

# A Hope for Change

## Alan Deutschman on *Change or Die*

By Joshua Freedman

Change Works...  
Sometimes.

The difference is  
people – and how  
they are led.



When the stakes are high, life and death for the people or the company, change will happen – right? *Fast Company* senior writer Alan Deutschman was surprised that the answer is “no.” He was attending a conference on the future of healthcare where the dean of Johns Hopkins talked about what happens to cardiac patients when they’re told to “change or die.” The incident led to an in-depth analysis of individual and organisational change with a startling conclusion: While change is possible, the usual approach doesn’t work.

How often have you heard an executive pull out the “change or die” rhetoric, attempting to rally the forces by enjoining them to take up a last-ditch effort to save the company? The “common sense” notion is that a forceful presentation of facts will instill fear causing employees to take the transformation seriously. Confronted with this hard-edged urgency, there will be no room for dissent. The trouble is that even in real “change or die” situations, people don’t change. Real change requires a much more subtle, relationship-driven approach.

Take the case of a cardiac patient just after a bypass: “You’re in a change or die situation,” Deutschman explains, “You have to switch to a much healthier lifestyle or you’re going to be killed by this terrible disease that you have. And even when doctors tell these patients you have to change or die, study after study has shown that two years later, nine out of ten of the heart patients have not changed. We like to think that crisis and fear motivate people to change. And yet the studies have shown that even in the change or die situation most people can’t change. That just really blew me away and made me want to understand the psychology.”

Deutschman first wrote about “Change or Die” in a 2005 *Fast Company* article that leads, “All

leadership comes down to this: changing people's behavior. Why is that so damn hard? Science offers some surprising new answers -- and ways to do better.” His new book takes the concept further, explaining how the traditional corporate view of change just doesn’t work.

While the notion that people won’t even change in a “Change or Die” situation sounds bleak, Deutschman isn’t: “We’re change machines. We improvise, we adapt, we overcome. And normally we do very well with



“Facts, fear and force don’t actually motivate change.”

change. It's just an issue when people or organisations get stuck. When we've tried the solutions that we know, the supposed solutions again and again, they keep failing. At these times, we can change but we need to learn from other people."

The real challenge isn't change, but the "conventional wisdom" that change requires the Three Fs: Force, Facts, and Fear. He points back to the heart patients – where even a doctor's expertise, extensive medical information, and the fear of death are not motivating. "You can't just tell people that they need to change. You can't try to just scare them. And you can't try to force them by relying on the moral authority of your position or expertise."

One reason the FFF driven change fails is the inattention to a basic principle of emotional intelligence: When people are pushed, they resist. When facts and fear are used to try and force change, people may comply in the short term, but they don't have a real ownership of the change. It's obedience, not motivation. In the Six Seconds' Model of emotional intelligence, this concept is captured in the competency of Intrinsic Motivation. Without Intrinsic Motivation,

people will not persevere, even if something is "good for them." So an effective change leader will go beyond logic to engage people at a heart level.

"We tend to think that people are rational. Especially in the business world where leaders usually come from engineering or scientific or financial backgrounds. These are very intellectually accomplished people. And they're doing things that are technically sophisticated. So they tend to have a very rational mindset. And they like to think that other people are rational too. So if you just give people accurate information they'll make the right choice. But in the case of heart patients, the doctors who come from this rational background have told their patients you have a very bad disease, it's going to kill you unless



*Hope is the antidote, the missing catalyst, that will enable a demoralised team to successfully*

you make these changes in how you choose to live. And they give people the accurate information and people still don't change."

What's the alternative? "You have to make an emotional connection with them that inspires a new sense of hope."

Deutschman says extensive research has shown that the most successful change actually begins with an emotionally significant relationship followed by repetition and reframing. In the 1950s psychologists at Johns Hopkins University began to study what forms of psychotherapy worked, and hundreds of studies have followed up on this work. "The key factor is the emotional connection that's made between the patients and the therapist. It's not so much the specifics of the method of therapy. It's whether you connect as human beings. It's whether you're with someone who has this sincere belief that together you can learn to change."

