Transforming Your Organization

By: John B. McGuire, Charles J. Palus, William Pasmore, and Gary B. Rhodes

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Contrary to Conventional Wisdom, Cultures Can Be Transformed

Senior leadership teams can and do evolve new mindsets. Individuals, teams, and entire organizations adapt, grow, and prepare for future challenges. They learn to change what they do and how they do it. As a result, they have grown "bigger minds for solving bigger problems."

Organizations seeking to adapt during turbulent times—like now—cannot force change through purely technical approaches such as restructuring and re-engineering. They need a new kind of leadership capability to reframe dilemmas, reinterpret options, and reform operations—and to do so continuously.

But organizational culture change is not for the faint of heart or the quick-change artist. Serious change demands serious people. Are you up for it?

Why Transform?

Companies have no choice but to change. The world is moving and shifting fast; executives know it. Trying to cope, they are applying their best thinking to the structures, systems, and processes they need to compete. Conventional wisdom says that the right business structures will provide the efficiencies, innovation, and agility that organizations need to succeed and sustain.

Behind closed doors, however, senior leaders and CEOs are speaking a different truth.

Increasingly, they are questioning the incessant reorganizing, re-engineering, and restructuring in the name of efficiency. Strategies and plans that should work instead fall apart, yielding (yet again) less-than-expected results. Operational decisions that once were clear-cut are becoming more complicated and ambiguous.

Worse, many top managers and teams struggle to agree on outcomes, or even common ground for moving forward. Skilled individual leaders with impressive track records fail to collaborate. They don't know how to work together to understand difficult challenges, much less to resolve them.

Instead, they continue to be constrained, operating in silos and defaulting to traditional boundaries and turf battles.

The ability to integrate systems, collaborate with partners, and coordinate across the supply chain remains elusive. Innovation is haphazard or thwarted. Customer-focused strategies are uncoordinated and implementation is uneven.

In short, organizations are stuck. Frustrated executives work harder and longer. People at every level are overwhelmed, guarded, and cynical.

What's Going On?

Insufficient leadership ability is part of the problem. You'll note we say "leadership"—not just a reference to the individual leader. The shift in focus from development of the individual heroic leader, to the unfolding, emergent realization of leadership as a collective activity is intentional— and very, very important.

A study by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) found that the four most important skills/capabilities needed by organizations in the future—leading people, strategic planning, inspiring commitment, and managing change—are among the weakest competencies for today's individual leaders.

At the same time, the nature of effective leadership is changing. CCL's changing nature of leadership research showed that approaches focusing on flexibility, collaboration, crossing boundaries, and collective leadership are increasingly more important than the basics of making the numbers.

These findings suggest that organizations should continue to seek more of a balance between developing leaders through individual competencies and fostering the collective capabilities of teams, groups, networks, and organizational leadership.

The common thread among these studies is a powerful one: choosing the right leadership culture is the difference between success and failure.

Different leadership cultures serve different purposes. A hierarchy of culture exists—and each advancing culture is increasingly capable of dealing with greater and greater complexity in leading and gaining the commitment of others, effecting strategy, and being successful in organization change.

As companies face change, they need to invest intentionally in a leadership culture that will match the unfolding challenge. The beliefs that drive leadership behaviors need to align with the operational business strategy.

Without that alignment, painful gaps appear in the individual leadership skill set and in the organization's collective leadership capability.

In contrast, when executives change their leadership culture, they are rewarded with significant, sustainable outcomes, including:

- an accelerating ability to implement emerging, successive business strategies

- greater speed and flexibility, allowing the organization to move faster in response to change and challenge

- new, stronger core organizational capabilities

- achievement of bottom-line results

- improved ability to create shared direction, alignment, and commitment throughout the organization

- growth of not only individual capabilities, but waves of individuals all growing capabilities in a leadership collective

- the development of talent and culture while implementing the business strategy

- genuine organizational innovation for not only products, but also the organizational systems required to sustain innovation

- effective cross-boundary work and the collaboration required for dealing with complexity and change

