

## **Praise for *No Bullsh\*t Change*:**

‘A punchy, practical and inspiring guide for all leaders who wish to transform and grow their team or organisation’

Justine Roberts, founder and CEO of Mumsnet

‘*No Bullsh\*t Change* challenges the status quo and uproots entrenched ideas of what leadership looks like. Chris Hirst offers a bold and inspiring vision of what the future of business can and should be. We are entering a new era of business where consumers are demanding more, and where the leaders who understand this will be the ones whose companies not only survive but also thrive. *No Bullsh\*t Change* offers clear tools on how to do this’

June Sarpong

‘A practical and authoritative guide – perfect for our complicated times’

Nicholas Hytner, artistic director and founder  
of the Bridge Theatre

‘I’ve seen countless business leaders with fantastic pedigrees make career-defining mistakes when managing change in a business. Chris’s book provides the sort of leadership lessons and actionable advice that will prove invaluable to the next generation of business leaders’

Andy Silvester, editor of *City A.M.*

'I highly recommend this book to anyone looking for an inspiring and thought-provoking read. The author's personal experiences and insights bring a unique perspective to the topic at hand and make for a truly engaging read. This is a book from somebody who has truly been there and done it, and it shows in the depth and authenticity'

Jack Parsons, CEO of Youth Group

'Not only does Chris Hirst have the experience of leading a remarkable turnaround, he has the wisdom to understand why it worked. This book issues a rallying cry for leaders burdened by permacrisis to take control of their future. As Hirst writes, "if in doubt, do"'

Kate Magee, editor of *Management Today*

'There are many books about leading change. You may recoil at the thought of yet another one. Don't. This book is an easy read, offering simple, pragmatic and achievable prompts. Whether you be novice or expert in the subject, you will find insight throughout its pages'

General Sir Chris Deverell

'Highlighter pens to the ready – practical, plain-speaking and unputdownable guide to inspire you to make change a reality'

Katie Vanneck-Smith, CEO of Hearst UK

'An excellent guide to real-world leadership. Perfect for our turbulent time'

Anthony Scaramucci, founder of Skybridge Capital  
and former White House Director of Communications

‘Clear, punchy, practical and very enjoyable’

Philip Collins, speechwriter, author and entrepreneur

‘This book tells me so many things I wish I’d known before. Clear and witty, Chris Hirst brings his experience and insight to the task of leadership in a world changing at a startling pace. He is the ultimate No Bullsh\*t Merchant’

John Kampfner, author of *Why the Germans Do It Better*

### **Praise for *No Bullsh\*t Leadership*:**

‘A punchy, plainly written guide, offering a readable and enlightened view of what leaders do and how they should do it’

*Financial Times*

‘A new rubric on leadership’

*Evening Standard*

‘A brilliant set of leadership tools that will help you succeed whatever your goal’

Sir Clive Woodward

‘Gets to the point of crucial leadership challenges in a simple and engaging way – it’s rare to find a book that does this so beautifully. Yes, it’s no bullshit, but it’s also really elegant in its directness and uses beautiful stories to illustrate the points’

The Business Book Awards Judges

**Chris Hirst** has spent over a decade in CEO positions, including as Global CEO for Havas Creative Group. Once an engineering graduate working in a glass factory, his career path has taken him to the boardroom via Harvard Business School. Named in the *Evening Standard's* Progress 1000 list and ranked one of the industry's most influential CEOs, Chris is a regular commentator in national and international press including *BBC News*, *The Politics Show*, the *Evening Standard*, *CNBC*, the *Financial Times* and *Sky News*. He also hosts the Intelligence Squared *No Bullsh\*t Leadership* podcast. His book *No Bullsh\*t Leadership* won Best Business Book of the Year 2020: Leadership for the Future, at the Business Book Awards. Visit his website [www.chris-hirst.com](http://www.chris-hirst.com) for training, podcast, blogs and speaking. Follow him on Twitter @chrishirst.

