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Leadership

Stacking the Deck

How to Lead Breakthrough Change Against Any Odds

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

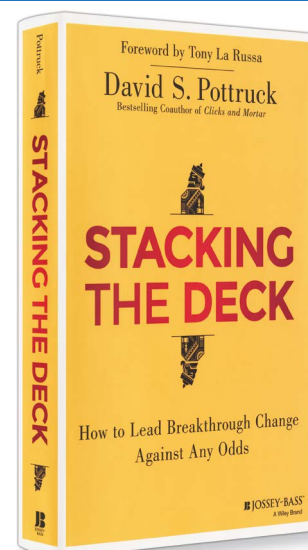
Change is a constant, and leaders must do more than keep up — they must innovate and accelerate to succeed. Yet people are often unnerved by change. As a leader during a time of transformation, you may stand up before teams that are indifferent, or even hostile, and need to convince them that change is necessary and urgent. What does it take to be an effective change leader and increase the odds of success?

Stacking the Deck presents a nine-step course of action leaders can follow from the first realization that change is needed through all the steps of implementation, including assembling the right team of close advisors and getting the word out to the wider group. Based on Dave Pottruck's experiences leading change as CEO of Charles Schwab and later as chairman of CorpU and HighTower Advisors, these steps provide a guide to ensure that your change initiative and your team have the best possible shot at success.

Leading an organization through major change — whether it's the introduction of a new product, an expansion to a new territory or a difficult downsizing — is not for the faint of heart. While success is never guaranteed, the right leadership, process, and team make all the difference. For all leaders facing major change in their organizations, *Stacking the Deck* is an indispensable resource for putting the odds in your favor.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The nine crucial steps for creating breakthrough change in your organization.
- How to anticipate known and unknown barriers.
- How to think about the big picture and the nuts and bolts, from passion and vision, to building a plan and partitioning projects.



by David S. Pottruck

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: STACKING THE DECK

by David S. Pottruck

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Introduction

Breakthrough change refers to those disruptive initiatives that dramatically, profoundly affect the organization and the people in it. It redefines the prospects for the future and interrupts the organization's cautious momentum plan with incremental improvement. One reality of business that seasoned executives know well — often by learning it the hard way — is that introducing and implementing breakthrough change is an uphill battle.

Most organizations' processes and culture are structured for predictability, reliability, control and risk minimization. Breakthrough change is the polar opposite. It is unpredictable and favors responsiveness to new realities over control and staying the course. Breakthrough change is inherently risky and goes against every instinct the leaders of the company have developed over the course of their careers. Is it any wonder, then, that employees often resist breakthrough change — even in companies whose leaders say it's exactly what they need?

Leaders must find ways to help people see the need for change and then inspire them to move toward it with confidence and urgency. The nine-step Stacking the Deck process is designed to mitigate the risks that come with change by having you take concrete steps to increase your chances of success. This preparation does not make the change less bold — and it doesn't guarantee success. What it does do is create an advantage (or more accurately, a series of advantages).

You may know the phrase “stacking the deck” to mean preparing a deck of playing cards so that you will almost certainly win the game rather than rely on chance. The Stacking the Deck process is not designed to cheat

other players. It implies instead that thinking through and preparing for all the steps and processes we will need to undertake vastly increases our chances of success. Together these nine steps represent a plan of action that will take you from the first realization that a change needs to be made through a complete shift in the way you implement this change.

Breakthrough change never, ever stops while the world progresses. Competition, the marketplace and technological advances make it necessary to keep growing and changing. Each of the nine steps will guide you along the way to breakthrough change. ●

Step One: Establishing the Need to Change and a Sense of Urgency

No matter how well leaders understand the need for change, the challenges they must face in leading breakthrough change will be enormous. We can't deny that change is part of life. Yet in life and in business, some people embrace change and others actively avoid it.

Link the Purpose and Mission

In leading breakthrough change, we must first convince others — those to whom we report and those on our team — that our proposed change has a positive, necessary and urgent purpose. First with the team and later with the larger organization, you've got to help people believe that the change facing them is actually progress. You will be most successful when you tie the change to the company's mission and show how the change will help achieve it.