The feeling of hope is essential, and it comes partly from the logical side – seeing results – and largely from something less tangible. "We've tried what we know again and again and it's failed. So people and organisations become demoralised, and we basically give up hope." This pessimism is a natural consequence of the ongoing churn in corporate life – the annual (or sometimes



*Deutschman's new book, Change or Die, provides a compelling roadmap for successfully leading change.*

quarterly) "transformational strategy" unleashed by some well-meaning and well-paid consulting firm. You can just hear the middle managers' "here we go again" refrain as the latest in an incessant string of changes come rolling over them, doomed before it starts by a lack of buy-in.

The antidote isn't a more logical plan, Deutschman says, it's a compelling relationship. "What we need is someone who can give us the belief and the expectation that we can change. It's kind of a leap of faith. It comes from having a personal relationship and being inspired by their belief in us. That's something that gets communicated in an emotional way."

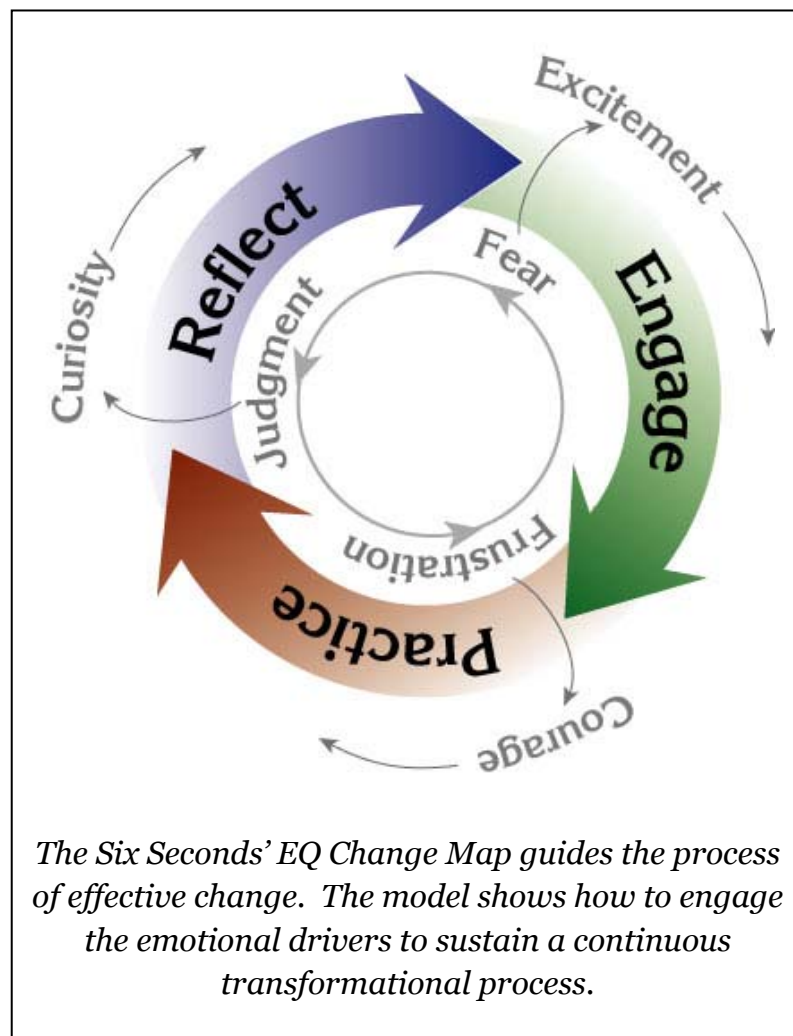
This emotional need goes far beyond a paycheck. Yes, people need to pay the bills, but they also need

something deeper, and some leaders have committed to provide that. In the book, Deutschman uses an example from the 1990s when General Motors closed a plant because the workers were “unmanageable.” The old paradigm was “telling people to do something and relying on the force of threatening to fire them if they didn’t.” When Toyota took over the plant, they tried a different set of motivators. “They took these American workers to Japan and showed them how this actually worked on the assembly lines in Japan. You can’t just tell people something. You have to prove it to them through experience. They set up a situation appealing to people’s desire to be competent, to be creative, to be successful, and to be admired and respected for those skills by the people they work with.”

