

Fostering change can be a funny business.

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What motivates change most in our businesses are the things that cost us the most in terms of missed opportunities for gain.

For some, it is the huge cost of employee turnover, low employee morale and productivity, or regulatory pressures from changes in the law that affect our core business practices and/or business systems. For others, the enemy is rapid changes in market demands, consumer expectations and increased competition. Whatever we need to do to remain competitive usually requires some kind of major change. The biggest challenge to successful change is resistance. We must be strategic in how we "un-freeze" the way things are being done and gain buy-in and support for our change efforts.

The reason change is so difficult is that it invokes fear. Fear of change is a natural human response: the unknown versus the familiar. A powerful weapon against fear of change is some strategically planned fun. By strategic, I mean the fun has to resonate with the culture and the people and must be thematically aligned to the change effort. The insistence on making change fun can really work when it is done right.

Think creatively about your company's future can be enhanced by thinking creatively about how you are going to get people on board to support and lead the change process.

Southwest Airlines has had to change the way they do business, and the way the industry does business, over and over again. To energize these changes, company leaders Herb Kelleher and Colleen Barrett leveraged their strategic efforts with outrageous shenanigans, radical events and a great sense of humor.

Southwest Airlines had battled the big guys to get the new routes and gates they needed in their new markets. When they moved into Albuquerque, their gate people dressed up in full camouflage and face paint and had a full-sized cannon on site to show the company's warrior spirit. (OK, so that was before homeland security.)

Herb Kelleher fought a smaller, competing firm for the rights to use the LUV ticker and Love theme, and actually fought the other company's CEO in the ring, WWF style, in a staged arm wrestling contest. (They had actually settled prior to this staged event.)

Online Business Services' president Josh Schechter dressed in a union suit, boots and a parka and camped out in a dome tent at the San Antonio Tech Center's atrium, along with a live goat named Mr. Pickles. This was how he kicked-off an early morning managers meeting that underscored their "TREK to the TOP"-themed change effort at the local firm. This stunt thematically placed leadership right at the very core of the change effort, as it tied into the training retreats, task forces and other change-management activities everyone was participating in. The only drawback was Mr. Pickles tried to sample everyone's breakfast Tacos. Yo no quiero!

AT Systems Security Inc., a western U.S. security guard company, had a comedian pose as newly acquired Scottish branch manager at their recent week-long manager's meeting in Phoenix. Comedian Chip Flatow had everyone enthralled and taken-in for two days with his outlandish (staged) approach to security management, right up until he dovetailed the shtick into his comedy routine over a formal dinner, delighting and energizing everyone. The company was able to show they were willing to have some fun, along with the hard work ahead, as had been discussed in meetings and punctuated by Chart House Learning's "FISH" philosophy concept.

FISH is all about being "world famous" in four key ways: have fun, make people's day, be there, and choose your attitude. You can't expose people to great ideas and not be willing, and able, to take action on those ideas.

So, at [Southwest Airlines](#), Online Business Services, and AT Systems Security, leadership walks the walk with their people, shows the courage to be a bit radical and different, and thereby imbues others with the courage and energy to adopt and embrace change. Lewin calls this "un-freezing". The way you unfreeze a culture has to resonate, or match, to your organization's unique "DNA." A lot of collaboration will help prevent the launching of the proverbial lead-balloon.

While change management is serious business, and benefits from being planned and orchestrated by organizational development professionals, the energy required for change to effectively take place is the fun stuff that everyone can support and thereby assure everyone plays a key role in helping to move a company forward to its desired, envisioned future.

Deliberately planned fun can serve to jostle the hearts and minds of people in a way that helps them become more receptive to changes in the business, and they are then able to accept responsibility for major improvements and change.