The Partners In Leadership Change Methodology

An interview with Roger Connors and Tom Smith, The New York Times bestselling authors and founders of Partners In Leadership
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Roger Connors and Thomas Smith are the cofounders of Partners In Leadership and are three-time New York Times bestselling authors. Recognized as the worldwide experts in workplace accountability, they have compiled the most extensive body of knowledge on the topic. The authors bring deep understanding and decades of real world success to help management teams facilitate large-scale cultural transition through the proven Partners In Leadership methodologies and models.

What does Partners In Leadership do?

Connors: Simply stated, we help leadership teams achieve what we call their R² Key Results, which is a reference to the results the organization needs to achieve that are different from the results they are getting today (their R¹). Most organizations have an R² they need to achieve—a set of results that are strategic to the organization and which are essential to their long-term viability and competitive success. Our premise: culture produces results, but the right culture produces R².

Smith: Partners In Leadership is expert in helping clients identify and create the right culture that will produce their desired R² results by showing them how and helping them to accelerate a change in the way people think and act. Our premise is simple: to achieve your R² results, get people to think and act in the manner necessary to achieve those results. This usually means you need to get people to think differently.

How do you do that?

Smith: Often leaders are looking for more “traction” in the change process—more early adopters, better results, and faster progress. Over the last 25 years, working with thousands of clients and millions of people in our training and consulting engagements, we have learned that change happens most effectively when you start by creating a Culture of Accountability. Without the ground rule of positive accountability, people externalize the change process and hold others accountable to make the needed changes. With positive accountability, people internalize the change and hold themselves accountable for the change. When you establish the personal accountability ground rule as fundamental to the change process, you accelerate the change and speed up the ability for people to think and act differently and that impacts the results you are getting.
Connors: Of course, that requires a new definition of accountability. Many people in organizations today feel that accountability is something that happens to them when things go wrong rather than something they do to themselves to ensure their success. In our work, we redefine accountability as something you do to empower yourself to overcome difficult obstacles and get the result you need. We introduce our Steps to Accountability® where people operate Above The Line® to See It®, Own It®, Solve It®, and Do It® rather than fall Below The Line® and get stuck in the blame game, feeling victimized by their circumstances.

Smith: This is a very important point. During times of change, people have the tendency to fall Below The Line, feeling trapped by all the things that are outside of their control. It’s not wrong to go Below The Line, it’s just not effective. Nothing good happens there, except maybe a little therapeutic venting. Establishing an Above The Line environment fosters positive accountability and that gives the change process traction. Now, with that understanding, the change is about “me” and about what “I” need to do to change and help achieve R².

What is the Results Pyramid model?

Connors: The Results Pyramid® model is a simple, yet very effective, means for understanding the connection between the way people currently think and act and the results you want. The model shows that the results you are getting come from the actions people take. The actions people take come from the beliefs they hold about what they should do and how they should do it. Those beliefs come from the experiences they have. Simply stated, experiences foster beliefs, beliefs drive actions, and actions produce results. To change the results you are getting, the model suggests you have to change the beliefs people hold.

Smith: Often managers and leaders make the mistake of working only at the top of the pyramid. You could say there is an invisible line separating the top half of the
pyramid from the bottom half of the pyramid. It’s important to ask, when we are not getting the results we want, where do we usually go first? Our observation is that people tend to go straight to the actions level of the pyramid.

In fact, leaders and managers often fall into the trap of working only at the top of the pyramid. They create new action plans, new policies, new procedures, even restructuring—all in the hopes of achieving a transformation in results—only to find that nothing has really changed in the way people think. That’s what happens when we focus solely on actions. Have you ever seen a restructure not work? We have. **We can change where people sit, but that won’t necessarily change how they think.**

When we work just the top of the pyramid, we tend to use a “coerce and compel” change strategy, where the focus is getting people to comply with what we want them to do. When we work with the bottom of the pyramid, we tend to use a “persuade and convince” change strategy, where we focus on helping people fully invest and own it.

Let me ask you, **can you force someone to change a belief?** Of course not, that is why using the entire Results Pyramid is so powerful. When people choose to change their beliefs, you get transformational change. You no longer have to tell them what to do; they now own it and can fully invest their hearts and minds into getting it done.

