

The strategist's bookshelf

The change two-step

Harvey A. Hornstein

Step Up, Step Back: How to really deliver strategic change in your organization, Elsbeth Johnson, 352 pages (Bloomsbury Business, 2020).

Near the start of her new book, *Step Up, Step Back*, Elsbeth Johnson, a Senior Lecturer at MIT's Sloan School of Management and Visiting Lecturer at the London School of Economics, makes a promise that she backs up with reliable research. "This book gives leaders a roadmap for leading change . . . and managers a toolkit to know what to ask for." The good news is, she delivers.

First, Johnson explains why her new approach to managing organizational change is needed. She believes that many of the old models are flawed, relying as they do on questionable reports of "heroic" leader behavior. According to such dubious accounts, no matter the opposing odds, working alone, "heroic" leaders of organization change doggedly pursue their goal. Johnson presents an evidence-based, alternative model that she uses to support her many action recommendations.

I'll admit that when I finished reading her chapter on the research supporting her model and recommendations, I wondered how it would be received by business practitioners. But after reading the rest of the book, my unequivocal suggestion to every practically minded reader is, don't skip the research! With skill, weaving material from this research chapter through the book, Johnson displays an enviable knack for organizing

information and creating exhibits that substantiate and simplify what otherwise might be complex, hard-to-understand ideas. In so doing, she reassures leaders and managers who take her advice that the efforts they undertake will produce successful, enduring organizational change.

Basing advice on the research evidence, Johnson contends that, as they launch organizational change efforts, leaders must learn to manage four "asks" to facilitate change: Clarity, Alignment, Focus and Consistency:

1. **Clarity** – In informal and formal ways leaders must demonstrate their personal commitment to the change, explaining:
 - Why the time is right for the identified change.
 - What long-term outcomes are expected.
 - Why fundamental, rather than cosmetic, alteration is required.
2. **Alignment** – Leaders' conversations, actions, allocation of resources and crafting objective measures of performance must all unambiguously reflect commitment to the desired change.
3. **Focus** – Involved managers must be provided "slack" – by not piling on work that guarantees the change effort's death – as well as evidence of leaders' patience. Both signal leaders' favorable assessment of the planned change's importance.

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4. **Consistency** – Pressures facing managers that are incompatible with those arising from the desired organizational change must be controlled and, wherever possible, curtailed.

The first two “asks” should be handled by organization leaders during the early stages of a change effort, during the “step up period.” The remaining two should be their concern later, during the “step back” period, a time when leaders’ “stepping back” fosters managers’ advance toward the desired organization change.

If organizational leaders successfully deal with these four “asks,” the result, Johnson asserts, will be “Meaningful Autonomy.” This point is reached when “managers are able and willing to take the decisions required to deliver the new strategy or change without feeling the need for leader input, support or cover.”

Devoting a chapter to each “ask,” the author explains what needs to be done in order to produce the clarity, alignment, focus and consistency necessary for managers to achieve meaningful autonomy. To illustrate what behaviors are required, she reports on the experience of four work groups within one organization: 1) The “ideal” case, 2) The “early momentum” case, 3) The “under the radar” case and 4) The “road runner” case. In each of the “ask” chapters Johnson shows that organizations’ leaders managing the two more successful work groups – the “ideal” and “early momentum” case groups – did what was necessary to achieve

clarity, alignment, focus and consistency, unlike the less successful groups – the “under the radar” and “road runner” cases.

In nine of the book’s chapters, Johnson provides two informative sections. One of them, “Science Spotlights,” provides readers with easy-to-understand information about such things as the research procedures being used and the findings of other researchers that clarify, support and expand on the issues being discussed. The second type of section, “Practice Spotlights,” contains brief, readable case studies of a leader’s or manager’s exemplary behavior. These “Practice Spotlights” bring additional clarity and perspective to the author’s recommendations.

In addition, chapters four through eight each end with “Tips and Watch-outs” summaries for organizational leaders and managers. Engaging and easy-to-understand, these summaries contain useful reminders of what they need to do in order to successfully manage the four “asks” in order to facilitate change in their organizations.

The book’s closing chapter explains how organization leaders who step up while properly managing the first two “asks” – clarity and alignment – and then step back in order to properly manage the second two – focus and consistency – propel their organizations toward successful, sustainable organization change. In this chapter Johnson rebuts what she calls the four delusions of leadership.

The four delusions of leadership are fostered by the older, flawed organizational change models, which contend that heroic leaders, working alone, can and must do it all. These delusions are:

1. **The magic delusion** – A leader’s charisma is a key catalyst for change.
2. **The activity delusion** – A leader’s early, frequent and continuing efforts are key catalysts for change.
3. **The drama delusion** – A leader’s capacity to make change exciting, vivid, tense and thrilling is a key catalyst for change.
4. **The agency delusion** – A leader’s understanding/belief that change only requires changing peoples’ attitudes and behaviors but does not require alterations of organizational systems or structure.

Leaders falling prey to these delusions impose costs on themselves, the managers reporting to them and their organizations. They become forever ensnared in change details, their managers are denied opportunities to develop important skills and their organizations never fully experience the benefits of successful, sustained change.

Change initiatives don’t have to misstep, trip and fall, says Johnson. In *Step Up, Step Back* she offers a well-researched and practical alternative.

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