

The Challenge of Change by John C. Maxwell

The history of Henry Ford and the Model T illustrates a fundamental truth about leadership: leaders never outgrow the need to change.

On his way to dominating the automotive market with the Model T, Henry Ford embodied innovation and progress. By pioneering the assembly line, Ford slashed the amount of time needed to manufacture an automobile. He installed large conveyor belts in his factory, allowing workers to stay in one place rather than roaming around the factory floor. He also shortened the workday of his employees from nine hours to eight hours so that his factories could operate around the clock.

The efficiencies Ford introduced allowed cars to be manufactured at a fraction of their previous costs. In under a decade, automobiles went from being luxuries affordable only to the wealthiest Americans, to being standard possessions of the average American family. Ford profited handily from the popularity of the Model T, and Ford Motor Company grew into an empire.

However, the dominance of Ford Motor Company was short-lived. As competitors changed their operations to copy Ford's concepts mass production, Henry Ford made a tremendous leadership blunder. With cars rolling off assembly lines like never before, consumers began to demand a variety of colors. However, Ford stubbornly refused, uttering the famous line, "The customer can have any color he wants so long as it's black."

In Ford's mind, producing multiple colors was foolhardy since black paint dried the fastest and could be used most efficiently. Amazingly, Ford did not comprehend the human preference for variety. Customers flocked en masse to other producers who catered to their color preferences, and Ford Motor Company never regained its grip on the market.

For so long, Henry Ford had focused on moving from inefficiency to efficiency that he refused to move in the opposite direction—from efficiency to inefficiency—even when doing so would have been wise and profitable. Ford's genius in sparking change had catapulted him to the pinnacle of American commerce, but later, his inability to change cost him dearly.

Issues That Make Change A Challenge

Critics. Along the journey of leadership, you'll meet all sorts of people, and I guarantee you'll bump into a few critics. Early in my career, I didn't know how to handle disapproval, and I bent over backward to keep everyone happy. In spite of my best efforts, I failed. Some of my people still didn't like me.

Trying to appease everybody invites trouble. Appeasers end up being average because they always gravitate to the middle of the road. They're afraid to make waves, and therefore, they avoid changes. My leadership began to take flight when I allowed myself to press people to change—whether they thanked me or cursed me.

People You Have Outgrown. As we climb the levels of leadership, we come to the sad realization that most people aren't committed to personal growth. Friends who once shared our dreams begin to settle for second best. Members of our inner circle quit when the journey gets hard. If we are to change ourselves for the better, then we need to change the company we keep.

Eventually, we must change our relationships by disengaging from the people we've outgrown. Disassociating from colleagues can be especially painful given your history together, the contributions they have made in your life, and your personal feelings toward them. Disengaging is painful because you care about them. It's painful because they may not understand why you've drifted away from them. It's painful all the way around, but remember, unless you are willing to endure these pains, your own growth as a leader will be limited. Leaders only grow to the threshold of their pain.

The Weight of Responsibility. When we're young, leadership has an idealistic appeal. We yearn to be in charge and out front, making the decisions. However, the reality of leadership involves the heavy burden of responsibility. Missteps by a leader can affect people's livelihoods or an organization's sustainability. The fear of getting it wrong can paralyze a leader.

If we, as leaders, want to make significant changes to increase our impact, then we must be willing to

shoulder progressively greater loads. Although added responsibility gives us a greater opportunity to exercise leadership, it also magnifies the consequences of our mistakes. To be a change agent, a leader must be willing to take ownership of key projects and pivotal decisions.

Personal Inadequacies. As we grow in our leadership, we advance into uncharted territory— areas beyond our comfort zones. Such occasions give us growing pains by confronting us with our inadequacies. Our wisdom fails to solve a problem, or we stumble into a situation requiring more wisdom than we possess.