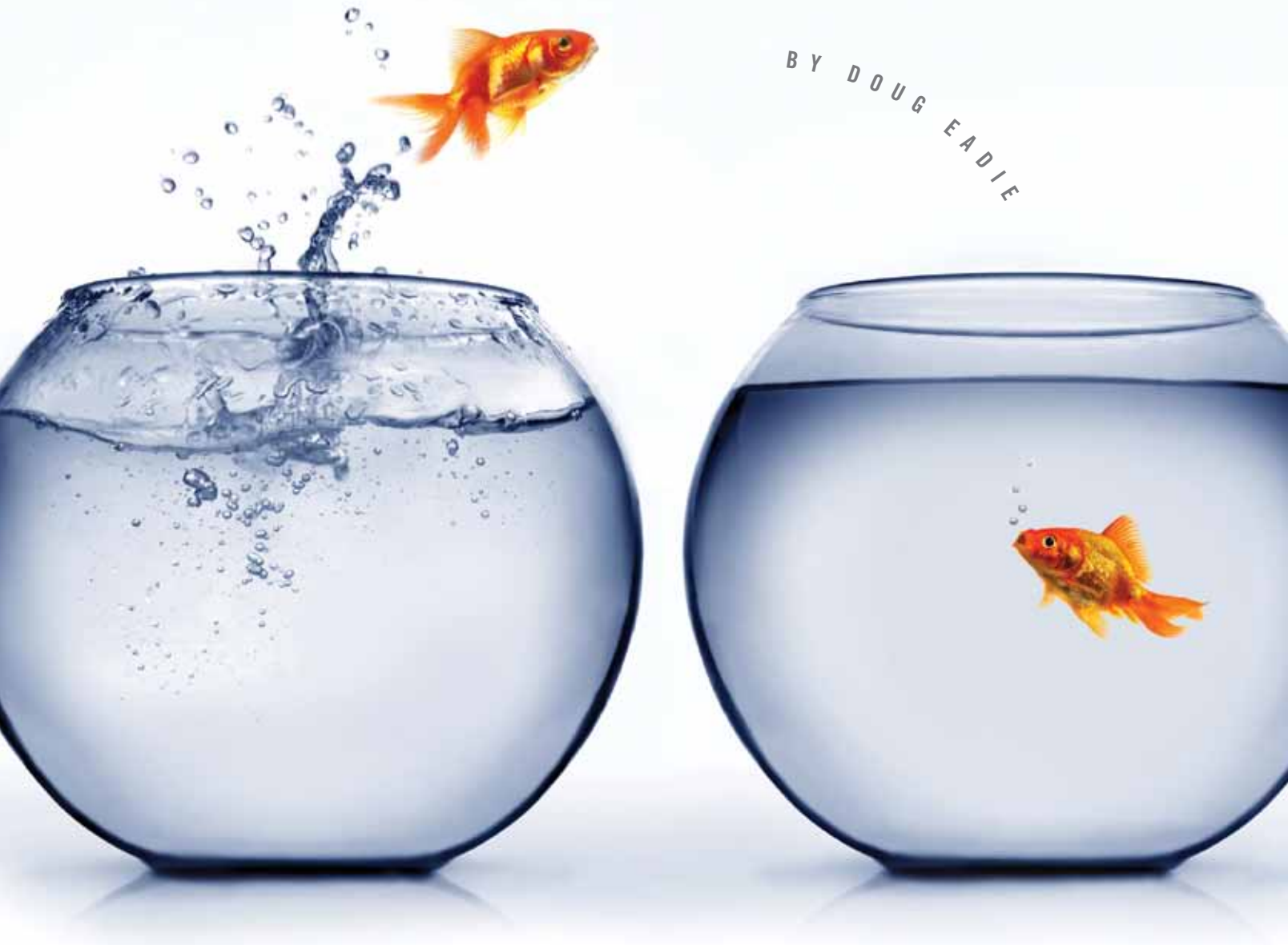


LEADING CHANGE: The CEO as Innovator-In-Chief

BY DOUG EADIE



I've earned a good deal of my daily bread over the past quarter century helping nonprofit and public organizations plan and implement out-of-the-box change. The surest sign of likely success, in my experience, is a chief executive officer who is passionately committed to playing — and well prepared to play — the “innovator-in-chief” role. CEOs who excel at the innovator-in-chief role make accomplishing out-of-the-box change a top-tier chief executive leadership priority. They also bring to the out-of-the-box change game substantial technical planning know-how, strong psychological and political skills, a large dollop of discipline and courage, and the internal stature to lead the change charge.

The CEO is the only person in your organization who can wear the innovator-in-chief hat because no one else brings to the change game the formal authority, influence, access to resources and time required to spearhead an out-of-the-box change effort and to overcome the inevitable inertia and resistance that can sink a change ship early in its voyage.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that out-of-the-box change is just a top-down process or that your CEO could get the change job done on his own. Without the backing of his or her board, your CEO couldn't possibly succeed as innovator-in-chief. And it's obvious that the bulk of the nuts-and-bolts work of planning and developing out-of-the-box change initiatives must be done by staff and volunteers. But the fact remains: Without a committed, capable innovator-in-chief

ensconced in the chief executive suite, out-of-the-box change will almost certainly be the impossible dream.