In *Change or Die*, Deutschman describes the milestones of successful change outlining a process parallel to the Six Seconds’ EQ Change Map. In the Six Seconds’ model, change is successful when it

proceeds through three continuously cycling phases: Engage, Practice, and Reflect. The phases each have specific objectives. There are both tactical and emotional dimensions to making the model function:

- **Engage:** create an initial plan with buy-in. This requires a trusting emotional connection with the change leader(s) who encourages hope and builds confidence.
- **Practice:** implement new approaches to test efficacy.



This requires encouragement and coaching to learn, practice and master new patterns and skills needed to facilitate change and growth.

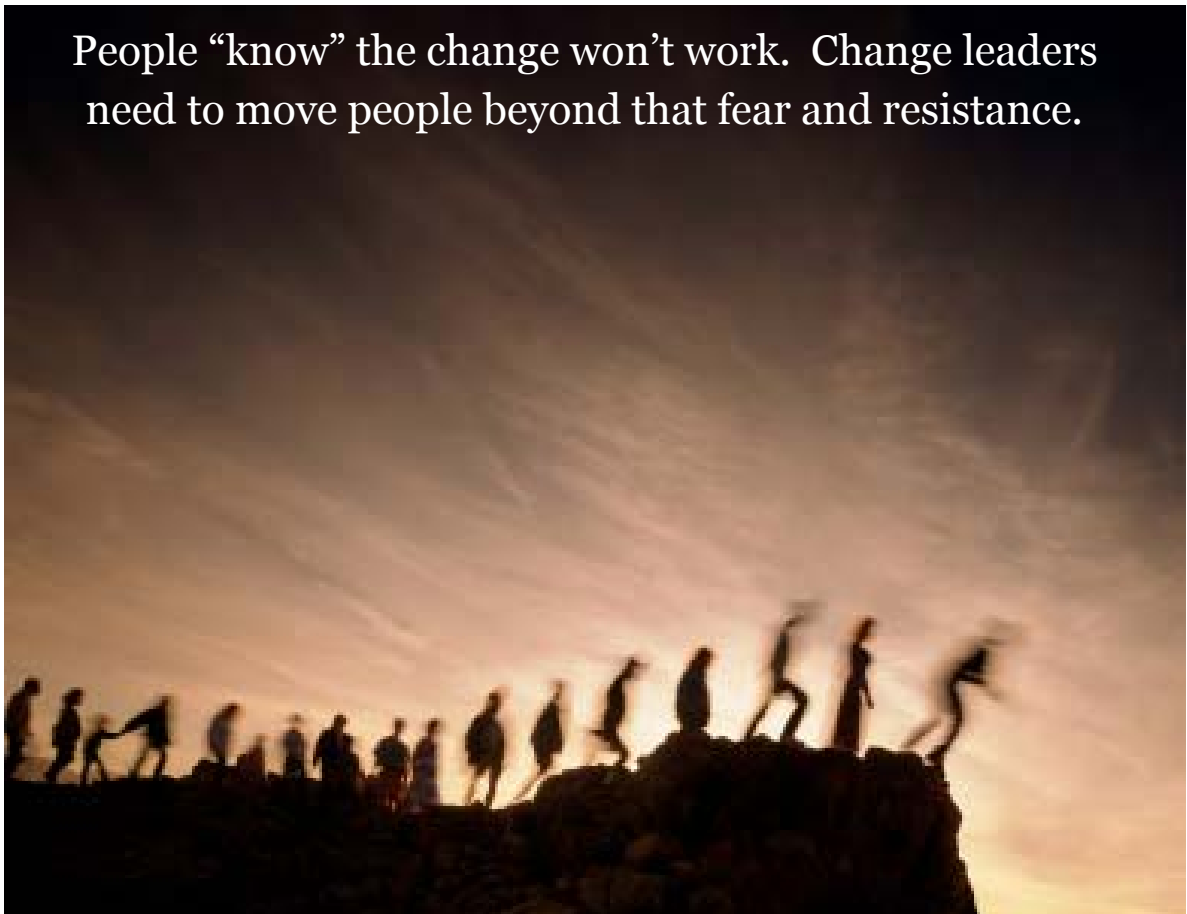
- **Reflect:** identify changes and cement the wins. Here change leaders must articulate and celebrate successes – and foster curiosity and dialogue to assess the change effort and refocus the plan for optimal efficacy.