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When employees believe in a mission, they get excited and passionate about contributing to the company's goals. Thus, connecting a breakthrough change to the company mission and explaining how it contributes to the mission can help employees see and appreciate why a change may be necessary — even critical — to the company's future success.

Whatever the purpose of the change you are proposing, convincing others of its need requires effort; and it's almost always much more effort than you expect. Even if the need seems logical and inescapable to you, others won't necessarily recognize that at first. People who are afraid do not behave logically, and they don't respond to logical appeals. How can we smooth the way?

First of all, repetition is important. It's not enough just to announce a change and call it a day. You must give your employees the information again and again and use a variety of methods. Tell them in person, tell them in writing, and tell them via e-mail. Tell them one-on-one and tell them in big groups. It's very likely that not everyone will have heard you correctly the first time.

Underscore the Urgency

Before you decide to convince anyone else about the change you are proposing, you have to satisfy yourself that change is not just necessary; it's necessary sooner rather than later. You have to invest in the change and commit to it with your time, your energy and your budget. Be sure that you've considered these issues and that you've honestly pondered and answered the following questions:

- Have I evaluated the numbers for different scenarios?
- Do they look good?
- Do I truly believe in the purpose behind the change?
- Am I fully convinced of the urgency of the change itself?
- Can I demonstrate that this change is worthwhile and imperative?
- Do we really have to do it right now?
- What will occur if we postpone it?

If what you're proposing is big and bold and strategic, chances are that you will encounter people at all levels of the organization who think it may be easier to do it later. These people may voice their objections by saying, "Let's think about this some more" or "Let's be patient." You might also hear, "Shouldn't we get some more data?" Overcoming resistance and maintaining momentum require constant effort. ●

Step Two: Assembling and Unifying Your Team

No matter how compelling the need and how strong your passion for making the change, achieving and sustaining breakthrough change will require much more than just your passion. Leaders must rely on a well-balanced leadership team. It's your job to actively develop and unify a group that will guide the organization in making your change a reality. You are looking for pioneers, for people who are comfortable with a greater degree of risk than the average person.

When you are creating your leadership team and looking for people to help you make this change happen, consider four key elements: skill, experience, enthusiasm and team fit. The surprising truth is that enthusiasm and team fit may be the most challenging elements to locate. You need people who are willing to enter unmapped terrain. These pioneers will guide your larger team, usher your change into reality and serve as ambassadors to the rest of the organization.

Attitude is critical, but it's not sufficient. Leaders must find people with the relevant experience, and very often — particularly with breakthrough change — that means going outside to recruit the key talent that's needed.

Take Steps to Unify the Team

Even with the right people, you have to unify the team and manage your people in the right way. More than the plans you develop or the financial resources at your disposal, it's your people and the way you lead them that will make the difference. Ask your team to give you the answers to the following questions on a periodic basis:

- What do I do particularly well that I should do more of and build on?
- What do I do poorly that is hurting the team and needs my attention and commitment to change?
- How could I do better? What actions would help me improve and improve our team performance?
- What do I spend my time on that I need to do more of?
- What do I spend time and energy on that I need to do less of, delegate to someone else, or stop altogether?
- How else could I improve my performance and that of our team?

Your team needs to know that you'll treat their answers as constructive and strictly anonymous. With that understanding, they may deliver up some surprising answers. Be

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sure to have a session with the team in which you review the feedback and let them know what you plan to do to respond to their suggestions.

Building Trust

Absence of trust is the source of a lot of team dysfunction, and establishing trust must start when a team is first formed. In fact, this is how you begin to build a high-functioning team. Getting people together and encouraging them to talk about themselves can in fact be a great trust builder — when done well.

It's important to shape and drive these situations to make sure that the stories actually bring people together rather than create walls between them. Since not every executive has the skills to lead such a discussion, investing in an experienced facilitator can be very worthwhile. ●

Step Three: Developing and Communicating a Clear and Compelling Vision of the Future

Once you have your leadership team in place, you and your team need to be ready to envision and communicate the future in such a vivid and irresistible way that everyone around you understands your vision and shares your passion for it.