- increased engagement within the top leadership team that links through leadership down into employees throughout the organization

- a rehumanized workplace, balancing technical and operational expertise with beliefs and experience

- leadership and organizational transformation

The Lessons of Our Experience

The history of change management teaches us that a simple recipe does not work. Change remains very difficult. Our experience with clients has helped us identify themes and patterns, tools and models that help leaders and organizations to change their culture. But the fact remains: anyone touting a quick-fix transformation formula doesn't know what he's up against. Change leadership isn't simple because:

1 **Bigger minds are needed to keep pace with rapidly changing reality.** Reality is leaping ahead of our collective development. We need new thinking and new ways of working together in order to keep up. Most organizations are behind in developing what they need to move up the hierarchy of culture. It takes an even greater stretch to thrive in the face of change.

2 **Change requires new mindsets, not just new skills.** Organizations have become savvy developers of individual leader competencies. In doing so, they have over-relied on the human resource function to manage change through individual skill development. Executives have not considered the need to advance both individual and collective leadership mindsets.

3 **Hidden assumptions and beliefs must be unearthed.** Unexamined beliefs control an organization and prevent any meaningful change. Years of valuing hierarchy, status, authority, and control—even if unstated—can lead to assumptions and behaviors that are out of date, unnecessary, unhelpful, and at odds with stated goals and strategic direction.

4 **Organizational change requires leaders to change.** Change the culture—change yourself. That's the new reality. Senior executives who move the needle toward organizational transformation also experience significant personal transformation. That commitment to personal change is a fundamental part of their readiness to take on the leadership and management challenges of change for a sustainable future.

5 **It takes a new kind of hard work. Stop calling them "soft" skills.** Developing new beliefs and mindsets is hard, and the leadership practices they generate will permanently alter the way leadership is experienced and accomplished. Developing a new mindset is much harder than managing spreadsheets and the next restructuring. If it was easy, everyone would be doing it.

Understanding the Hierarchy of Leadership Culture

Culture is fundamentally about the meaning that people make of the world and the tools they have to deal with the world. Leadership culture is the meaning that people make and the tools they have to create shared direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC) throughout the organization.

The goal of culture change work is to purposefully and actively build capability for new ways of working. It allows for the new thinking, beliefs, tools, and processes that will result in the organizational success.

As business strategies get more complex, the culture is required to grow into the level of complexity required to implement it.

Consider Abrasive Technology Inc. (ATI), a globally integrated company with headquarters near Columbus, OH. The company designs, manufactures, and markets diamond-based products for super-abrasive precision grinding and tooling. Number one or two in niche markets, the company wanted to keep that position and develop new product lines.

In 2001, the company founder, owner, and president instituted a radical change in the organizational structure and operations. The business goal was customer-focused continuous improvement of all of the organization's processes. The cultural goal was, as the president put it, to create a company "that I would want to work for."

Eliminating the traditional organizational hierarchy and structure, he sought to redesign the business around work processes. In a process-centered organization (PCO), process engineers collaborate with members of process teams to improve effectiveness. Employees are rewarded for individual, team, and overall organizational success.

At ATI, the change was met with great resistance. Operating as a PCO required much more than a change in the organizational chart and the introduction of new systems. It forced people throughout the company to rethink their roles and responsibilities, as well as their relationships with each other and with management. It called into question beliefs about trust, engagement, authority, and collaboration alongside a reordering of the business strategy and needs.

It soon became clear that ATI wouldn't gain the benefits of being a PCO without a correlating change in the culture.

Most workplace leaders—and most leadership development practitioners and theorists—don't have "transforming organizational culture" on their to-do list. And for those who see the need (like our clients at ATI), they don't know where to start.

The goal of culture-change work is to purposefully and actively build capability for new ways of working.

At CCL, we start by describing a hierarchy of leadership culture: dependent, independent, and interdependent. Organizations, like people, tend to evolve along a path from dependent to independent to interdependent.