# No Bullsh\*t Change

An 8 Step Guide  
for Leaders

**Chris Hirst**

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*To Dad*

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# INTRODUCTION

To lead change, you must be able to achieve effective results in constantly changing environments, against unpredictable forces with imperfect information.

*There is nothing more difficult to take in hand,  
more perilous to conduct or more uncertain in its  
success than to take the lead in the introduction  
of a new order of things.*

Niccolò Machiavelli

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND when the unimaginable happens?

On 28 February 2020, I was in the back of a taxi in Mumbai on my way to speak at a conference. I was last on, a little nervous, and I'd had less time than usual to prepare. Habitually, in such a situation I would sit in silence and remind myself of the key points I wanted to hit, but this time I didn't have the opportunity. For the whole hour my companions and I talked breathlessly of a mysterious new disease that was racing across the world. Surely it couldn't be as serious as was claimed, or as contagious, or as difficult to contain. Surely it would come and go like so many other crises we'd known through our lives – storms that appeared on the horizon but blew quickly by. We drew comfort from familiarity – everything looked normal, nothing had changed, it would all be fine.

The conference came and went, as they do. The room

was large, windowless, airless and full. The hotel lobby teemed with people; the bar and buffet afterwards full of jostling delegates. From there we went straight to the packed airport terminal and hunted for seats in the lounge, all the while looking around with wide eyes – noticing, as if for the first time, the sheer enormity and proximity of humanity. Unbeknown to us, the tectonic plates had already split and rendered, the world irrevocably altered. The shock just hadn't reached us yet.

At whatever point in the future you read these words, one thing is for certain: never again will we unthinkingly assume that the near future, never mind the distant, will look mostly indistinguishable from the near past.

Leading change is the leader's ultimate test. During the pandemic we experienced the impact of those leaders able to rise to the challenge and the consequences of those who were not.

All leadership is about change, but in this book we will consider the specific circumstance when the fundamentals of the existing order are, or must be, upended. In this context, leading change is not, certainly not initially, a process of steady, measured progress, but should be considered little short of a revolution, approached with all the urgency, zeal and clarity that that description implies.

Successful change programmes are not, as often portrayed, activities pursued in splendid isolation like an academic exercise. To succeed, leaders must be able to achieve effective results in constantly changing environments, against unpredictable forces, with imperfect

information. Many of the most significant factors a leader must contend with will be beyond their control, from macro-economic pressures and geo-politics to the responses of competitors and even sometimes employees. Leading change requires that leaders both respond effectively to those factors beyond their control and mould those that are within.

## Dreadnoughts and valves

All leaders at some point will be faced with a circumstance where the methods, tools and thinking that had proved successful thus far can no longer be relied upon to succeed in the future. This point of inflexion is one of great challenge. For many, the greatest hurdle, at least initially, is in overcoming the cognitive dissonance of this circumstance: outwardly all may seem as it did yesterday, as it did last year, yet clouds gather on a horizon that had previously been sun-bleached blue. Perhaps, many silently hope, it will blow past.

In 1906, the Royal Navy launched one of the most revolutionary ships ever built, so much so that its very name, HMS *Dreadnought*, became synonymous with an entirely new breed of huge and awe-inspiring machine. The *Dreadnought* brought together for the first time an entire range of revolutionary technologies, from steam turbine engines to all-steel construction, and much more besides. However, her inception had posed a terrible dilemma for their Lordships of the Admiralty.

Only a year earlier, Britain had celebrated the hundredth

anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar, where its most feted son, Admiral Nelson, had defeated a Napoleonic fleet, heralding a century of global dominance. Through the intervening years, the British had held on to their top-dog position through an uncomplicated, yet expensive expedient, one they called the 'two-power standard'. This dictated that they must maintain a naval fleet of a size at least as large as that of the next two biggest powers combined. By 1906, that was a lot of ships, and had cost a lot of money.

