


## Leading the way



**This issue**  
HR leadership  
tips and insights +  
The law of work

**&** The portrayal of  
professional  
women in film

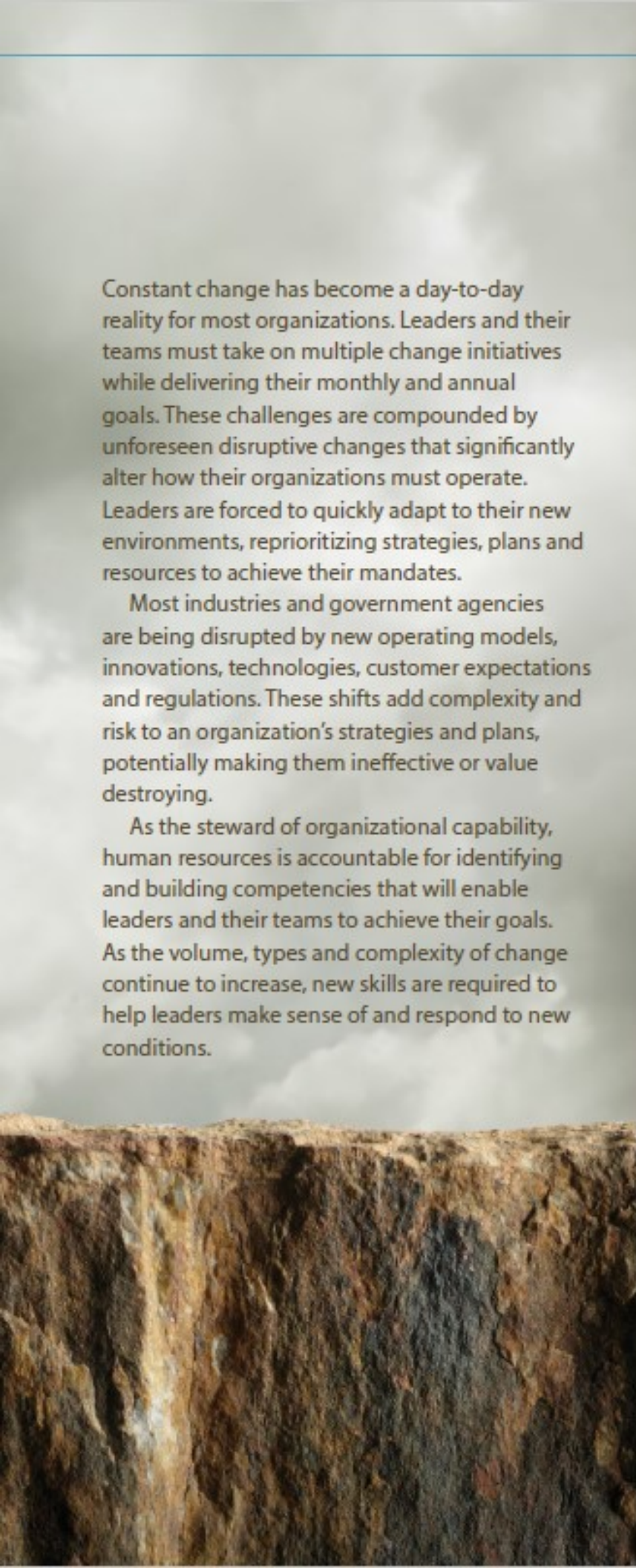
LEADING  
THE WAY  
TODAY

# Helping leaders manage disruption

A woman in a business suit is walking on the edge of a large, brown rock formation on the left. A man in a business suit is jumping across a gap between two rock formations, landing on the right one. The background is a cloudy, grey sky.

by Phil Buckley





Constant change has become a day-to-day reality for most organizations. Leaders and their teams must take on multiple change initiatives while delivering their monthly and annual goals. These challenges are compounded by unforeseen disruptive changes that significantly alter how their organizations must operate. Leaders are forced to quickly adapt to their new environments, reprioritizing strategies, plans and resources to achieve their mandates.

Most industries and government agencies are being disrupted by new operating models, innovations, technologies, customer expectations and regulations. These shifts add complexity and risk to an organization's strategies and plans, potentially making them ineffective or value destroying.

As the steward of organizational capability, human resources is accountable for identifying and building competencies that will enable leaders and their teams to achieve their goals. As the volume, types and complexity of change continue to increase, new skills are required to help leaders make sense of and respond to new conditions.