In the earlier step, we were simply attempting to convince others that the status quo is unacceptable and the way we are doing things today no longer works; we need to do something different as we move into the future. In Step Three, we develop and present a very specific idea of what that “something different” is. In most cases, this means comparing the present to a future that is very different.

Whether you are starting anew or bringing change to an existing organization, you must give people a clear — and strongly compelling — vision of the future: where the organization is going and their role in the new future. Momentum is critical in the early steps of breakthrough change.

There were two recurring themes in all of the interviews I conducted:

- The critical need to communicate a compelling vision of the future;
- The critical need to communicate that message over and over.

Leaders need to spread the message to different groups and at multiple times to the same group, in different ways and in various situations. The ability to lead change

rests on the leader's character and skills as a communicator. Developing yourself in these areas is an immersive process, as deep as it is rewarding. It is vital to each of the Stacking the Deck steps and transcends all of them. Developing your communication skills should be at the top of your list.

In a sense, communicating the vision behind the breakthrough change effort is never over; it's something you must repeat and constantly reinforce. To do this well requires passion, patience and understanding. ●

Step Four: Planning Ahead for Known and Unknown Barriers

The fourth step in the Stacking the Deck process is all about anticipating problems as you are planning, and confronting these problems before they derail your efforts.

Unfortunately, you cannot anticipate all problems. In general, however, the early or initial difficulties you will encounter when introducing breakthrough change fall into four broad categories. So many great change initiatives are given up for lost or destroyed because of these difficulties that I refer to them as the “Bermuda Quadrangle.”

Mapping the Bermuda Quadrangle

Be aware and on the lookout for these issues as you plan and then execute the changes you propose:

People Resist Change: What will people resist? What will they embrace? What can you do to allay their fears about the change? The brevity of these questions is deceiving. They are difficult questions that must be addressed early and with an open mind.

Skills Are Missing: Recognize that a great attitude is required but is not sufficient. Part of your advance planning, therefore, must be a careful assessment of what skills will be needed, how they can be developed in-house, and where you can find them outside. You'll have to find ways to get people to adapt, or else actively recruit new people. Most likely you'll do both.

Processes Are Rigid: If you are proposing a change to established processes and procedures, you may be up against years of institutional habits and mindsets. You'll need to determine where the company is set in its ways and decide what it will take to change those procedures and mindsets.

Company Culture Is Unyielding: You need to think about the breakthrough changes you're proposing in the context of the entire enterprise. Does this change fit in

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with the values of the existing corporate culture? If it does, how can you best make that connection clear?

Planning for the Unexpected

The way to prepare for the unexpected is to explicitly talk it out, and not just inside your head. Gather executives, responsible business partners and any other people whose involvement is critical to the change you propose, and ask them all to think seriously about how the change might be received within the organization, outside of the organization and what could go wrong.

Examine potential resistance: Take the time to explore and think about the risks and the uncertainties ahead and do so in detail so that you can eventually manage them proactively and create comprehensive ways to defuse these issues. While you may not be able to predict with certainty exactly what will happen, you can make a reasonable estimate of the odds of success versus the odds of the project going wrong.

Outside experts can sharpen the focus: Using outsiders can help you better anticipate the barriers you will face or even see the opportunities that are already in front of you. Outside consultants play a huge role in the success of breakthrough change. They are valuable repositories of new experiences, new wisdom and challenging perspectives — including the critical perspective that can debunk corporate mythologies. ●

Step Five: Creating a Workable Plan

Now you need to translate the inspiring vision of the future that you and your team have developed into a workable, real-world plan.

Making Assessments: From the Present to the Future

Starting anew and long-term planning have certain parallels: the need to assess where you are, where you want to be and how to get there. These assessments are vital to leading breakthrough change, whether you are starting from scratch, reshaping an aspect of the business, entering a new market or looking to expand your reach.