The *Dreadnought* represented a technological leap equivalent to that between propeller and jet. From the moment that King Edward VII smashed the wine bottle on its prow and the behemoth slid into Portsmouth Sound all existing battleships in the world were rendered obsolete. However, Britain's adversaries, though awed, were unlikely to be cowed.

Every action stimulates a reaction; every reaction demands a response. Their Lordships' dilemma had been that, though they may have moved first, where they trod others would surely race to follow. And the first consequence of their decisiveness? They now possessed more obsolete battleships than anybody else. HMS *Dreadnought* represented the start of a new era, and they had at that instant a total superiority over their opponents of just one.

The Admiralty, faced with the potential erosion of their position through technological change, opted for pre-emption, deciding that they must take control and act rather than allow external circumstances to dictate to them. If revolutionary change was coming, they reasoned,

better to be in its vanguard than baggage car. Yet the decision, easy with hindsight, was far from it at the time. HMS *Dreadnought* represented the instantaneous erasure not simply of an old technology (wooden-sided, sail-powered fighting ships), but the entire training, staffing, procurement, strategy and fighting doctrine of the Royal Navy. The launch of the *Dreadnought* was nothing short of the end of Nelson's Royal Navy and the beginning of one entirely new, though with a consequently far less certain and pre-ordained future. Their Lordships, in their own way, had initiated a revolution, something that, in the ordinary run of affairs, cossetted in their Mayfair clubs, they very much frowned upon.

In the 1960s, electronic machines ran on valves. These look to us today a little like the oval lightbulbs found above the bars of modish Soho watering holes (New York or London – take your pick). The electronic valve industry was huge, but increasingly threatened by the new disruptive technology of the silicon transistor (which evolved into what we now know as the microchip). The leading valve manufacturers weren't dumb – far from it. Like the Royal Navy, they saw change coming, but reached a different conclusion. Rather than revolutionary change, they chose evolution. After all, they reasoned, embracing the transistor was a perilous, fraught and dangerous undertaking, one far from certain to succeed, and with unknowable future prospects. Such a pivot would erase all they had up to that point created.

In their chosen strategy, they were, by one measure, very successful. At the point where the entire industry

disappeared (almost overnight) they were producing the smallest and fastest valves they'd ever made. Becoming better and better at what they had always done was a highway to oblivion. They were building fabulous sailing ships while the world wanted *Dreadnoughts*.

For leaders, the catalyst for change can be reactive, such as responding to the pandemic or technological innovation (the test faced and failed by the valve manufacturers). Or it can be proactive, a revolution of their own making, such as that instigated by the Royal Navy. More commonly it will be something of both push and pull. Ideally, as a leader you would be able to manage and control events, choose your own moment to act. Yet, as we know, the real world rarely affords such a luxury.

The need for change is often obvious with hindsight, but making the leap from status quo to reinvention is rarely easy. Many leaders find themselves in situations analogous to those discussed yet fail to grasp the urgency of the need. They are like the proverbial frog in warming water, failing to notice the incremental deterioration of their situation until it is too late. Or, more commonly, they see the signs but lack the clarity, determination or courage to act. The warming water is, after all, comfortable. Until the very end.

Those organisations that saw the danger but failed to act, or acted and failed anyway, are legion; many of them household names. In 2009, I worked with Nokia, then far and away the world's largest and most successful mobile phone manufacturer. It is easy now to forget that they were the poster child of the mobile revolution, a genuinely loved and aspirational brand. In one meeting we

raised with them the possible threat of the Apple iPhone (launched eighteen months earlier), then a super-premium product. Though Nokia had been one of the first to develop touchscreen technology, they dismissed the iPhone as a premium niche: ‘we sell more handsets in a day than they do in a year,’ they boasted. The internal inertia – cultural, contextual and financial – was just too great to overcome. What began as a failure of imagination ended as a failure of their business. By 2012, they faced bankruptcy.