Each of the three levels of leadership culture in the hierarchy is characterized by a set of beliefs, behaviors, and practices (also called "leadership logics"). Each successive culture is more sophisticated and can respond more successfully to deeper challenges. The core reason is they can think, learn, and respond to challenges faster and better. The leadership logics may be explicit or implicit, but either way, they are deeply held and often difficult to see or discuss.

Dependent leadership cultures hold only people in positions of authority responsible for leadership. Authority and control are held at the top. Success depends on obedience to authority and loyalty. Mastery and recognition of work operates primarily at the level of technical expertise.

Other characteristics associated with dependent cultures are: a conservative approach to change, an emphasis on keeping things running smoothly, and the tendency to publicly smooth over mistakes.

Independent leadership cultures assume that leadership emerges as needed from a variety of individuals based on knowledge and expertise. Authority and control are distributed through the ranks. Independent cultures value decentralized decision making, individual responsibility and expertise, and competition among experts.

Independent cultures focus on success in a changing world and adapting faster and better than the competition. Success means mastery of systems that produce results in an individual's own domain, and eventually contribute to the success of the organization. Mistakes may be treated as opportunities to learn.

Other characteristics associated with independent cultures include: individual performance as an important source of success and status, an emphasis on taking calculated risks, open disagreement, and independent actions within functions or workgroups.

Interdependent leadership cultures view leadership as a collective activity that requires mutual inquiry, learning, and a capacity to work with complex challenges. Authority and control are shared based on strategic competence for the whole organization. The mindset tends toward collaborating in a changing world so that new organizational orders and structures can emerge through collective work.

Mistakes are embraced as opportunities for individual, team, and organizational learning, and both positive and negative feedback are valued as essential tools for collective success.

Other characteristics associated with interdependent cultures include: the ability to work effectively across organizational boundaries, openness and candor, multifaceted standards of success, and synergies being sought across the whole enterprise.

Interdependent

Independent

Dependent

Leadership Culture as Shared Action Logics

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Each successive culture moves the organization to a greater level of capability for dealing with complexity and accelerated change. By creating and advancing new beliefs and leadership practices, organizational leadership together has the chance to rise above their current behavior and thinking. As senior executives learn together and grow from current mindsets to new ones, organizations begin to advance from one culture to the next.

Match the Culture to the Need

While there is nothing inherently wrong with any level of culture, organizations must match the leadership culture to the operational need. Asking a command and control (dependent) culture, for example, to implement an innovative, agile strategy is a recipe for disaster. In contrast, an interdependent organization is better poised to handle a high caliber of complexity and challenge. As a more fluid organization, it will be able to draw on individual talent, connect effectively across boundaries, and adapt as needed. Developing leadership culture is about growing leadership talent to the needed level of capability. To break through the current capability ceiling, organizational leaders must take time to connect two critical factors:

First, you have to know where your culture is in the hierarchy of cultures. The way leaders engage with each other and with others in the organization will depend on the leadership logic that dominates. Investing in knowing what your current culture is capable of will save dollars, and more important, time. You might leap to implement the next new thing, only to find out your approach was off the mark. Instead, understand where your leadership culture is today to develop feasible change plans.

Second, you have to understand the drivers and core capabilities needed for your business strategy to succeed. What future level of leadership culture is needed to support the business strategy? It is the job of leadership to ensure that smart strategies are wisely implemented. This is possible only when the culture of beliefs and the focus on readiness to develop capability to implement is real.

When the level of leadership culture aligns with your business strategy, your performance will be stellar.

By choosing the right level of leadership culture that your organization absolutely requires for its future, your leadership talent as a collective can advance to new levels of organizational capability that secures success. When the level of leadership culture aligns with your business strategy, your performance will be stellar.

The institution of the PCO at ATI pushed a transformation in its leadership culture. Before the change, ATI exhibited a dependent leadership culture of command and control. As the company grew its global business that served customers in multiple industries (aerospace, automotive, ceramics, lapidary, medical and dental, textiles, and tool-and-die, among them), it needed to be more versatile, connected, and responsive.