**Connors:** You might ask, why don’t leaders work with the bottom of the pyramid, particularly when trying to bring about a transformational change? We think it’s because they are not quite sure how to do it. Our methodology shows leaders how to avoid the trap of only working with the top half of the pyramid and how to use the entire Results Pyramid to speed up the change process.

**How long does it take to create transformational change?**

**Connors:** Many would say it takes a long time to get true, transformational change. From our perspective, **it only takes as long as it takes to change a belief.** When people shift their beliefs, that’s a transformational change. When they only change their actions, that is merely transitional, and it won’t last.

I recall when I was a young boy, about 8 years old, I rode my bike over to a neighbor’s house that just had a fire. I was quite impressionable then and remember the site of the fire. It was scary. The entire kitchen had burned to the ground. One of the firemen brought me into the kitchen and showed me what happened. The toaster was plugged into the wall and had shorted out—that was the cause of the fire. From that early experience—that is, from the moment of that experience—I have held a belief that you should never leave home without making sure the toaster was unplugged. To this day, 45 years later, I always make sure the toaster is unplugged before I leave home. No one has to follow up with me or remind me or try to figure out strategies to get me to do it. I check the toaster because I have a strong belief driving that action. **Change a behavior and you will get incremental improvement; change a belief and you capture the heart and mind and get transformational change.**
How do you quickly change the way people think about doing their work?

Smith: Helping leaders accelerate the needed shift in the way people think and act is what Partners In Leadership is all about. It’s not change, for change’s sake. According to the model, your organizational culture produces your organization’s results. Culture produces results. Let’s call those results you are getting now R₁. Your current culture is comprised of the existing experiences (E₁), beliefs (B₁), and actions (A₁) on the pyramid. By definition, your current culture produces R₁, the results you are currently getting.

When those results need to be different—let’s call those new results R₂—because of a new strategy or new market/competitive conditions or because you want to grow, the question becomes very simple: Can the existing culture produce the new results we need to get? If you’re really dealing with a true R₂—that is, the results you need to get are truly different from the results you are currently getting—then it is imperative to understand that the existing culture cannot produce R₂. The existing culture produces R₁. To achieve your R₂, you have to identify the needed shifts in actions (A₂), beliefs (B₂), and experiences (E₂). Accelerating that shift in culture delivers the competitive advantage.

Which is more important, strategy or culture?

Connors: We have all heard the statement that “culture will eat strategy for lunch every day.” Given what we do for a living, we appreciate the prioritization of culture high on the agenda of senior executives—that’s where it should be. However, without an effective strategy—the right strategy, a winning strategy—culture alone is not going to get you where you want to go.
Smith: That said, usually culture is the last initiative that is employed, when it should be the first. Your culture is always working, 24/7; it never takes a holiday, goes to lunch, or calls in sick. It is always working, sending cues to people about how they should think and act at work—telling them what they should work on and how they should work on it. Your culture is either working for you and helping you implement your strategy and achieve your R², or it is working against you.

Connors: That is the key question—is your culture working for you or against you right now? We share with people that either you are managing your culture or it is managing you.

One retail client with 1,000 store locations was experiencing a decline in same-store sales. They told us that they had tried 10 different enterprise-wide initiatives and all of them had failed to make a dent in the decline. So, with no other good options, they thought they would try working with the culture!

They worked with us to set up a pilot with 50 of their stores. The pilot criteria was very straightforward: a less than 2% increase in same-store sales meant no action, between 2% to 4% meant study it further, over 4% meant implement enterprise-wide. Our Culture Track™ training was implemented in the 50 stores. After the first 30 days, they saw an 8% increase in same-store sales. Within 60 days, the client launched the process in all 1,000 of their stores. At the end of the first year, 65% of all stores hit their plan when only 9% had done it the year before.

There were no new strategies or no new products, just a new way of thinking that drove their success throughout every level of the organization, including the front line of each store.

**How do you begin this process?**

Connors: The best way to start is to develop a clear understanding of the key cultural shifts that need to occur from the current culture (C¹) to the desired culture (C²). Remember, in our model R¹ is produced by C¹, the existing culture. R², the results you need to achieve—which are different than the R¹ results you have been getting—is produced by C².