Some examples we can consider in contrasting pairs. Blockbuster Video, once on every British high street, rented out its final DVD in 2010, yet a close contemporary, Netflix, shifted from postal DVD delivery to online delivery and ultimately to the vanguard of a global revolution in not simply content distribution (where, like Blockbuster, they began) but creation. For Blockbuster, read valves; for Netflix, *Dreadnoughts*.

## Failure to act guarantees failure

These and many others are examples not of businesses that failed because their product or brand was poor – in many cases they remain, even today, very well-known. They failed because, though they saw the threat, they were unable or unwilling to act.

Leaders in all roles and at all levels are assailed from without and within by reasons (often good reasons) why they should do nothing, to stick with the status quo, the most compelling often being the risk and uncertainty that change inevitably brings. However, the surest guarantee



of failure is the failure to act; their faltering first steps foreshadow their eventual defeat.

Too many leaders never really begin at all. They meet the fork in the path and choose that which is more familiar and seemingly safer. Many tell themselves that of course change is needed, just not today. They opt instead for what they know – to make better and better valves, or faster and faster sailing ships.

All leaders, at one time or another, find themselves at this point of inflexion: status quo or revolution.

**Status quo** because most of what you have done and known in the past will continue to serve you well into the medium future. For all leaders, most of their time is spent here. Nobody, no matter what they claim in their TED Talks, can exist in a state of permanent revolutionary change.

**Revolution** because sometimes a slightly better, faster, smaller version of the status quo won't do. Because the behaviours, culture, process and thinking that have served to this point are no longer fit for purpose. Revolution because your greatest certainty is simply that the past can no longer serve as your guide. All leaders must at one time or another face up to this sometimes startling reality. Leading change is their greatest and yet most rewarding test.

Overcoming the warm inertia of the status quo is the leader's first battle. Leadership is primarily the act of influencing the behaviour and performance of others, but leading change begins with you. First, you must be convinced of the need to change. Hesitation is understandable, impulsivity to be resisted.

The consequent demand for those who can effect meaningful change has never been greater. The best, and the teams or organisations they lead, will grasp these opportunities rather than wilt before them. This ability, in an ever-shifting world, to steer your own course is the ultimate route to personal and professional fulfilment and, dare I say, happiness.

## A story of change

For the past fifteen years I have been responsible for leading, advising and ultimately transforming hundreds of businesses, big and small, on every continent. In 2019, I wrote a book about what I'd learnt.

In the early part of the century, I was hired as part of a new change management team tasked with turning round a dull, dying business, by general consensus considered unfixable. I was the Managing Director, No. 2 to the CEO. He was the brightest and most exciting star of his generation. I and my new colleagues considered ourselves to be an unbeatable team, reassured by our collective expertise, experience and confidence. The business may be unfixable, but we knew we couldn't fail. Except we did.

Within six months the CEO who had hired us had gone. Within twelve months the new team had begun to shatter, and by twenty-four months there were few of us left. Over the next four years new CEOs came and went, but the business stayed stubbornly unchanged, its gradual decline unabated. By 2009, after six years

as Managing Director, once part of the solution, I had become part of the problem. I believed, with good reason, that I had screwed my once promising career. It had been a salutary and painful lesson, a case study in how not to do it. How simply being talented isn't enough. How nemesis follows hubris.

At length and perhaps somewhat too late, I decided that I must take my future into my own hands. If I was no longer part of the solution, then I would have to start afresh. It almost didn't matter where; perhaps I would leave the industry altogether. It was a scary prospect. By now I had a young family, a mortgage and all the other responsibilities that freight our decisions and incentivise inertia.

Then, suddenly, a piece of luck. I found myself with a new boss, who unexpectedly offered me the opportunity to take charge. The question was, could I take it? After six years of failure, could we fix the unfixable?

I found myself as CEO with little thought of what the role demanded. However, I was determined of one thing above all others: that I would make the best possible use of the one resource I had – my six years of failure. I had seen first-hand how to fail at the task that now lay before me. From this I drew three important lessons that would provide the energy to fuel our new beginning:

### **1. Leading change is a team sport**

I couldn't do it alone. We needed a close team at the top if we wanted to build a high-performing organisation.

