



Q & A with Bud Taylor



Why is customer-driven change important in today's business world?

It's the only thing! We are coming out of a recession that has been largely caused by short-term profits to meet the expectations of "the Street." We lost sight of why we were in business—and that's to serve customers. Yes, we have to make profits, but that's difficult to do without customers. Business has to rebuild public confidence. The fastest way to do this is to transform with customers as our goal.

In *Customer-Driven Change*, you compare elements of customer-driven change to the work of nineteenth-century French artists. Why did you decide to explain business concepts by using art?

We complicate change. We mush everything together to the point of being defeated before we start. Change becomes too exhausting to even think about. But it doesn't have to be. The issue is how to clearly communicate change to those leading it and undergoing it. Understanding takes away fear; however, how do you make change understandable so that it "sticks"? You create images, that's how. We know that people remember the Mona Lisa quicker than they do the capital of Montana.

There's nothing more dynamic than mid-nineteenth-century France and the transition from romantic to impressionist art. The transition is literally painted for you. You can see how centuries of art changed in a few decades. If painters found the formula, don't you think they should share it with business?

Of course, there's also the fact that I love art and I love Paris.

What is the most important piece of advice you give in this book?

Don't start until you know you're working on the right thing with the right leaders! Then develop the coalition among customers, employees, and managers that will make the change successful. The risk is too high not to do this. Failed change breeds cynicism that prevents change.



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How does a company go about changing for their customers? Where does it start and who should initiate it?

Every situation is different. The classic answer is that you have to start with the CEO or a strong contingent of the C-suite. Sometimes it's not that easy. Sometimes the C-suite is the protector of the past. Sometimes people lower in the hierarchy have to start creating a sense of urgency.

I've worked in situations where customers start cancelling contracts before the C-suite comes to its senses. Lower levels take on the responsibility for building the business case for change. They expend the effort to dig into data, understand what we're trying to do for customers, and then build implementation action plans and a strategy.

I must point out that I'm not saying, "Do what your customers are asking for." What I am saying is to know the value proposition that you need to deliver to your customers; and then make sure that everything is aligned to that end.

What are some important factors to consider before implementing customer-driven change in a company?

Blue Ocean strategists hate me. Whitespace, brainstorming, and ideation do not change most companies.

In 80 percent of my experience, change comes down to "cleaning up your backyard before you invite guests for a BBQ." Once the basics are in place, you have to build a competency that can be leveraged into a BHAG (Big Harry Audacious Goal). BHAGs are out of reach until you know who you are and understand that you can only build from strength.

Great companies never die; they just keep changing from their strength. Take a look at Southwest, Apple (even during its years of purgatory), Hewlett Packard, and Nokia. Unfortunately, Lehman Brothers is no longer on my list—it lost contact with the legacy of its founders.

Do you have a favorite example of successful change?

My favorite examples are always on the front line, not at the level of large strategic change. Granted, you need the strategic context; however, the gratification is when you see changes happening between employees and customers.

I remember working with account managers in Microsoft Europe. They were doing lots of customer activities but didn't know which ones were actually working. Once we built a bridge to their customers, they started doing amazing things at the tactical level that accumulated to help create change at the strategic level.

All of a sudden, work became meaningful and so did results.



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What obstacles can prevent effective change from lasting?

Leadership! The first step in customer-driven change is to build the leadership team to lead it. Sure, I believe that change is a participative, grassroots process, but this process starts with leadership.

Organizations have to bring together the guiding team that is capable of transforming the organization. Sometimes this means aligning, enhancing, or purging the current team. But the success of change will be directly related to the commitment and capabilities of the leadership team. If you don't have the right leadership, then the legacy culture will win.

What interests you most about helping companies instigate customer-driven change?

My passion comes from the fact that change will never change.

Organization leaders are traumatized by change because at its core change means that they will have to confront their basic insecurity of managing people. Change is about people and how you lead them toward their customers. Personal interaction is difficult business for many who pride themselves as businesspeople.

Customer-driven change gives managers an answer, a way out. It depersonalizes change by letting them use the customer as a common goal. They don't have to deal with staff conflict or development—they can simply point people outward toward improving the business for its customers. Everyone wins.

Is there another book in your future?

Absolutely. Writing this book has taught me more about myself than anything else. I have clarified a lot of my thinking.

The great part of my job as a consultant is that I'm always on the front line with my clients. I'm always trying to "figure it out." This leads to a constant stream of new insights. Implementing business systems is complicated drudgery; working for customers is transcending and fun. Books are an effective way to get this message out.



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