Initial assessment: where we are. Virtually all plans start with a thorough assessment of “where we are” (WWA). This assessment should take into account not just operations and processes but all other factors that contribute to a company or organization’s position in the marketplace. You want to look at factors such as compet-

itive position, customer satisfaction and quality of output, productivity and efficiency, human resource considerations and more.

Assessment for breakthrough change: where we want to be. Truly breakthrough change is a chance to substantially redefine the future to be something very new and different, perhaps a competitive leap forward. What will success look like in this new situation? How will we measure that success? Be sure that you and your people are imagining the most timely, highest-potential breakthrough. What you don’t want is for people to picture just more of the same, only faster. You want to think imaginatively, envisioning a different future.

Assessment for action: how do we get there? Rather than painting a big, sweeping picture of the future, we must now define that future as a set of specific goals, deliverables and metrics, because now we are creating the actual plan. When you can fully answer the “how,” breaking it down in terms of partitioning, metrics, people, and pilots (Steps Six through Nine), then you will have developed a meaningful plan of action.

Planning Components

Like many other business plans, the plan for a breakthrough change has the following key components: goals and deliverables, tasks, deadlines, capital and other resources, people.

Goals and deliverables: In contrast to planning an incremental change, you don’t know exactly what the outcome will be at the beginning of a breakthrough change initiative. If, however, you are using the Stacking the Deck process, you will have a reasonably good idea. You should have a clear need to change and a compelling vision of the future. But that isn’t the same as a specific set of executable goals you can move toward. By dividing your overall goal into smaller, step-by-step goals, you will have a series of checkpoints that you can use to determine if you are on track. When you subdivide a single, giant goal into smaller targets, you allow for more control and momentum building.

Tasks: Once you have the broad strokes of a plan, you must lay out the tasks you need to accomplish. This part of the planning process remains the same for most project and operational plans, whether the change is incremental or breakthrough.

Deadlines: You must be constantly reinforcing the importance of critical deadlines as they relate to key deliverables. There are often many moving parts in breakthrough initiatives and they are often interrelated. Pause or remove one, and everything grinds to a halt. Combat delay

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the same way leaders approach other problems: anticipate, anticipate, anticipate.

Capital and other resources: There's likely to be a series of economic and institutional limits on those resources. As a result, the budgets typically awarded for these projects seem much tighter to those who are responsible for the actual outcomes. You need to negotiate from a place of strength and knowledge to secure the best possible framework for your change initiative.

People: People go hand in hand with more physical resources. Often the only way to combat a shortage of funds or labor is with an excess of passion. This goes back to finding your pioneers and getting them on board quickly. You need people who are committed, excited, and willing to put in the extra time and effort. ●

Step Six: Partitioning the Project and Building Momentum With Early Wins

Leading breakthrough change often means working toward an end that seems distant and out of focus. If your people can't visualize the future in real terms, they'll find it difficult to muster the urgency to undertake the journey. You therefore need ways to make the immediate steps clear and to help people — particularly those who may not have been involved in developing the vision but who will be crucial to its realization — see the path to the future in real, concrete terms.

Planning for Interim Successes

One of the best ways to preserve the enthusiasm that you have generated early on is to divide a major breakthrough change initiative into smaller phases, having shorter and intermediate-term goals with specific, clearly defined benefits. Ideally, each of these smaller goals will take less than twelve months, preferably six months or less. They provide a series of checkpoints where you can celebrate interim successes on the road to a completed change.

Planning for interim successes has multiple benefits. By delving into the details of a phased approach, you can uncover issues well before they turn into problems. Breaking a change initiative into a phased approach improves the quality of planning and, in the long term, can also make you a better, more detailed planner. It also enables you to show results and increase support for the initiative.

Build in Celebrations

“Celebrate” is another key word for the team and the overall plan. It does no one any good to let a success, including a small interim success, slide under the radar unnoticed. Without a sense of accomplishment and achievement within the team, burnout can become a problem. Acknowledging and celebrating small, staggered successes boosts morale and helps with team retention. From both a career and psychological perspective, people need to be seen to have accomplishments. Further, each celebration can reinforce the overall goal. Particularly if that goal is far on the horizon, you should create small celebrations in all phases of the initiative.