## **2. Sometimes, revolution is the only way**

The scale of the challenge we faced demanded an iconoclastic approach. We resolved there would be no sacred cows in our reinvention of the organisation.

And, most importantly,

## **3. Success is a consequence of learning from failure**

We may not have been clear exactly how we were going to go about our task, but we were certain what we were *not* going to do. We were not going to repeat the mistakes we and others had made over the preceding six years. If mistakes were going to be made (and they inevitably were), we were going to make new ones, all of our own.

So began my own personal journey of change.

Within three years we had gone from being a dog of a business to one of the hottest in the world. What follows is the distillation of the lessons I learnt during the dark years of failure and bright years of success, and what I have learnt since leading change programmes for businesses around the world.

## **No bullsh\*t change**

You're here because something's wrong, broken or slowing down. Things just don't quite feel right; dark clouds are gathering on the horizon. And you're here because you're going to fix it. In this eight-module programme, broken

into respective chapters, I intend to give you the confidence, the clarity and the tools to do just that.

This then is a manual to allow you to effect rapid and lasting change, whatever your circumstance – whether leading a team of six or a multinational of sixty thousand, a government department or a mid-table sports team, a shop floor or a showroom. The principles of leading successful change programmes are universal.

In writing this book, my objective is two-fold: clarity and action. Though I have organised my ideas in a deliberate order, one that I believe makes for most ready comprehension and utility, their real-world application will necessarily be more fluid. Consider leading change as the gradual illumination of a darkened room. As each subsequent row of lights are switched on, the effect is cumulative, but the order in which you switch them on matters less than that they are all eventually lit. And of course, if they begin to go out again, darkness returns as quickly as it retreated. It's your task not simply to switch them on, but to keep them alight.

All change must begin with an honest understanding of your current context. In **Chapter 1, 'Baseline', we explore how to understand the situation you find yourself in today and use that to overcome the internal inertia that resists change.** It's not difficult, but it's very important.

In **Chapter 2 we look at why effective communication is so important when leading change.** We will consider some common (and easily avoided) mistakes and introduce a straightforward and universally applicable guide to doing it well.

Objective-setting is often misunderstood, unnecessarily overcomplicated, ineffective and even self-defeating. Yet a clear objective is essential to any change programme. **In Chapter 3 we explore how to define effective objectives**, why it's not as difficult as we are often told, how to use them for maximum effect and why they are critical for building effective teams.

The most difficult part of any change programme is the start. Your greatest challenge is often not that people don't believe change would be desirable, but that they don't believe it is ever going to happen. **In Chapter 4, 'Breaking Free', we learn why urgency and energy are critical to getting started**, help you build credibility as an action-oriented change-leader, and most importantly build confidence that your programme can and will succeed.

**Chapter 5 considers the importance of teams and coalitions** and why the more great leaders you have, the quicker you'll achieve your goals.

We are all good at being able to see the things that are broken, dysfunctional or could be improved. However, attempting to tackle everything at once will only guarantee failure. **Chapter 6 introduces the concept of *Schwerpunkt*, the point of maximum effort** (you don't need to be able to pronounce it, just understand it) as a means of focusing your effort, and how this will accelerate you towards your goal.

**Chapter 7 explains why, ultimately, all organisational change is culture change.** It is also a no bullshit primer on what culture is, why it matters and how to

build the effective and enduring culture you need in order to succeed.

Finally, in **Chapter 8 we arrive at the end of the beginning**. Most change programmes consider what is in reality only the start, but in the real world, effective change demands consistent effort, a great deal of determination and a willingness to learn from failure. Change doesn't happen in isolation, but is a contingent process that must adapt as it progresses.

This programme is designed to be a tool to help you lead effective change from the smallest team to the largest organisation. It is intended to inspire, inform and, most importantly, enable. The steps, tools and examples are not formed from simple academic study, but rather decades of practical experience – from great victories and crushing, tears-in-the-eyes defeats.