This cyclical approach to change allows for a much more rapid cycle time creating short-term wins that

demonstrate the efficacy. Often change efforts fail because they attempt to skip over or short change one phase – most frequently making a plan in isolation and failing to successfully engage people.

Part of the problem with conventional change efforts is that they come on the heels of many other similar efforts – all tied to facts, force, and fear. People “know” this new change won’t work. That perception is about emotion, not logic, so the change leader needs to use emotional intelligence to connect at a heart-level. “An organisation that’s struggling and failing has tried

People “know” the change won’t work. Change leaders need to move people beyond that fear and resistance.



various efforts and strategies that have all failed in the past. You need to give people hope. You need to make them believe that this time with this leader and this new strategy, that there really is hope for things to turn around. And that's something that can only be done emotionally."

"Again and again leaders have told the people 'we have a plan, we have a solution, follow me,' and it's failed. So the people in the organisation are demoralised; they have given up hope. So how do you overcome that demoralisation?"

### **Engage**

What you really need is an emotional inspiration, a human connection. To people coming from the hardcore, quantitative, financial, MBA, Ph.D. kind of background, this may just seem kind of squishy. But it's true."

"There's an example in my book of the incredible turnaround of IBM beginning under Lou Gerstner in the 1990s. Gerstner came from that rational, technocratic mindset. He had been the youngest partner at McKenzie Consulting and had an

engineering and MBA background. When he came in to take over IBM, people thought it would be all spreadsheets and strategic planning and cost-cutting.

Gerstner somehow realised that what he needed to do was emotionally inspire the belief of the people in IBM. Inspire them that they could be a great company once again; that they could thrive and have a

brilliant future. He had to go out there and give speeches and show by his own conviction, by his own passion, by his own belief, that it could change. He had to use his emotions to inspire the emotions of the people in the company."

While the old-style charismatic leader can give a great locker-room speech and fire people up, this relationship-based change leadership requires a more subtle process. When people are coming from hopelessness and distrust, their radar is up, actively looking for another snow job. Authenticity beats slick.

"It starts with your own belief and your own compassion and your own conviction. People have to see that you're sincere. Gerstner was not a

"How do you overcome that demoralisation? What you really need is an emotional inspiration, a human connection."

great public speaker. He was not a naturally charismatic person – not a Steve Jobs kind of inspirational speaker. In fact, Gerstner’s a little bit awkward. But people saw the speech and they got a sense of his sincerity. They felt something. And when we look into someone’s eyes and we hear the tone of their voice and we hear the rhythm of their speech, we’ve learned from the experience in our lives when people are sincere and that’s important.”

While sincerity is key, the emotional component is not sufficient by itself. Change will be derailed by a lack of buy-in, but it is equally useless to launch change without a good plan.

### **Practice**

“In any kind of corporate turnaround, you need what John Kotter of Harvard Business School calls short-term wins. You need to have some success fairly quickly that allows people to experience the change. This helps them believe in it.”

“In my book, I talk about the Dean Ornish program for heart patients. It’s a program for people with very bad heart disease who have been eating very high-fat diets and being sedentary. Ornish puts them on a radical vegan diet where they get fewer than 5% of their calories from fat and they’re taken out every day

to exercise. It’s a huge lifestyle change. But after one month, they see that their chest pains have almost entirely gone away and that they’ve lost weight and their cholesterol is falling. The rapid improvements are also a very strong motivator for change.”

“So you start by communicating your belief and your sincerity. But then you still need to prove to people through their own experience. They need to see and feel the benefits of the change if you’re going to get them to commit to the hard work of making it happen over the longer term.”