The Change-Savvy Innovator-in-Chief

CEOs who succeed at the innovator-in-chief role are “change-savvy.” The change-savvy CEOs whom I've worked with and observed over the past quarter century:

- Are technically very knowledgeable about best practices in the rapidly changing area of change planning and management, which means they aren't wedded to conventional planning wisdom and out-of-date approaches. You'll never hear a change-savvy CEO extolling the virtues of traditional long-range or “strategic” planning as a change tool, much less catch her fondling a 10-pound five-year plan.
- Realize that successfully accomplishing out-of-the-box change against all odds requires making the change planning and implementation process a top-tier priority. This means that the CEO makes a firm commitment of time to leading change from the top, and never tries to delegate a piece of this leadership role to lieutenants.
- Recognize that leading out-of-the-box change as innovator-in-chief of the organization is more psychological and political than technical. Not only does the CEO understand that fear is often at the heart of staff resistance to change, he or she also takes strong, visible steps to allay that fear through the clear articulation of vision and

other motivational steps that are intended to inspire and energize participants in the change process. The CEO also pays close attention to the transformation of key stakeholders into ardent change champions.

- Command the respect of staff members and key stakeholders, primarily by playing an aggressive and visible change leadership role and practicing what they are preaching in the change arena. The CEO knows that his or her leadership credibility depends on “walking the talk,” never contradicting in practice what he or she is saying publicly.

The CEOs who are most successful at accomplishing out-of-the box change possess three powerful character traits: courage, deep emotional self-awareness and fundamental self-confidence. Being courageous and steadfast in leading change planning and management is a critical CEO trait. The farther change planning moves outside the box in your



organization, the more fear, anxiety, tension and anger you're likely to see. Fear often is quickly transformed into indignation, and who's a more convenient culprit and target of anger than the highly visible innovator-in-chief who's leading the change charge? These change-savvy CEOs expect the resistance and frequent anger, and they withstand it.

The absence of deep emotional self-awareness can seriously limit the impact of a CEO in leading out-of-the-box change, such as not capitalizing on talents and commitment of strong women on their executive teams because they find such strengths threatening or being unsuccessful in building critical partnerships and joint ventures with other organizations because they see these organizations as competitors. And there are CEOs whose need for security and control lead them to impose on their organizations mechanistic long-range planning processes that substitute neatness and order for creative questioning and exploration. Hidden, unrecognized emotions can

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sabotage CEOs, causing them to see the world through an internal lens that distorts objective reality, and hence leads to inappropriate behavior.

The fundamentally self-confident CEOs I've worked with and observed over the past 25 years have embodied true humility. They are so psychologically secure that they are able to celebrate — and capitalize on — the strengths of the people around them, both board and staff members. They're blessed with robust, healthy egos that aren't easily wounded and don't require constant protection. They are able to keep things in perspective, seldom seeing a personal challenge, slight or even insult as a *cause celebre*. Rather, they are able to take the long view, resisting the impulse to lash out now in the interest of achieving an important objective down the pike. They're keenly aware that the person who's treated them with apparent disrespect today might very well turn out to be a valuable ally tomorrow.

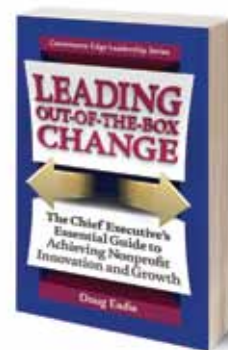
Key Work of the Innovator-in-Chief

Three key roles are critical to the CEO to accomplish significant change in their organization:

- As "chief process designer," the vision-driven CEO makes sure that the structures and processes that are required to plan and implement out-of-the-box change are well-designed, both technically (e.g., the planning steps that board members, staff and external stakeholders go through actually result in technically sound change initiatives that can be implemented) and from a psychological/political perspective (e.g., participation in the planning process turns

key stakeholders into owners of out-of-the-box change initiatives and consequently "change champions" for those initiatives).

- As "chief motivator," the change-savvy CEO employs his or her words and deeds — usually in-person and always very visibly — to build support for and commitment to out-of-the-box change, countering the inevitable inertia and resistance that work against successful change.
- As "chief enabler," the out-of-the-box leader enables the change process to move forward from plans to action in a full and timely fashion, through clear and firm direction, incisive decision-making, the allocation of sufficient resources in staff time and money, and — when necessary — disciplinary action to overcome efforts to sabotage change. ▮



Adapted from Doug Eadie's new book, *Leading Out-Of-The-Box Change: The Chief Executives Essential Guide To Achieving Nonprofit Innovation and Growth* (Governance Edge, 2012). **Doug Eadie** is president & CEO of Doug Eadie & Company, Inc., a firm specializing in board and CEO leadership and strategic change. He may be reached at Doug@DougEadie.com.