**Many** leaders struggle when faced with disruptive change because their experience doesn't translate well to their new circumstances. When faced with the unknown, they often default to quick responses, ignoring the measured decision-making process they would use in more familiar situations. One leader reacted to a competitor's entry into a new product category by copying the strategy without the necessary market research, expertise and resources required—it failed.

In times of disruption, speed of action can trump pragmatic assessment. Without a structured approach to manage new environments, leaders either instinctively select a course of action that 'feels' right or base their decision on the first data source that appears credible. Both approaches are risky and can lead to expensive mistakes, including damaged reputations.

New realities require new approaches to resolve them. Leaders need to learn and master the ability to make sense of unknown operating conditions. A structured approach to do so enables them to quickly define new circumstances, assess potential impacts on the organization, identify courses of action and implement the best ones with available resources.

Answering the following questions provides a simple and effective framework to help leaders build their ability to manage disruptive change.

## Why is this important?

Focusing efforts on the highest-value activities is a major challenge for leaders, especially when their operating environments are disrupted. Every situation can seem important based on its newness, which can trigger panic and desperate responses. Without focus, new conditions can also distract people from their work, causing confusion and lower performance.

Prioritization provides context to a disruption by determining its relevance to organizational goals and strategies. Leaders need to ask, "How does this change impact our ability to achieve our goals and honour our mission?" Without answering this question, everything urgent appears to be important. The new development may be the highest priority or be less disruptive than initially viewed and best dealt with through delegation, delay or no response.

DISRUPTION continues on page 18



## What do I need to know?

Identifying what data is needed to assess the new development helps frame the situation. Determining what information exists and what needs to be sourced is the first step to building a fact base from which to create and test options. It also demonstrates to stakeholders that "something is being done" to address the challenge.

Being open to new and varied information sources directly impacts the amount and types of facts being considered. Taking time to fully assess data requirements leads to broader options that may be new to the organization and lead to the best responses.

## What expertise can I learn from?

Tapping into existing knowledge is often skipped in the interest of speed. Locating organizations and people who have insights into and knowledge of similar situations is the next best thing to personally having it. Speaking with these resources builds understanding, shapes options, and identifies pros and cons for each.

Creativity and perseverance are required to locate the expertise to manage disruptive change. Being open-minded about sources of knowledge will lead to broader perspectives and greater understanding. Usually, the best information is held outside an industry or government department. People who have this experience can also provide ongoing advisory support.

## What response is best for us?

Culture and capabilities are important considerations when assessing alternate courses of action. What will work well in one organization may not work well in another. For example, a hierarchical organization will most likely reject or poorly implement a plan that requires employee empowerment and decision making. It doesn't have the mindset and skills to successfully implement the solution.

Taking time to evaluate the effectiveness of options through cultural filters will lead to better decisions and results. It will also limit resistance to chosen responses because they lie within existing expectations and practices.

Answering these four questions provides leaders with a framework to understand and assess new operating conditions and create and evaluate different courses of action to address them. It helps them determine the importance of the new development; source the information required to understand it; access expertise to assess it and identify possible responses; and evaluate them including cultural elements that could limit their effectiveness.

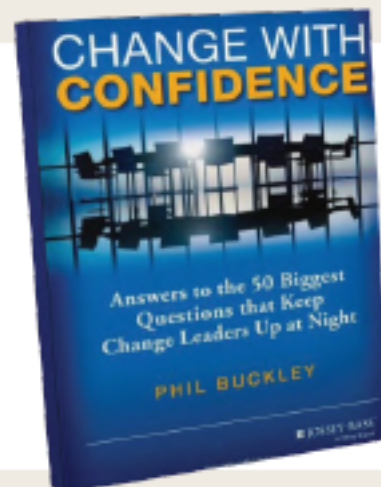
Human resources professionals have an important role in building leadership capabilities for managing disruption. Providing a structured approach to assess and respond to new realities is one way they can support leaders as they face new challenges. Providing ongoing coaching and support is a way to ensure they use it well. **HRE**

**Phil Buckley** is an author and Managing Director of Change With Confidence, a change management consulting firm that enables companies to succeed through transformation.



The **50 biggest questions** are answered in *Change with Confidence*. This book:

- **builds leader confidence and skill sets** by preparing leaders for the questions they must answer when leading a big change
- provides **concise yet thorough answers** illustrated by **real-world examples**
- includes **proven techniques** to plan and manage change projects



For more change resources, visit: [www.changewithconfidence.com](http://www.changewithconfidence.com)