The challenges of change are rooted in neurobiology – the human brain literally wires itself to respond a particular way. The patterns of thought, feeling, and action quickly form, based on experience, and



*Like roads connecting cities, our brains form patterns. These patterns become “the way,” simplifying our lives but making change more challenging.*

slowly change – it’s our brain’s way of making life easy. To overcome the brain’s wiring, sometimes a company needs a fairly radical culture change.

Since the neurological patterns form based on experience, corporate culture tends to be self-reinforcing – people come to see a particular way of doing business as normal, and normal feels right. But business-normal is often dysfunctional.

Deutschman illustrates the opportunity to break out of “dysfunctional normal” with the story of the W.L. Gore company – the makers of the waterproof fabric GORE-TEX widely used in outdoor gear, founded in 1958 by Bill and Vieve Gore.

“Bill was an engineer, a chemist, at Dupont back in the 1950s – a classic, old school, military command and control, hierarchal industrial company. And he was frustrated by it. He realised that the only time that people really talked to each other and worked together in creative ways were in two places.

“One was on a taskforce. When the company really had a problem, they put together a taskforce and they threw out the rules. People didn’t have to only report to their boss; they just put a group of people together and they actually found creative solutions and got things done and worked with each other.



*For change to occur, people need to hold a new kind of conversation. Given that any honest dialogue is rare, it takes an exceptional workplace context for people to openly talk through change.*

“The other time was in the carpool on the way to work where people in the car actually talked to each other without regard to the hierarchy and the chain of command. Then when they got to the office at 9:00, it would fall into the military paradigm.”

So Gore decided to start a company that would follow the rules of the taskforce and the carpool – a company where people would focus

on working together to solve problems. Now almost 50 years old with over \$1.8b in sales, 45 plants, and nine years near the top of Fortune's 100 Best Places to Work, the experiment seems to be a success.

In terms of change, what's interesting about the Gore case is what happens when a new Associate (not "employee") comes into the company. "Someone from the



*At first people just reject facts that don't fit their preconceptions. Then, with time and experience in a new context, the preconceptions get washed away.*

outside who's worked in traditional hierarchal companies comes in and they're told, 'We have no bosses here.' At first the new people think that that's just corporate talk and euphemism. The Gore people say, 'Really – you don't have a boss. Your job is to go and meet all the people in the group and get to know them and let them get to know you. And then once you know each other and have a feeling for each other then they'll start to ask you to take part in things.'

"The newcomers typically respond: 'Let's get over all the PR and the corporate euphemism. Really, who's my boss? Who's gonna tell me what to do? What's my job?'" It takes a while for them to realise you have to create your job. You have to connect with other people there and get them to invite you to join their teams and their efforts. But it doesn't make any sense to people because it's totally outside their experience, it's outside their belief system or conceptual framework."

This experience illustrates the power of patterns. The conceptual framework starts at a neurological level with brain cells connecting to form interlocking systems. Those new Gore employees have the system of "boss" and "hierarchy" strongly connected with the notion of "work." The patterns become a kind of frame though which they see the world, and

their brains literally restructure so that frame makes sense.

“We all have these belief systems or conceptual frameworks or patterns. We’ve had them for a long time, and they influence our gut feelings about things. They shapes how we view the world. And when you present people with facts that don’t fit into their conceptual frameworks, they tend to just reject the facts.”

### **Reflect**

The capacity to recognise these patterns is one of the core competencies of emotional

intelligence, and it’s one of the eight competencies measured by the Six Seconds’ Emotional Intelligence Assessment (SEI). Understanding this link between thoughts, feelings, and actions, seeing these unconscious filters and response mechanisms, is a key first step to responding intentionally rather than reacting on autopilot.

The W.L. Gore case also illustrates what neuroscientists call “plasticity” – they brain is changeable, and first-hand experience over a period of time is a powerful way to rewire the synapses.

This reality has important



*The first step to changing patterns is recognising them. This requires self-reflection – or “zooming back” to see a larger picture.*

implications for education as well – including MBA education. “I’ve been writing about MBA business education over the past 20 or 25 years, and every few years the top schools will call on journalists to say ‘we’re changing the program. It’s not just about analysis, it’s not just quantitative –

we’re doing the soft skills, we’re doing leadership, we’re doing communications and that’s what’s important now.’ But I’m still not sure that people fully grasp the importance of the human elements. And maybe the best place to teach that isn’t in a university classroom.”