I don't present this programme as the only way, but recommend it to you as a proven way. You wouldn't learn to fly from someone who had never left the ground, and nor should you learn to lead change from those who have never walked in your shoes. In leading change, the best you can hope for is intelligent, but imperfect progress. And if in doubt, do.

# 1

## **BASELINE**

You can't fix something if you don't understand  
what it is you're trying to fix.

You can't lead change if you haven't made a compelling case  
for why change is needed.



*You can't use an old map to explore a new world.*

Albert Einstein

*The first principle is that you must not fool yourself,  
and you are the easiest person to fool.*

Richard Feynman

IN 1783, NEVIL MASKELYNE, the Astronomer Royal, received an inflammatory letter. In it the author claimed that Greenwich, the site of the Royal Observatory, wasn't where Maskelyne thought it was, that its latitude and longitude had been calculated incorrectly. Worse still, it had been sent by Cassini de Thury, of all horrors, a Frenchman.

The French had recently completed a revolutionary map of the then (but not for much longer) Kingdom of France. It was the first map to be produced on modern scientific lines using the latest technology, geodesic triangulation, delivering a degree of accuracy that would be recognisable even today. Nothing like it existed *outré-Manche*, and Maskelyne, though dismissive of the criticism, smelt opportunity. Using the pretext of the letter, he rapidly obtained government funding for a British version of just such a project.

Today we think little of maps. GPS allows us to know precisely where we are at all times. However, accurate maps changed the world. The problem is, before it is possible to create such a map, you must know with great certainty where you are starting from. Thus, De Thury's message was more than simply a passing swipe at the accuracy of English measurement, it was a warning that not only did they lack an accurate map of the kingdom, but they were in no position to create one.

So began the first modern survey of the whole of Great Britain and Ireland, a project that took fully sixty-two years to complete, yet one that stood the test of time, only being fully revised in the mid-twentieth century.

Triangulation is, as its name suggests, a model of mapping based on the specific geometric properties of a triangle, and the division of the territory to be mapped into accurately measured versions of the same. The greater the accuracy of each triangle's measurements, the greater the accuracy of the maps produced. The distinctive white 'trig points' still to be found dotted across the British landscape were the original reference points chosen for the corners of these triangles.

The first task of any such survey is to establish a baseline, the point from which all other calculations will be made and the first side of the first triangle, and this foundational work was undertaken by the Scottish military engineer Major-General William Roy. A site was chosen, one end of which is located on what is today a perimeter road of Heathrow airport. These first measurements were taken with painstaking care, using twenty-foot glass rods

in 1,370 individual stages, each of which was required to be accurate to within a thousandth of an inch. Only once this baseline was complete could mapping begin.

## The importance of a baseline

Maps help us determine how we might get to our future destination, but as anybody who has attempted to use one will know, their first and most important task is to tell you where you already are.

To lead change you need a baseline. This is the foundation on which your future actions will be built. It performs two critical roles that we will consider in this and the following chapter.

1. **It is an accurate and universal understanding of where you are to begin** – specifically, the current status of the organisation and its challenges, be they internal, external or, most commonly, a mix of the two.
2. **It forms the basis from which you build alignment amongst all your relevant stakeholders.** Within many organisations there is a widespread (if incomplete) understanding of its problems – problems that multiply the longer they are left unattended. The baseline is a critical step in building a powerful and aligned coalition that will support the actions required to achieve your goal. Without this alignment progress will be difficult, if not impossible.

## If it's broke, first understand it

All successful change begins with a clear and accurate description of the situation that you and your team find yourselves in today. This is your baseline. Mostly, unlike that faced by Major-General Roy and his thermally sensitive glass rods, this is not a difficult question to answer. It is, however, like his, an important one. You can't fix something if you don't know what it is you're trying to fix. You can't improve a system that you don't fully understand. Perhaps most importantly, you can't lead change if you haven't made a compelling case for why change is needed.

