



Cutting to the Chase

Setting Proper Expectations for Senior Leaders

conneracademy⁷

Picture this: An executive calls you into her office, closes the door, and says:

I know you haven't had time to dig into all the particulars about the change we're launching soon, but at this point, I don't need a precise analysis. I want your experience-based read on what I should be anticipating. Give it to me straight: What should I expect, and what should I know going in?

What would you say? Most practitioners find a way to respond, but far fewer actually provide a practical, insightful answer.

The full ATA paper "Cutting to the Chase" offers a perspective on answering the question. It covers two critical issues leaders raise most when they want to brace for major change: what to expect, and what to do and stop doing. Here are some highlights.

What Leaders Should Expect

Most change efforts run into trouble because of flawed assumptions going in. Leaders expect the journey to be faster, cleaner, and more rational than it ever is. The table below shows a handful of the mistaken expectations leaders have and the realities they discover. (The full list shared in the paper runs to 34 pairs.)

What Leaders Often Assume	What Experience Teaches
Once people see the logic of the change, they'll embrace it.	Personal biases, old habits, and cultural norms will block many people regardless of how compelling the case is.
The absence of visible resistance means implementation is going well.	The appearance of little resistance is often a sign that implementation is going poorly but concerns aren't being expressed.
Leaders who sponsor a change are its most committed supporters.	Sponsors are often the strongest resisters of the very changes they approve.
Most of the time, leaders succeed with the changes they launch.	Most of the time, leaders settle for far less, at a greater cost, and after a much longer implementation period than they bargained for.
Culture is too soft to measure, so why bother factoring into a change prognosis.	When culture and change collide, culture wins every time.

What Leaders Should Do and Stop Doing

If the first question leaders ask is, "What should I expect?" their second question tends to be more personal: "How do I lead others well when navigating significant change?" The paper offers a comprehensive list of Dos and Don'ts drawn from the patterns of leaders who've successfully navigated sustained turbulence. Here are a few:

Start or Strengthen

- Rely more on courage and discipline than tools and techniques.
- Treat the organization's capacity to absorb change as a limited strategic asset. Protect it for the initiatives that matter most.
- Operate on the basis that anything that looks like "the answer" will be more expensive and less durable than it first appears.
- Welcome feedback, particularly that which you least want to believe is true.
- Pay as much attention to "how you learn" as to "what you know."

Stop or Reduce

- Don't wait for things to settle down. They won't.
- Don't rely on people who protect their relationship with you at the expense of telling you what you need to hear, especially if you might be part of the problem.
- Don't try to buy realization outcomes by making installation payments.

- Don't be enticed by the excitement of initiating change and then become bored or distracted with what it takes to sustain it.
- Don't ask for things others can't influence or promise things you don't control.

The Bottom Line

The paper closes with a response to leaders who've asked both questions and have gone through the full reckoning:

If all this sounds difficult, it's because it is. If it were easy to deal with major transitions, there wouldn't be a competitive advantage to pulling them off. Successfully navigating ongoing change is incredibly difficult and places a disproportionate responsibility on you as a leader. Yet for those who pay the price, the rewards and self-satisfaction are immense.

That's what cutting to the chase looks like. It's the truth, delivered with candor and care, from someone who has earned the right to be trusted. That's the standard HITAs hold themselves to.

This paper is drawn from the Conner Academy Advisor Training Academy (ATA) curriculum. To explore the full program, visit conneracademy.com.