Breakthrough change is often about a new way of doing business, a new distribution channel, a new product, a new position in the market. As you develop your plan, carefully consider which interim steps you will focus on first. How will you capture what you've learned from those steps and celebrate the interim successes? How will you increase and maintain momentum? How will you fund it all? ●

Step Seven: Defining Metrics, Developing Analytics and Communicating Results

To define success for your initiative you need to focus on measurable outcomes. People need to see the end result with such clarity that they can act on their own.

There's a strong desire in business to measure everything with one simple question: how much money are we making right now? But when we are making a breakthrough change, the end goal of enhanced profitability could be a long time in coming. There are always other more immediate factors we can track that will lead to profit improvement down the road. And when that road is long and uncharted, as it often is with breakthrough change, it's particularly important to measure the interim steps and goals along the way.

Measuring Progress and Success: Big Data, Metrics and Analytics

Leaders and high-level executives who are responsible for funding a given project want concrete, measurable indicators that tell them how a change is going. Historically, the usual word attached to these kinds of indicators has been “metrics.”

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The possibilities big data offers seem phenomenal; the opportunities to analyze enormous amounts of data in real time, very enticing. But even as capabilities evolve, it's clear that given the changes brought by big data, the traditional terms of metrics simply don't go far enough. Instead, we need to think in terms of analytics as we strive to use the newly available data most effectively. How do we best make use of the data and monitor the indicators? There are two major types of indicators — leading and lagging — each with different implications for your breakthrough change initiative.

Leading indicators: As the name implies, leading indicators are harbingers or evidence of success or failure that appear before any of the others. It's a common misconception that market share and profitability are leading indicators. In fact, it's more likely that we are hoping these will dramatically accelerate toward the end of the project; they rarely do so at the beginning.

Here are some leading indicators you might consider measuring:

- Measures of customer engagement such as customer calls or log-ins, click-throughs to deeper parts of your website, visits to physical locations, and purchases of various merchandise lines or products.
- Measures of employee engagement, attitude and turnover.
- Trend lines revealing how key indicators move over time periods.
- Customer loyalty as measured by online recommendations, endorsements, referral programs, or by the Net Promoter Score.
- Sales numbers, units, dollars, average price, product mix.
- Public relations as measured by number of positive mentions and numbers of headline stories, product reviews, or articles about your product or initiative, as well as social media mentions in tweets, retweets, and the like.
- Customer complaints, by type and number.
- Any customer attrition you may experience.

Lagging indicators: Lagging indicators are the big and important measures of success — such as reduced costs or improved market share, competitive position, pricing power, profit dollars, and profit margins — that we are working toward. Everyone wants to see positive lagging indicators and, typically, the sooner the better. But the results reflected in lagging indicators take time, sometimes

years, to emerge. They are almost always foreshadowed by positive trends with leading indicators.

How do we help our people through that long period before the lagging indicators move? We have to power through. And that is helped enormously with analytics and measurements: the more precise and granular, the better. We want monthly, weekly, and even daily measurements. We want to see every emerging trend, and every reporting period counts.

From leading and lagging indicators to big data to various types of analyses, the available information is nonstop. You need to determine what's most important among competing issues and direct your attention there. ●

Step Eight: Assessing, Recruiting and Empowering the Team

This builds on the work you did in Step Two. At this point, you might want to revisit and repeat some of those initial team-building actions, for at least two reasons.

First, it may be time to further strengthen the leadership team for the long haul. And second, as the focus shifts to bringing together the entire team, you need to attend to the broader team that will ultimately do all the heavy lifting to bring the change initiative to fruition. This means assessing skills, namely, skills that already exist within the organization, additional skills you will need to develop and skills you will need to bring in. It also means recruiting for talent, fit and balance and empowering the larger team to succeed.

Search for Talent, Skills and Fit

You know that you're looking for people with precise skills, talent, and experience for your dream team. Now, where will you find those people?

Inside your organization: You will first want to look inside the organization to use the skills of the people you already know and trust, people who deeply understand the organization's mission and the importance of the breakthrough change. Being able to rely on people who are already part of the culture can be a tremendous boost. But if you've come to realize that even your best people are not right for the job, how do you go about finding the right people?

