

# 8 THINGS

LEADERS SAY WHEN THEY FEAR CHANGE  
(AND HOW TO CONFRONT THOSE FEARS)



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**Problem:** The rate of change happening within and outside of organizations is putting pressure on leaders, their existing models, and their preferred ways of thinking and operating.

**Opportunity:** Adjust and adapt before the changing marketplace realities crush current business models and result in a defensive, reactive leadership posture that produces a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Resolution:** Confront the fears behind the thinking that is keeping senior leaders from living into their full potential while leading through a time of unprecedented change in business structures, assumptions, practices, growth, revenue, and value creation.

***“The most important factor in determining an organization’s propensity to grow is whether or not senior leadership has a bias toward growth.”***

I would like to say this is often simple, overt, and easy to spot. However, leaders have learned how to disguise their discomfort with change. Through language, disciplines, and expectations, many have all but ensured actual growth never happens. Often, this may be done subtly or even subconsciously.

This has not proven to be too much of a problem in the past. Over prior decades, the marketplace realities that many senior leaders experienced throughout their careers changed only incrementally. Today, however, the speed of change is accelerating at a rate much faster than any single leader or team can understand, process, analyze, assimilate, and integrate into their organization. It’s not their fault. No one said this was going to happen. But even though they didn’t ask for it, it’s happening. While it may not be their doing, their lack of adaptation will ultimately be their undoing.

**If constant change is the new normal, then agility is the new business strategy.**

The next few years will bring about massive changes in how organizations are constructed and how they engage the market, build brands, relate to employees and contractors, develop and serve their customers or clients, design and deliver products, etc. There will likely be no part of a business that will not be swept into the change cycle around digital transformation, even if they are not distinctly a digital business.

But before we can ever hope to dig into change strategies, there must be some reconciliation of the types of thinking that are holding leaders back from leaning into the growth potential that is right in front of them. Transformative mindset shifts don’t happen through external measures. Rather, they occur when we intentionally and strategically confront, analyze, and

dismantle the thinking that is holding us back. When we reshape our thinking, we can more clearly interpret the entire world around us. If our thinking contains flawed, outdated, or biased assumptions that are no longer true, then we will miss the cues necessary for us to transition from now to next.

**Here are eight statements I hear from leaders facing change and the fears behind those statements:**

1. *“We need to cut edge initiatives and redirect those funds to existing lines of business that are in decline.”*

The fear of failure is real. But every established program began as an edge initiative. The only difference today is you won't have decades to develop your prototype, mitigate risk, and then deliver your product or

solution to market. Functioning as an effective leader in the next decade will require you to embrace your own individual ability to adapt and to create an organizational culture where “failing together” is an acceptable step on the path to achieving success. It's normal for this to feel uncomfortable or foreign at first—it is a muscle that must be developed through practice and repetition.

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2. *“Data is helpful, but I'm trusting my gut on this one.”*

The fear behind this statement shows a belief that a senior leader's experience is no longer valuable. This is not true. Rather, data allows you to challenge or validate your intuition to increase the speed at which you can bring your solution to market. Addressing this fear requires a mindset shift toward viewing data as a tool for empowering your decision making, rather than a threat to your leadership.

3. *“We can't afford to implement acquisition strategies right now.”*

Leaders who make this statement fear what would happen if they abandon the financial forecasts and models upon which they've created operational dependencies and planning. If you're not growing your pipeline, you're dying. Fear-based decision making often paralyzes you within the past—both past models and past successes—so focus on reorienting your vision to be future-focused.

4. *“Our strategy is to go back to the basics and do what we know how to do.”*

The fear behind these words points to uncertainty about how new strategies will ask one to grow and change as a leader. You may think you don’t have the energy for what change will ask of you, but expecting growth as you’ve experienced it in the past is a strategy that ensures failure. The solution here is to channel the motivation, determination, and diligence that propelled you to leadership in the first place so it can motivate you to embrace the discomfort of the challenging new environment you face.

5. *“We can’t afford to focus on lifetime value.”*

Leaders who say this don’t yet fully understand how to organize around the customer experience. This impacts attribution models, departmental structures, and even threatens our ideas of what something as simple as a campaign looks like. Instead, start by investing time in educating yourself on how other companies or organizations calculate customer lifetime value and incorporate it into their growth strategies, and then evaluate what applications can be drawn for your own corporation. The parallels may not be perfect, but as any surveyor or explorer will tell you: knowledge of the landscape helps dispel fear.

6. *“Everything is a priority, and everything must perform at projected revenue levels.”*

It can be fearful not being sure of what to focus on at what time, and not being able to envision what success actually looks like. When you don’t have clarity, the perception of risk multiplies, and then you may exchange a bias for action with a bias for excuses. Dismantling this fear requires carving out time to hit the pause button, reflect, and thoughtfully prioritize the tasks for your team—the ones that are not only urgent but important and future-focused. When everyone has clarity, you’re able to embrace acceptable risks and move forward more effectively.

7. *“I value my leadership team because of their loyalty and years of service.”*

The fear behind this statement may be hiding the reality that leaders might have to confront the fact that the current team isn’t the right one for the next season of growth and change. That’s tough. And deep within senior leaders is also the fear that they themselves might not be the right leader for this next season. Addressing this requires reflection, self-awareness, and a deep level of honesty with yourself and your team.

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8. *“We are committed to achieving the kind of growth we know, understand, and are prepared to experience.”*

The fear in this statement reveals a loss of memory with regard to past successes. It's natural to want to repeat what you've experienced in the past, especially if it was positive. But you have to remember that even past experiences were new breakthroughs at one point. Adjusting your mindset will be critical to achieving the next success. If something is not challenging, then it rarely leads to growth. If it's not growth, then it's maintenance and not leadership.

### **Be brave. The alternative should really scare you.**

Fear is a normal and natural part of the leadership experience. Leadership is hard, especially when you are the person everyone is looking to for the right decision. In a culture of change, the bias should be towards growth, learning, and thoughtful experimentation. If you value compliance, predictability, and the familiar, then you aren't leading. Instead, by your personal preference and professional experience you are holding yourself and everyone else captive.

This season of change and transformation is requiring you to be courageous and brave. It's asking you to forge uncharted territory and to go where few have gone before. You will have to hold loosely to the things you understand today to make room in your thinking and decision making to discover new approaches, methods, and insights. Moving forward in this way will create new realities and growth opportunities for you and the organization you lead.

This begins with you. It begins with your mindset, which you have the power to shift. It begins with your vision for the future, which you get to set. It begins with boldness.

As one of my mentors is fond of saying, “Look it in the teeth, even if it bites back.”

## **About**

**Ben Stroup** is Chief Growth Architect and President at Velocity Strategy Solutions where he helps leaders design, develop, and deploy smarter business growth strategies. Ben is a futurist, disruptor, and data champion. He leads a team that takes a structured learning approach to business challenges, which allows them to assist leaders in bridging the gap between ideas, innovation, and revenue—taking ideas from mind to market.

**Velocity Strategy Solutions** is an on-demand, next-generation business strategy and management consulting firm which provides clients with a relentless focus on data, execution, and results that positively impact the bottom line. Velocity delivers integrated people and revenue strategies combined with a disciplined approach to growth architecture that elevates the capacity of leaders, teams, and organizations to succeed and win more.