As a PCO, the plan was to engage and empower all employees, but it didn't happen overnight. One machinist, speaking at the time of the change, summed up the attitude of many workers: "I do my eight, and I hit the gate." Like many others, he only knew a dependent leadership culture and had no interest in participating in a process that required his active engagement.

Faced with this deeply held resistance to the change, the CEO found it necessary to cut off debate. Paradoxically, he used command-and-control to move the organization away from command-and-control. Employees either complied or left. New associates were hired with the process-centered culture in mind.

Leadership Strategy for New Cultural Capabilities

Interdependent

Independent

Dependent

new core capability

leadership strategy

current capability ceiling
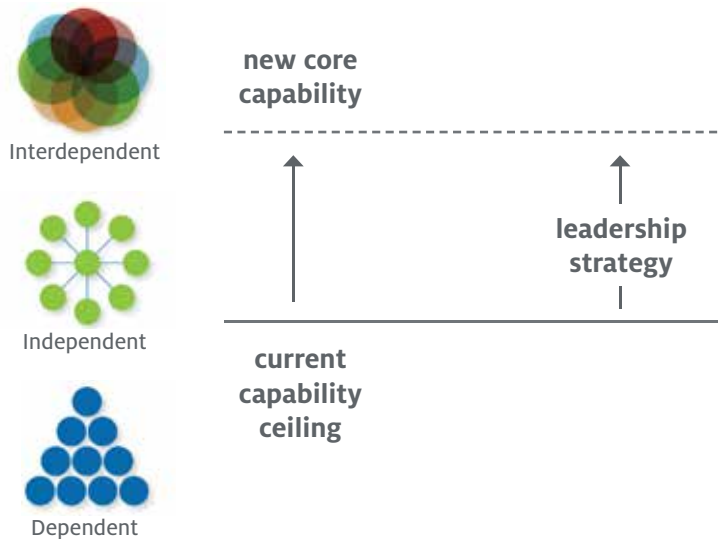
Slow Down to Power Up

More and more executives tell us they need increasingly collaborative leadership for working effectively across boundaries inside their organizations and across their value chains. In fact, our executive research shows that it is their highest need and yet least effective organizational capability.

If an interdependent culture is needed but a company is operating at the dependent or independent level, how does the senior leadership team start to change culture? How does the senior team start to work more effectively across their business and functional boundaries? In a counterintuitive move, they need to slow down.

"Slowing down to power up" is a key principle for leading change. By giving time and attention to the beliefs that underlie behavior and decisions, executives help the organization to be faster and more flexible in the future.

When leaders and teams slow down action, conversation, and decision making at critical times, they can address challenges at the root level. Instead of focusing on speed, the focus is on learning. Multiple right answers and better solutions are offered. Everyone involved is able to reflect on assumptions, understand problems more clearly, and integrate the perspectives of others.

Slowing down at key times for learning, diagnosis, and dialogue allows you to power up—creating accurate, focused, valuable decisions. Time lost on the front end translates into speed further along in the process. Slowing down helps you reduce organizational missteps (both large and small) due to poor communication, too-fast decision making, and the faulty assumptions and beliefs that drive them.

Slowing down is also a cultural stance. It is a behavior that is in itself a big change, and at the same time, it fosters desired leadership culture change.

ATI, for example, identified "learning" as a critical skill for developing a culture that can adapt to change. Teams could stop any process to gain better understanding or to make learning explicit. The idea of taking time out for learning in the middle of a manufacturing process seemed bizarre and foolish to many. Changing that belief was a very big undertaking. But, because the senior team was committed to slowing down to power up, the process took root and led to permanent changes in business performance.

Another CCL client, KONE Americas, worked in a culture with a strong bias for action. In the elevator and escalator installation, modernization, and maintenance business, KONE executives and employees were very good problem solvers and highly analytic tacticians who took immediate action to get things done. But like any overplayed skill, it became a weakness. This skill had them in a reactive, short-term mode, operating in one system at a time, solving one problem at a time.

