

# Change & the F

By Joe C

A stylized, high-contrast illustration of a steam locomotive in a landscape. The locomotive is rendered in black and white, with a large circular headlight. The background consists of yellow and grey shapes representing hills and a sky with white clouds. The locomotive is on a track that recedes into the distance. The overall style is graphic and minimalist.

# tying Scotsman

Connelly



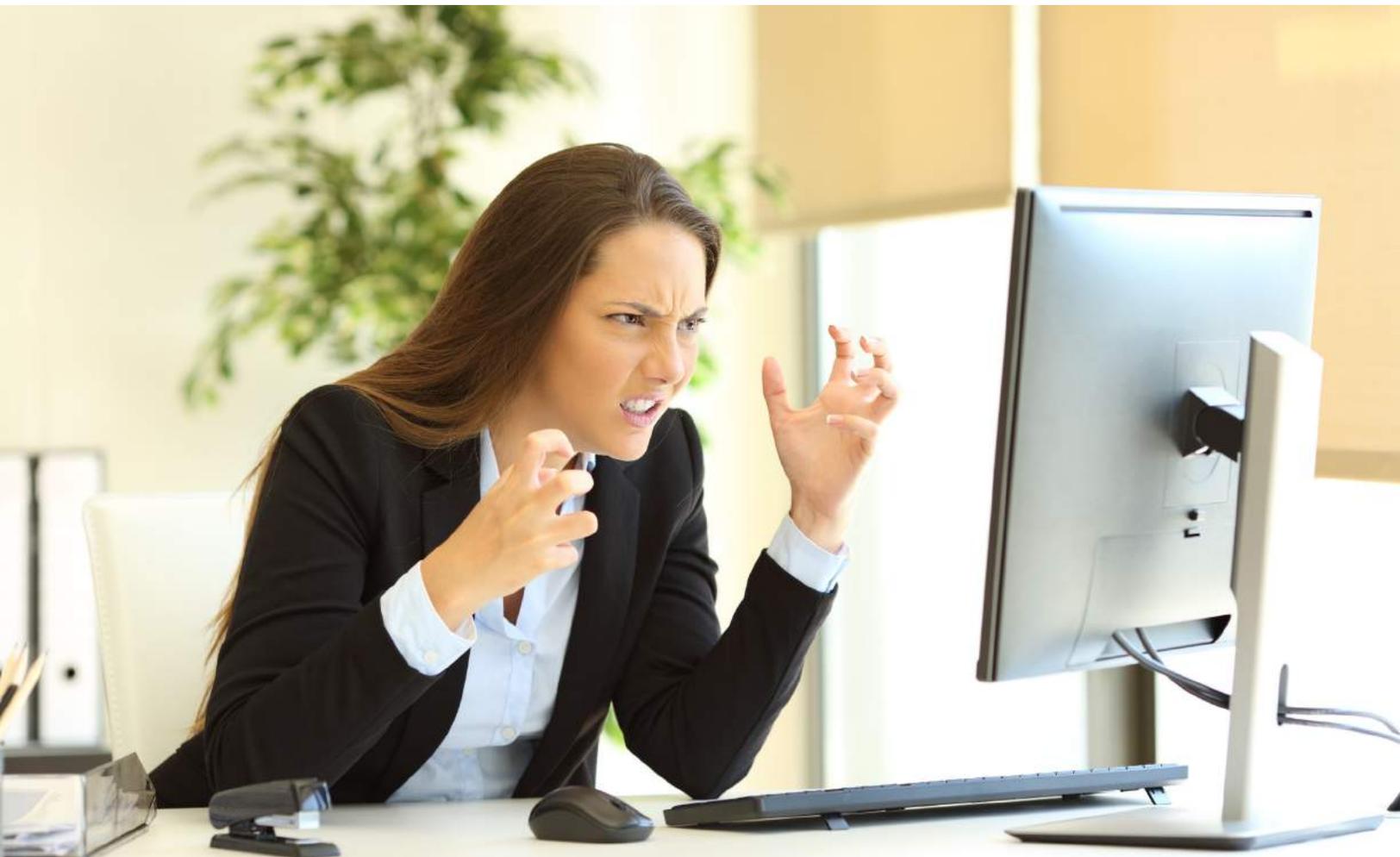
Joe Connelly

Rapid business change is more evident than ever. Competition constantly increasing; new disruptive technologies being rapidly deployed, and good in-demand employees always on the move. This relentless rate of change is unlikely to decrease anytime soon. In fact, smart money is on more convergence, more breakthrough technologies and even more demands from eager shareholders keen to make their investment 'the big one'. So, what's a company to do, especially one not on the cutting edge of fiscal or technology performance?