“You could teach people in the classroom about the W.L. Gore culture, but until they’ve actually worked in it and lived in it for a year, are they really going to understand it at a gut level? It’s hard because being told something doesn’t change our belief systems, our conceptual frameworks. It’s actually experiencing it repeatedly that drives the shift in our beliefs.”

In other words, the explicit content of a class becomes less important than the tacit experience of the learning process. What’s internalised isn’t so much what’s said, isn’t so much the powerpoint, but is more what happens at a gut level.

**“In order to change people’s deeply rooted belief systems, you’re talking at least a year or two immersed in a different culture on a daily basis. With that amount of time it’s amazing what people can learn.”**

“It’s not enough to just take the two-week long trip to Asia to meet people or to have the six-week project in Europe or in Silicon Valley. In order to change people’s deeply rooted belief systems, you’re talking at least a year or two immersed in a different culture on a daily basis. With that amount of time it’s amazing what people can learn. In my book I

talk about the Delancey Street program in San Francisco, which takes criminals, drug-addicted felons, coming out of the state prisons, and in three to four years transforms them into sober, peaceful, enterprising workers. It works by immersing them in a culture, but that’s not something you

Change is about learning and trust.

Who do you trust to teach you?



can do in a one-semester course that meets three times a week."

Deutschman's research also applies at a very personal level. He's faced the challenge of being stuck and then finding a way to change. "I struggled for a decade, from my 20s to 30s, with being very overweight. I'm not quite 5'9" and at my peak I weighed 228 pounds, so I was technically an obese person. I really had this bad health problem and I knew that I had to do something about it. I struggled and failed for a decade.

"I had been successful at all the other things I had done in my life. I'd done well in school and had a thriving career in a very competitive field. I felt like an accomplished, successful person, yet I had this one area where it was clear that I needed to change. I

just continually struggled and failed to change; I came close to believing that that's just the way that I was.

"When I lived in New York I was writing a column for *GQ* magazine and they paid for me to work with one of the most expensive, prestigious personal trainers in New York at the Equinox chain of gyms, which was the very hot chain of gyms at the time. I was supposed to work out everyday with the top trainer and I wound up gaining weight from the experience.

"When I moved to San Francisco I accidentally found a trainer who I formed a strong relationship with. She communicated a strong conviction that I could change and I would change. This emotional link to her gave me hope and she was able

to help me learn a whole different way of approaching my lifestyle. So it was a matter of really finding the right person who could help me learn. I wound up losing 40 pounds from the experience and keeping it off.”

Deutschman’s personal experience frames change in a new way: Rather than seeking a solution, change is about learning. Who do you trust to teach you? What is it about these trustworthy teachers that you can emulate? Perhaps the whole notion of “leading change” should be reformatted to “teaching change.” If you are a leader and you want people to change, are you an effective teacher? Are you building a relationship where learning can occur?

Given the challenges of change, and how easily it seems individuals and organisations get stuck, Deutschman offers this hope: “I thought that if I can do this then there’s hope for everyone to change. So in the book I

talk about the hardest cases. Heroin-addicted criminals. People whose arteries are almost completely clogged from heart disease. The auto plants that GM considered the worst plants with the most unmanageable workers. Even in these toughest cases where some might dismiss the possibility, profound change is possible.”

We’re made to change, Deutschman says, because humans are great at learning. It starts with a relationship: “We can change but we need to learn from other people. We need first to start with their belief and conviction in us. We start with an emotional bond knowing they believe in us. Then we need to learn from them.” In addition to the right relationship, learning takes a kind of humility and the emotional safety to fail and start again. “We have to keep becoming beginners and going through the process of learning again. Yes it’s frustrating, but it’s worth it.”

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In an 18-year career as a writer, Alan Deutschman has been the Silicon Valley correspondent for *Fortune* and a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, and *New York Magazine*. He is currently a senior writer for *Fast Company*. His web site is <http://www.alanddeutschman.com/>

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