KONE's greater leadership challenge was to work better across multiple systems simultaneously and provide longer-term strategic direction for the company. This pushed them to grow bigger minds, tolerate more ambiguity, and stay with strategic issues without the immediate satisfaction of taking action and getting things done. One senior leader said it this way: "Moving our primary focus from operations to strategy will be uncomfortable for us. We won't feel effective not making constant decisions."

In addition, KONE had long operated in a leadership culture where conflict was often avoided. People tended to keep things smooth and harmonious on the surface. This reinforced the dependence on authority figures, who typically encountered little or no questioning of their opinions and perspectives. This further narrowed the range of ideas that were generated and debated to address the deeper, strategic challenges KONE faced.

In 2008, CCL introduced "dialogue" as a core tool for slowing down to power up—a simple process that is easy to learn and use. To help groups deal with complex or potentially divisive issues, people objectify the problem. For example, instead of saying, "I disagree with your view of the logistics process," a person could say, "Here's what I see when I think about the process; what do you see?" This is an intentional effort to switch gears from advocating to one another (or debating or avoiding) to exploring the issue—allowing the best ideas to surface and win.

The difference between directly evaluating and commenting on the perspectives of others with a bias-for-action and speaking to issues through dialogue with a bias-for-strategy may seem simple, and it can be. But at KONE it created a way for people to stay engaged and respectful while surfacing differences, and digging deeper into long-held beliefs that were driving decisions. As one participating leader said, "I see an immediate

increase in our trust levels through dialogue and feedback. Conflict is easier now because we know why we're asking questions—it's about discovery and our learning together." By spending time questioning, observing, and reflecting, executives at KONE now generate multiple perspectives and "right answers" that can then be integrated into the best strategic solution available.

KONE's leadership is deeply committed to an inter-dependent, collaborative leadership culture and is swiftly advancing. Perhaps most telling, meetings, which were once occasions primarily for operational information sharing, are becoming an integral part of effective strategic work.

"My whole thought process shifted," one leader said. "We are using meetings and developing the discipline of dialogue to work out strategic issues and to do our active learning together."

As the managers at ATI and KONE have learned, if you need new leadership practices, then you need new leadership beliefs. This means you need to slow down, think, question, unearth, explore, let go, and reset—not your typical CEO behavior. But CEOs like those at ATI and KONE Americas, dedicated to strategic sustainability and interdependent learning cultures, aren't common either.

When Individual Competencies Are Not Enough

Changing culture requires a belief that developing both individual leader capacity and organizational leadership capability are worthwhile efforts. Generally, this belief comes about when key people in the organization place a high value on learning and leadership development.

For organizations facing significant change, we believe that continuing down a path investing only in individual leader development based on competencies misses the mark. Yesterday's conventional wisdom is tomorrow's weak spot. Organizations require a new perspective.

Leader development strategies, based only on individual competencies, are necessary but no longer sufficient. Learning must take place in the collective, not just on the part of individuals. Formal and informal leaders acting and working together determine whether organizations will succeed in implementing strategies and adapting to change. Individual development and coaching will only get the organization so far; breakthroughs require attention to leadership cultures and collective leadership capabilities.
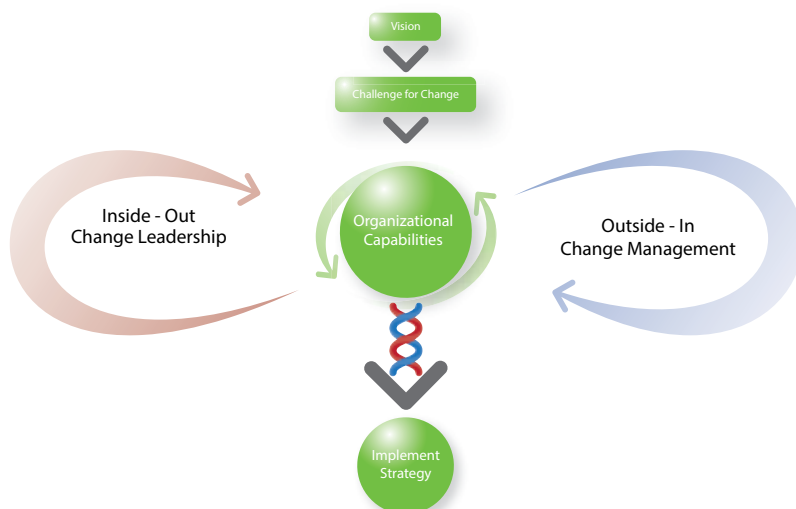
By bringing inside-out leadership into balance with outside-in management, organizations foster core capabilities and build shared direction, alignment, and commitment. Without the human side of the equation, efforts to implement strategy fall short or fail.

