

OVERCOMING EXECUTIVE BLAH BLAH □

By Laurie Anderson, Ph.D.

November 2001

If I am asked to waste one more minute of my time being herded into a large meeting hall to hear our senior management tell us that we have to change and it's time to work smarter, I'm going to explode. I wonder if they would find anything lacking or insulting in the same message back at them.

IT Director of a Fortune 200 company

Last year, the leadership of one Fortune 500 company spent 3 days off-site with 200 of their top people nationally to charge them with working differently in critical ways to achieve better results. One year after issuing the call to action, the leadership saw no positive return on their sizeable announcement investment. And no tangible evidence of a change.

This is a depressingly common phenomenon. As reported by Mourier and Smith in their 2001 study of organizational change, corporations and government institutions currently pour millions of dollars annually into change efforts. And the failure rate across industries and companies is now estimated to be about 75%.

Given that change is our proverbial constant these days and the rate of change is only accelerating, we need to break the code. And therein lies one important clue. Having sat through hundreds of "we're going to change" meetings and shifted through reams of "here are our new priorities/initiatives/values/competencies" presentations and documents, I can assure you that our investigation should start at the executive message formulation stage.

The best executives in today's marketplace lead change. They incite people to move from 'here' to 'there'. To be successful, then, executives must say what they mean and mean what they say. They have to define both "here" and "there" in ways that we can see ourselves. And unless we're talking about launching brand new initiatives with all new hires sporting empty calendars, leaders have to say, with clarity, precision, and conviction, "Do THIS, not THAT."

Most calls to action don't work at the outset because leaders fail to spell out what needs to be different in a way that is actionable. The messages may be inspiring, but they don't guide action back at work.

TALK THE TALK

Before anyone can walk the new talk, executives need to do a better job of talking the talk. This is where 'executive blah blah' comes into play, a phrase that I've used for years in consulting and each time, have been met with nodding heads. But, for the

record, 'blah blah' refers to messages overrun with buzz words, phrases, generalities and inadequate substance. They are messages that lack the specificity to be directional.

Most importantly, executive direction too often misses the mark on spelling out the kinds of choices that people must make in their work for things to be done better, faster, cheaper. This is not because executives as a group of people are unintelligent or uninspiring. Ultimately, they may have the right answers. And they may do a great job of rallying the troops in the big meeting halls. But, when people get back to their desks, they are all too often unclear about what THE NEW WORK ORDER means operationally. And thus they go back to doing what they were doing before all the blah, blah. Ergo, the 75% failure rate.

Confusion is inevitable when executives do not redirect work. But merely add to it --- adding directions, priorities, and goals. And if critical words in the message are not anchored with some shared meaning, the change effort is doomed. For example, we hear over and over again about working smarter, being more agile, being customer focused, taking more risks, valuing people more. Yet it's often unclear behaviorally what that means in terms of the actual input or output of real individuals. And I'm still waiting for the day when someone will raise their hand and say: "I get it! I'm the one who's been working stupid, resisting change, ignoring the customer, detonating all efforts to move forward and valuing people more than the furniture."

Blah blah refers to messages with little meaning. Most employees will listen attentively to their leaders out of interest, respect, hope and/or fear. However, if they do not hear enough about the tough choices, the 'this versus that', they leave with no intention or clarity about how to act differently. Moreover, they often conclude that the people who really need to act differently are the 'other guys' anyway.

Here are some indicators of "executive blah, blah" which will generate either inaction or ineffective action moving forward:

1. No individuals/teams are assigned clear and public accountability to produce or create something different
2. No one knows how success will be quantified, reviewed, publicized, and rewarded
3. No target dates with measurable results are set
4. No rewards for action and no consequences for inaction are set
5. No tough questions are asked or answered
6. No project plan is produced or required by a set date
7. No budgets are assigned or reassigned
8. A meeting is required or anticipated in order to set an action plan --- but the date of the meeting is not set
9. No one exhibits any genuine passion or excitement
10. No one feels discomfort when the expectations for new action and change are announced (there might even be a 'here we go again' attitude)
11. No analysis was shared that demonstrates why you need to change what, by when in order to stay abreast or ahead of whom
12. No one can rapidly replay verbatim the new actions or results that are expected