## Internal and external context

When drawing up the baseline, there are two broad areas to consider and understand. Either, or both, of these may provide the motive force for change. They are:

### 1. External context

This includes such things as the macro-economic environment (as a consequence of the pandemic, for example), geopolitics (Brexit or the Ukraine war), competitor activity (pricing or product innovation) and legislative change (such as GDPR). This is not an exhaustive list, but it's a good snapshot of the multitude of factors a leader must contend with that are largely or wholly beyond their control.

### 2. Internal context

This includes everything from product quality, new

product development, marketing, production processes, structure and workflow to culture, pricing, employee relations, talent retention and talent attraction. Again, not an exhaustive list, but a good cross section of the areas that are mostly or wholly within a leader's control. At least in theory.

It's obvious, but important to remember, that even if external factors are the driver of your organisation's need to change, **only those within your control are available to you to try and fix it.**

## The challenges of being an insider

The process of understanding your baseline is one that most obviously applies to someone new to an organisation, team or department. However, in the majority of situations, change is led by leaders who are already in place.

As an incumbent, you too must be able to define and communicate your baseline. Indeed, it could be argued that by being an insider, the processes of baseline setting is even more important and potentially difficult, as much of what must be changed may have been instigated or maintained by you. Consequently, incumbent leaders typically face two challenges.

The first is that they view the process as threatening – an unwanted referendum on their performance. This logic is understandable, but flawed; you must, as far as is possible, control the impulses of your ego. If you are going

to fix something, you have to understand it, and that applies whether you're newly appointed to the position or not. If you are the incumbent and you don't fix it, it's a reasonable assumption that sooner or later somebody else will be asked to try. This can be a threatening, but also liberating realisation; action, as always, is your most certain route to success. A common cause of leadership failure is the unwillingness to recognise that what has worked in the past will no longer work in the future.

Secondly, a leader must by definition be part of the solution, not part of the problem. A regular and objective re-evaluation of the baseline is critical to ensuring that this is the case – one that is performed, as far as is possible, without preconception or precondition. For a change-focused leader this isn't a process that happens to you, but one you lead, learn from and use as the basis for the next actions you must take. You have to be prepared to challenge the assumptions that have served you well to this point, and in establishing your baseline be willing to confront and, if necessary, overturn existing patterns, habits and beliefs – including your own. Perhaps especially your own. Easier said than done, but that is what change entails.

All successful leaders must be prepared to conduct objective, periodic reappraisals of their organisation's performance, objectives and strategy – to shed their team's skin and start again. In fact if they don't, they risk being replaced by someone who will. Very often the first act of a change programme is to replace the leader, because those in post are unable or unwilling to act.

One of this book's primary ambitions is to stop this being you.

## Symptoms and diagnosis

Symptoms are easy to see; diagnosis can be less straightforward. Horror films make great play on this, and their protagonists' initial naïvety. The four teenagers in an isolated lodge for a birthday weekend assume the strange noises in the night must just be owls, or bears or the wind. So confident are they that the least famous actor wanders off to check it out. Blood, gore and screaming ensue. In *Aliens*, the jock space marines scoff at the Cassandra-like Ripley and, muscles bulging, head out to swat the bugs beneath the nuclear power plant. Blood, gore and screaming ensue. In each case they see the symptoms but, fatally for the minor characters, misdiagnose the source.

Commonly in all organisations, problems are similarly easy to spot. However, new and incumbent leaders have almost directly opposing challenges in deciding their course of action. Incumbent leaders must beware the assumption that what has always worked in the past will continue to work in the future – and not ignore the flashing red lights on the dashboard until it is too late (certainly too late for them). And in contrast, it is common for new leaders to simply damn all that went before and set about slinging the baby out with the bathwater. In both instances a clear and well-defined baseline would save an awful lot of trouble, heartache and, perhaps in some instances, blood, gore and screaming.