Growing Bigger Minds

Of course, culture change is not a short-term process—it will take a few years. An organization doesn't become a more collaborative culture, for example, just because it is desired or when new competencies are named. Here are six strategies to help you and your team rise above current beliefs and practices, grow bigger minds, and build capacity for new ways of working.

Discover your culture and capabilities. Get a deep and clear-eyed view of your current culture. This is the most important feasibility study you will ever undertake. Is your organization primarily dependent or independent? Does it have elements of successful interdependence from which you can expand? Even more important—what is the culture of your executive leadership team?

You also need to identify and understand the drivers and core capabilities needed for your business strategy. Do you have the leadership capacity and culture needed to succeed? Where are the individual and collective gaps?

Do you have the leadership capacity and culture needed to succeed? Where are the individual and collective gaps?

Craft a leadership strategy. A leadership strategy is an organization's implicit and explicit choices about leadership, its beliefs and practices, and its people systems. It is the blueprint for building the leadership capacity to meet operational objectives. Do you have one?

In much of the work on talent and leadership bench strength, the focus has been on understanding the pool of people in the pipeline and creating the qualities and skills they need to play formal roles in the organization. For these efforts to take hold and to determine whether the strategies and plans will actually be achieved, a leadership strategy must also focus on the collective capacity of individual leaders and the collective capability of the leadership culture.

Transform the executive team. If you want organizational transformation, you have to transform the executive team first. The days of delegating change are over. Change the culture— change yourself! Jump-start the change work behind closed doors with just the senior team. Coach senior team members (both individually and as a group) to develop their readiness for leading culture change. Focus on topics of control, time, and engagement.

Whatever you do, don't pawn off the culture work on someone else. Don't give it to HR. No one else can create change for the executive team. No proxy can carry the senior team's responsibility.

Take time out for learning. Allow for routine breaks or in-the-moment discussions to stop and learn. Slow down and take a deeper look at the situation. Reflect on assumptions, understand problems more clearly, and integrate multiple perspectives. Learn to ask questions: Establish and encourage dialogue that consists mostly of questions; make sure you or others are asking plenty of "whys" and "what ifs," which will take you closer to root causes and bring up more alternatives for addressing systemic causes of repeating problems.

Establish action-development teams. Action development implements the organization's strategy while developing leadership culture and talent. Teams of senior and high-potential leaders tackle mission-critical, complex challenges identified by the business strategy. They learn to work across boundaries, with explicit sponsorship and coaching, while developing new and better ways of working together.

Align talent processes. Hire for the organization you want to become, not for whom you used to be. Look for people who want to be part of something larger than themselves, have strong collaborative mindsets, and are able to have conversations about culture and leadership.

KONE has been at this work for less than a year with amazing operational results in their business markets, while dramatically improving safety, customer satisfaction, and employee engagement. Over the course of several years, ATI has seen marked improvements in its operations and in culture. ATI has applied multiple culture change strategies and, in some ways, the work continues. The intensity or duration of each strategy has varied and evolved—and ATI continues to sustain number one or two product line positions in niche markets.