Becoming a magnet for talent: Ideally you want to be able to draw on an ever-expanding pool of talented people, both inside and outside your organization. Whether building a network comes easily to you or is a skill you need to work on, the sooner you start, the better. Consider

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the people you meet at a conference, people who have worked with you before, even people who have recently been part of high-profile change projects elsewhere. Keep tabs on these individuals and cultivate professional relationships with them. Stay in touch and take a personal interest, perhaps even offer to act as a mentor. The odds are good that you will both benefit.

Unify and Empower the Larger Team

The benefits of a strong team are worth it. And with the right team, creativity in the face of a crisis can work wonders.

Ginger Graham has run several businesses that focus on innovation and new product development and speed. She explained that at one point the medical device company she was then with, Advanced Cardiovascular Systems, was “woefully behind in stenting technology and losing market share in the core business because of it. We invited something close to 50 employees into a room for several days with a professional facilitator to map out how we had been developing products. Then we asked them to brainstorm and work together to answer the question, ‘If you could change it all, if you could fix all the things that you believe the company has been doing wrong, what would that future development process look like?’”

The group immediately set to work and redefined product development in the company. They defined a new way of developing products that would be “faster, leaner, more efficient, more focused — and that would allow us to catch up and win in the marketplace.” In fact, the process worked so well that the company “went from 1 percent to more than 75 percent market share on one product launch in a major category in stenting, when stents were still relatively new in this country.” ●

Step Nine: Testing with Pilots to Increase Success

Defining a precise set of rules about how to roll out your next breakthrough initiative is impossible: the potential projects are simply too diverse. Nevertheless, appropriate and careful use of pilot projects is a consistent thread in successful rollouts; pilots can dramatically enhance your prospects for success.

Traditional proof of concept pilots rest on a belief that it makes the most sense to test a new idea on a representative sample of your customers and your employees. The goal here is to create a slice of life and then see how your

idea performs in this micro but representative version of the real world.

Unfortunately, when a traditional pilot to test the feasibility of a project shows initial success, leaders all too often rush to roll it out on a large scale.

I recommend adding an even earlier, smaller pilot, which is designed in every way to succeed. I call this a stacked proof of concept pilot because it gives the advantages of stacking the deck to a proof of concept pilot. Instead of a wide range of geographical locations, you select the best possible location, where people (potential customers and staff alike) will be most receptive to the change you’re proposing. Instead of addressing average customers, you target your ideal customer base, those segments most likely to respond positively. And instead of a cross section of managers and employees, you handpick your best and your brightest to work on the stacked proof of concept pilot. You’re looking for those people who are drawn to and thrive on change.

If it fails, you are forced to concede that since your idea can’t succeed here, it probably can’t succeed anywhere, and needs to be fundamentally reconsidered. In forming the pilot team and framing the project, you are trying to remove all possible implementation issues, individual motivation issues, employee pushback issues. All that is left is a single question: can this idea work? The stacked proof of concept pilot gives you the opportunity to test that question on its own.

In the right hands, and with the right mind-set, the Stacking the Deck steps can create a more productive and more readily navigated path to breakthrough change. The process itself is less about what to think than about how to think. It’s about learning to anticipate and to analyze logically and carefully; thinking creatively and embracing possibilities; learning what to prioritize, where to concentrate energy, and how to move forward while bringing others along with you. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Stacking the Deck*, you’ll also like:

1. ***The Road to Reinvention* by Josh Linkner.** Linkner identifies six elements in any business that are ripe for reinvention and shares examples, and step-by-step techniques for creating deliberate, productive disruption.
2. ***Choosing Change* by Susan Goldsworth and Walter McFarland.** McFarland and Goldsworthy offer a proven model for not just facing inevitable change but also leveraging it as a tool for long-term success.
3. ***Change with Confidence* by Phil Buckley.** Buckley addresses the 50 biggest questions that change leaders ask time and again, and provides the context and advice to enable successful, sustainable change.