13. During the initial meetings, few people note the steps they need to take immediately
14. Words like ‘new,’ ‘faster,’ ‘better,’ ‘cheaper,’ ‘smarter’ are used without definitions or criteria that everyone can recite
15. After introducing the change, the leader doesn’t close with names, dates, and reassigned budgets

OVERCOMING EXECUTIVE BLAH BLAH

The two major causes of executive blah blah are: 1) the tough choices and the defining new actions have not been identified; 2) the tough choices and the defining new actions are not integral to the public message. Both kinds of oversight will defeat any serious change from taking hold.

The first step in a solution to overcome blah blah is to identify the tough choices that need to be implemented BEFORE crafting any message. Before executives can define it for others, they must define it for themselves. The point is not for leaders to get lost in the project management responsibilities of any change initiative but to ensure that the hard decisions behind the change have been wrestled with, made, and are being backed with conviction.

Before anyone should spend a moment on the wordsmithing of the public message, executives need to be able to answer these questions:

1. What exactly needs to stop/start/continue for the change to be successful?
2. How will we be measuring the progress of the change, both early and often?
3. How will we expose where it’s happening and where it’s not?
4. How will we recognize and reward those responsible for success?
5. How will we be ensuring that everyone understands what is to be different
6. How will we be planning, openly and inclusively, about how best to accomplish the new objectives?
7. How are we going to ensure that we stay aligned, focused, and motivated to persist day after day, and especially when it gets hard?

The next step to take to eliminate executive blah, blah is then a relatively straightforward one. The answers to the above questions need to be in the public message. All words need to be defined.

TESTING THE NEW MESSAGE

Finally, regardless of how we are able to de-blah blah a message, great progress will be made **action mapping** – completing a checklist of decisions and directions that guarantee clarity, focus and benchmarks to assess early and often if the ‘talk’ is being translated into ‘walk’, i.e., if the investment in old actions is being released, whether new actions are being taken and whether the new actions are producing desired results. Action mapping is designed to show how the desired results associated with then new direction will follow from behavioral changes people can recognize and drive.

Action-mapping is different than project planning in that it operationalizes the old direction and new direction **side by side** so that people can concretely see, understand, plan for, and execute the required changes at the behavioral, as well as conceptual level. It ensures that everyone is tracking with, and working together to perform differently at the level of their jobs

THE DE-BLAH BLAH TEST

Ask these questions to ensure that a real message is making it through the words.

- Does everyone now know specifically how to redirect his or her time or money given the new direction? Have we provided them with a from/to behavioral chart?
- Are metrics (measures) clearly set to determine if individuals and teams are succeeding. Count the score early and often.
- Are the new responsibilities linked to clear rewards for success and consequences for failure or inaction? Visibility and differential treatment incite top performers. Are there team awards to incite cooperation and collaboration, information sharing and problem solving?
- Where and when will the metrics be posted and/or distributed so everyone can know how they and others are doing? Would we ever want the leader board to be a secret?
- What follow-up is planned to resolve the inevitable implementation and prioritization questions? Tough questions and choices need to be identified and resolved expeditiously.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Behind these questions is the observation that executives engage in blah blah too often. Critical in any change message is the clarification: “No more *that*. Do *this* instead.” Executives are often uncertain and/or reluctant to spell out the hard tradeoffs in a public forum or message. When the tradeoffs aren’t seen as required to be successful, nothing of substance changes.