Other outcomes have included:

- turnover rates that dropped from double-digit numbers to near zero

- previously poorly performing plants suddenly making and sustaining group variable compensation

- a shift in metrics to only three core measures

- 50% reduction in product returns year after year for five years running

- a state-of-the-art talent management system that includes peer reviews; individual, group, and organizational-level compensation; coaching; and assessment and learning systems

- zero recruitment costs due to 100% internal referrals of new hires

- hierarchical, conformance-based culture transformed into a process-centered organization with a collaborative culture

A Move to Interdependence

In 2000, a small group from CCL analyzed 66 requests for service from clients. Two-thirds of those requests included the need to improve collaborative work across boundaries.

A close look revealed that those requests were connected to complex organizational imperatives. The need to better leverage partnerships and alliances, manage supply chains, and integrate software systems were all examples of why methodologies in business process re-engineering, quality movements, and downsizing had emerged. But none of these methods had yet incorporated corollary changes in leadership theory or practice.

These requests for assistance that seemed to indicate developing more collaborative business and leadership practices were seen by clients as a way to cope. But developing collaboration as an individual competence, we thought, was not going to be enough to support organization-level change.

Nearly 10 years later, CCL's organizational leadership understanding and practice has gained traction. The call from executives has grown louder and more insistent. More leaders see collaboration and interdependence as a way to successfully adapt and operate in complex situations.

Rather than dismissing culture work as "soft stuff," many executives now view it as the high-priority, hard stuff— changing whole beliefs systems so that organizations can survive.

Are you ready for the new hard work?

About the Authors

John B. McGuire is a senior fellow at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®), specializing in change leadership. He is an international authority on leadership culture and organizational transformation, and cofounder of CCL's organizational leadership practice. As a researcher-practitioner, John's innovation essentially reforms traditional change methods to be consciously driven through the senior leadership's culture, beliefs, and practices. He is a keynote speaker and coauthor of the book *Transforming Your Leadership Culture*. His publication contributions include articles, book chapters, and the popular press. John has assisted organizations across multiple sectors, and held senior business management positions across industries. He holds master's degrees from Harvard and Brandeis Universities.

Charles J. (Chuck) Palus, PhD, is a senior fellow at the Center for Creative Leadership. As a collaborator in several cross-disciplinary research groups, he studies leadership as a collective social process. He is cofounder and manager of CCL Labs, a community-based innovation laboratory that prototypes products such as the Leadership Explorer tools including Visual Explorer, Leadership Essentials, and the Early Leadership Toolkit. Chuck is a cofounder of and a designer, facilitator, and researcher in the CCL organizational leadership practice. He holds a BS in chemical engineering from Pennsylvania State University and a PhD in developmental psychology from Boston College.

William Pasmore, PhD, senior vice president at the Center for Creative Leadership, is an international authority on organizational leadership. He joined CCL in 2008 as organizational practice leader, guiding efforts to help clients develop the larger organizational leadership systems that increase their overall performance and enable their leaders to thrive. He was a partner for 11 years in the corporate learning and organizational development practice of consulting firm Oliver Wyman Delta. There, he headed the global research practice, working with top executives of Fortune 500 companies on organizational architecture and development, succession planning, talent management, and strategic planning. From 1976 to 1997, Pasmore was a tenured full professor in the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, teaching courses in the MBA, Executive MBA, PhD, and Executive PhD programs. He holds a BS in Aeronautical Engineering/Industrial Management and a PhD in Administrative Sciences from Purdue University in Indiana.

Gary B. Rhodes is a senior fellow emeritus and adjunct faculty member with the Center for Creative Leadership. In his continuing work with CCL, his interest is on action research focused on leading change and leadership culture transformation. Gary has worked with hundreds of leaders and organizations around the world in a wide variety of sectors. He was also a tenured professor of social administration and public policy at the University of Louisville. Gary holds a master's degree in social work from the University of California, Los Angeles, and an interdisciplinary master of philosophy in social science and social policy from the University of Michigan. He is coauthor of *Transforming Your Leadership Culture* and *Competent Supervision: Making Imaginative Judgments.*

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+1 800 780 1031   +1 336 545 2810   info@ccl.org

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