CULTURE

Leading Culture Change:
Four Dynamic Skill Sets You Will Need to Succeed

B. Kim Barnes
THE INFLUENCE GURU

Organizational cultures don't change because executives announce it. Change leaders need to know where to intervene, and four interlinking skill sets.

Organizational culture change is a big, shaggy, complex, daunting topic. Yet, some of us as leaders or as internal or external consultants are being asked to make it happen. "We need to develop a culture of innovation." "Our culture must be more open to diverse ideas." "We have to work cross-functionally, not in silos."

Culture is a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize an entity such as a country, organization, team, or group and enable it to achieve its goals. Whether ethnic, national, professional, or organizational, culture is made up of a set of interconnected norms, values, taboos, rituals, and myths. These aspects of culture reinforce one another and are baked into processes, structures, strategy, and the day-to-day life of those who are insiders. Organizational cultures don't change because we want them to or because top executives make announcements. They may change incrementally in small, almost invisible ways that add up to something different over time or they may crash and burn because they no longer work in a world that has moved beyond them. Intentional change in organizational cultures happens when those who are driving it know where to apply interventions that break the self-reinforcing patterns that will otherwise maintain the status quo.

A sophisticated understanding of what holds the current culture in place as well as clarity about how the elements of the "new" culture (norms, values, taboos, rituals, mythology) need to work is essential. Without this, you can expect the "organizational immune reaction" to set in, regardless of your belief that the change is needed and beneficial.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF CULTURE

- **Norms:** Standards or ground rules for acceptable behavior in the organization. They can be implicit (unstated but enforced) or explicit.
- **Values:** Principles upon which decisions are based and the basis of the organization's reward system. Values specify what is intrinsically good or desirable.
- **Taboos:** Social rules established against attitudes and actions that are considered "off-limits" and unacceptable—those things forbidden or prohibited.

- **Rituals:** Ceremonial acts, often of celebration, that are repeated under specific conditions.
- **Myths:** Stories we tell ourselves that explain our origins, practices, and purpose and provide guidance for how to align with the group.

Any major culture change requires rethinking, reconsidering, or reinterpreting these elements. Since we are like fish that are normally unaware of the water they swim in, this will require taking a step back and bringing these elements of culture to consciousness. This is why formally designated change leaders often need the assistance of a consultant - someone who is at some distance and can observe what may not be obvious to an insider.

Change leadership is made up of many interlinking skill-sets. Strategic thinking, design thinking, transition management, and interpersonal influence are among the most important ones.

Strategic thinking is a multifaceted approach to thinking backward from a preferred future state and continually assessing how to achieve it, given the changes that take place in the environment.[1] For a change leader, that means having a clear vision of the ideal result (developed with key stakeholders) and then identifying a path to get there – being ready, as new information emerges, to change directions, explore new paths, or respond in other ways in order to continue moving toward your success vision.

Design thinking is a strategy, methodology or approach to solving problems that focuses on the end user, develops multiple prototypes, and sees solutions as flexible and continuously in development rather than fixed.[2] Change leaders need to be design thinkers in order to respond to the many stakeholders any large system change will affect. They understand that "one size does not fit all" and that different people and groups will need different approaches to involvement in and acceptance of the change.

Transition management is the facilitation of the psychological and discontinuous process of passage from one state to another[3] as experienced internally by individuals and groups. Every significant change requires an enormous number of transitions, and a major change will not be fully successful until individuals and organizations have worked through the major transitions required to achieve it. Any successful change leader needs to be able to identify with and understand the pain points involved in making these transitions and develop, support, and facilitate the processes for moving through them.

Interpersonal influence is the act of moving another person toward action without the use of direct power. It is a two-way process, done in the open.[4] Being a change leader requires you to be flexible and tuned in to the needs and concerns of many different stakeholders and to approach them in a way that aligns with both the individual and the context within which the change is occurring. Having a strong set of behavioral influence skills enables you to gain insight into how others perceive the change and find ways to make it easier for them to accept it.

Fortified with these understandings, a realistic assessment of the current situation, and the behavioral skills that enable you to put this information to use, you will be in a better position to manage the difficult and complex job of leading a large-scale change effort.

Organizational cultures don't change because we want them to or because top executives make announcements.

NOTES

[1] From Strategic Thinking: Leadership Tools for Planning, Problem-Solving, and Decision-Making, a copyrighted program of Barnes & Conti Associates, Inc.

[2] From Design Thinking and the Journey of Innovation, by Nelson Soken, Ph.D., and B. Kim Barnes

[3] From Mastery of Change: Thriving in Interesting Times, a copyrighted program of Barnes & Conti Associates, Inc.

[4] From Exercising Influence: Building Relationships and Getting Results, a copyrighted program of Barnes & Conti Associates, Inc.

Originally published on LinkedIn, April 28, 2025.

B. Kim Barnes

Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

bkimbarnesconsulting.com · hello@bkimbarnesconsulting.com · linkedin.com/in/bkimbarnes

© 2026 B. Kim Barnes. All rights reserved. This article may not be reproduced without permission.