**CHANGE INITIATIVES MUST** come from a foundation of strategy. Change without a unified strategy has as much potential to cause disruption as it does positive outcome, and so the first step must always be to create a winning strategy. One not developed in a vacuum, but which has consideration and input from all relevant stakeholders within the company. And one that's given ample time to take root and show desired results.

I often share a story in my coaching practice of the 'The Flying Scotsman'. In its day the fastest train in the world, proudly designed, engineered and tested in Scotland, at the time the home of many great engineering feats. But this train did not start as a train, or even a big heaving hunk of iron. It started in the minds of people, who came together and created a strategy, which later evolved into a plan, which later evolved into action. And then and only then, world records! I often marvel at these types of people who had a clear vision/strategy and were willing to do what it takes to make their vision a reality, while also having the patience to see the acorn become an oak tree.

With constant demands for "now" results, people are becoming too short-term focused. Of course, the next Apple or Google is somewhere in the offing, and will surely hit the big time soon, but even these companies started off small and had many twists and turns on the road to success. And for sure they had to learn the simplicity and power of the SPA Method... Strategy first, Planning second, and Action third – and of course, sprinkled with a fair helping of patience. For example, I find myself fortunate



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to have some friends who are independently wealthy. People often look at them and think they have some magic touch. Maybe some of them do, but more importantly the way they made their money was through the above four tenets of business growth: strategy, planning, action and patience.

Initially when I came up with the SPA acronym a few years back, I knew it was right. I saw it in action many times in my own career, coached the concept to many people who made it a success, and fundamentally believed in its strength and applicability. But yet, I saw both

individuals and companies fail with the approach also. But why? Maybe something was missing.

Every change, no matter how big or small, has a time-constant associated with it. A period of time it takes for something to change from one current state, to a new ‘desired’ state. This period of time cannot be short-circuited. It cannot be reduced no matter how much will and hope is applied. Executives must fully understand the time constants of the change they are planning, and ensure the team leading this change, and the recipients of it, both understand and agree to this time



Joe Connelly says more patience is required, and everyone decides to stick with the business plan.

period. For example, if revenues from a new customer initiative take 18 months from start of engagement, no amount of hoping, encouraging, or beating people up will make revenues materialise from this customer within 3 months. Yet, if I had a dollar for every time a CEO, board member or senior manager didn't understand that some results just take time, then I would be writing this article from a boat somewhere in the Bahamas.

Going back to my Flying Scotsman analogy, even when the train was built and sitting on the tracks, a marvel of modern design and effort, no records were being set. Sure, it had

capability (at least the engineers would lead you to believe that). But yet there was no action, and certainly no records. So now a new essential phase had to kick-start. Something was built, something potentially remarkable, but it had to be given time to show its true capabilities. As steam engines go, the technology is quite understandable. You have to start a small fire in the oven. Then you shovel coal into the fire to increase the heat to create steam which moves the wheels. Early on, when the fire is burning brightly and giving off lots of heat, there's no steam. So, with a little more patience and lots of effort, more coal is thrown into the fire, the

process continuing until the fire is truly raging. Then and only then is there a faint peep of sound and a little puff of smoke from the funnel. But with all of this still no movement and still no world-records.

More patience is required, and everyone decides to stick with the plan. Throwing more coal into the all-consuming oven, brings more noise and steam from the funnel, and after what seems like an inordinate delay, the huge iron clad wheels slowly turn. Maybe a half inch at first, then a little more. Wise as the train engineers are, they continue to throw coal into the now even-hotter oven. How could an oven this bright, raging so furiously in its iron cage, still need more coal? But more coal is fed nonetheless. And then half-an-inch becomes a full wheel rotation, and then another, becoming ever faster and with a gaining of forward movement. Before long the train is rocketing down the tracks letting everyone know why it was suitably named as it was. Then something interesting happened. The engineers after having been so relentless in their tireless efforts, take a break, look outside to see the countryside simply flying by, and have time to savour their success and everything it brings; and likely knowing them, a cup of tea to boot. Amongst the tea and views savouring, they occasionally throw some coal into the oven to keep the momentum going – momentum that took great strategy, planning, action, and patience to realize.

Companies who need to change can. But it's people within these companies that create the vision that leads to strategy, plans and actions. And it's these people and their stakeholders that

simply have to develop a little more patience to let their competition-beating approach really fly. The good news is strategy, planning and action can all be learned whether through great internal leaders, consultants, courses, books, the internet. It's all there and very-well documented. But as I get a bit older and maybe a bit wiser, the one thing that still seems to me to be so elusive for so many companies and stakeholders, is the attainment of patience. As one young, hyper, action-oriented kid (me) once asked his mother, "How do you develop patience?" she simply took her time, reflected, and replied in a soft tone "Just wait!". **CBJ** 

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