Laurie Anderson, Ph.D.
206 South Kenilworth Avenue
Oak Park, Illinois 60302
(708) 524-2444
lauriemail@aol.com

.... Laurie Anderson is a well-known business consultant, psychologist, career transition specialist, and writer with 15 years experience advising leaders in business, health care, government, and educational settings. She has worked primarily in areas related to:

- Developing business strategies and metrics that define accountabilities and success
- Workforce redesign during changing economic times
- 21st century Human Resource planning and program design
- Change planning and management for individuals, teams, and organizations
- Executive assessment and coaching
- High performing team development
- Meeting design and facilitation
- Performance improvement systems and strategies for high-potentials
- Career development and planning

Currently, Dr. Anderson is working extensively with:

- Executives who are committed to reconfiguring their leadership approaches and strategies to maximize organizational, team, and individual effectiveness during changing times
- Managers with staff redeployment needs who require workforce redesign strategies and tactical implementation plans that deliver on both cost and performance targets
- Senior leadership groups charged with strengthening organizational focus and alignment during times of strategic and cultural change
- Staffing groups (e.g., IT, Accounting, HR, Marketing) committed to being metrics and accountability driven as they shift from a more traditional vendor to a business leader model

Dr. Anderson has been a speaker, advisor, consultant to:

McDonald's	Motorola
Baxter Healthcare	Alexian Brothers Medical Center
3M	Altus Food Company
NutraSweet/G.D. Searle	Northern Trust
DePaul University	Dade Behring
R. R. Donnelley & Sons	Viacom International
Alliant FoodService	Tenneco
PeopleSoft	The Sandy Wade Company

World Bank
DriveLogic
Procter & Gamble
Kendro Laboratory Products
Leo Burnett
Thresholds Social Services
Mentor Graphics
Loyola University
The Road Less Traveled
Fujisawa Healthcare

State of Illinois, Department of Human Services
Associated Physicians Management Company
ABN Amro
Distance Learning
Florida Family Insurance
Takeda Pharmaceutical
CFG Insurance Services
Stein Consulting
Quaker Oats
bcom3

Dr. Anderson has also taught business courses at Northeastern Illinois University on change management; career development; and leadership. Prior to establishing her own business, Laurie worked in marketing research for The Quaker Oats Company. She earned her B.A. in Asian History and Sociology from Wesleyan University and her M.A. and Ph.D. in Applied Psychology from Loyola University of Chicago. Along with her organizational consulting business, Laurie has had a private practice in Oak Park for over 10 years working with individuals on career/life transition planning.

When evaluated, 98% of Dr. Anderson's coaching clients recommended "without reservation" that their hiring organization continue her services.

When significant events occur that impact leadership strategy in American's workplaces, Dr. Anderson is frequently interviewed and/or quoted by the media (CBS News; ABC News; WGN Radio; Wall Street Journal; Business Week; Washington Post; Fast Company; Smart Money; Boston Globe; Chicago Tribune; New York Newsday; Executive Excellence; California CEO; New Jersey Herald; HR Executive; San Francisco Chronicle; Training & Development; Minneapolis Star Tribune; HR-Today; InfoWorld; Orange County Register; Workindex.com; American Demographics; TheStreet.com; Investor's Business Daily).

The most recent publications authored by Dr. Anderson include: "Executive Blah Blah," (Executive Excellence, October 2001); "Beware of Complacency! What HR Managers Should Be Doing for the Post-September 11th Workplace," (Solutions, January 2002); "When Executives Divorce: Where Does the Leadership Go?" (Personal Excellence, March 2002); Steak or Sizzle: How to Prepare a Compelling Business Case (Executive Excellence, May 2002).

Dr. Anderson has also run a successful private practice for 15 years that specializes in career development and professional transition strategies for adults.

Dr. Anderson is very fortunate in that she is able to select assignments and as such, generally prefers to work with:

- Reputable organizations
- Fast changing organizations
- Scenarios that involve a realistic chance that the work/solutions designed collaboratively will be quickly implemented and continuously improved

- Problems from ‘hell’ that few have the answers to
- Opportunities to learn and pass along that learning in articles and speaking engagements
- Fun people to work with who are actively looking for collaborators with proven expertise, high energy, a willingness to learn, and an active sense of humor
- Clients that provide information in advance that allows Dr. Anderson to tailor her work to their precise needs and expectations