Identifying what C² looks like is key. We do that by helping the leadership team identify a set of Cultural Beliefs® that guide the change process. These beliefs are used to guide all the coaching and feedback that teams give one another throughout the organization. The Cultural Beliefs focus the change effort and keep it on target.

Smith: We should also mention that culture change occurs within intact teams. It is important to have an enterprise-wide focus, but the day-to-day change effort is within the intact team setting. The process design has to have a preference towards working with existing teams.
**How do you change a belief?**

**Smith:** Our model suggests that the way to change beliefs is to provide new experiences. However, when it comes to changing beliefs, not all experiences are equal. In fact, there are four types of experiences. A Type 1 Experience is an experience that needs little interpretation to form the desired belief. A Type 4 Experience is an experience that does exactly the opposite, it forms a belief you do not want people to hold. When it comes to changing beliefs, you need to create Type 1 Experiences.

**What is the biggest obstacle to changing beliefs?**

**Connors:** Once you understand the need to work with the bottom of the pyramid and change the beliefs people hold by creating new experiences, it becomes important for you to understand the notion of belief bias.

Belief bias is the instinctive, natural human tendency that people have to validate their current worldview (behavioral scientists call this confirmation bias). We don’t walk around all day looking for ways to invalidate the beliefs we hold about how the world works. In fact, we selectively filter our experiences and look for evidence that suggests our current view of the world is correct, screening out all the other evidence that would suggest otherwise. People will not give up their existing beliefs very easily. That’s a problem when it comes to getting people to change the way they think and act. Belief bias gets in the way and slows down the change process.

We have learned how to suspend belief bias so that people are open to changing their beliefs about what to do and how to do it. Our training process and workshops are designed to help suspend belief bias. When that happens, people are more willing to consider new beliefs and are more ready to make the change.

When we suspend belief bias, we open the window that allows us to change beliefs more rapidly, accelerating the change in the way people think and act. This means that any effective change process must first address the ability to suspend belief bias.

**How do you suspend belief bias?**

**Smith:** One of the ways we suspend belief bias in the workshop is having the organizational leader fully participate in leading the meeting. Often people are used to seeing the leader in the back of the room or leaving the meeting for other events. Instead, we get the leader fully involved in leading the workshop. There are a number of other things that we do in the workshop process, the secret sauce of change, to help suspend belief bias:

- Relevant content
- Facilitated discussion
- Application orientation
- Credible platform (research-based, proven track record)
- Experiential methodology
- Expert intervention
- Best practice design
The Golden Hour

Connors: There is a window of time that we call the “golden hour” where belief bias has been suspended but will not last forever. In photography, the golden hour is the first hour of sunrise and the last hour of sunset. It is only during those short windows of time that you can get the perfect lighting. In the change process, it is during the golden hour that people are looking for evidence to validate the new belief they are considering. We have learned that this is a period of time that lasts only about 60 days after the workshop. If people don’t see evidence for holding a new belief during this time, the old beliefs take over again.

Smith: The good news is that once a new belief takes hold, belief bias begins working for you, because people once again begin to validate the new belief just like they did with the old belief. When that happens, people start looking for the evidence that supports their new understanding of how they should think and act. They begin to selectively perceive their environment, ignoring contradictory evidence, embracing reinforcing evidence, and solidifying their new beliefs.

Type 1 Experiences

How do you create an experience that will change a belief?

Smith: As we said, it is important to create Type 1 Experiences during the golden hour. You create a Type 1 Experience by taking an action and developing it into an experience. For example, one management team needed to shift people’s belief about working in cross-functional teams. The management team had a reputation for not getting along and not working well together, which gave permission to everyone else in the organization to follow their example.

They decided to demonstrate their new commitment to working as a team by having lunch in the employee cafeteria together. Now, we helped them create a Type 1 Experience, an experience where little interpretation is needed to form the desired belief. The team discussed how they could make this action an experience. They decided they would walk into the cafeteria together as a team, all 12 at one time.

Connors: As I recall, they even prearranged to sit at some tables that were right in the middle of the cafeteria. They also decided that they would tell jokes and have fun during lunch.

Smith: That’s right. They executed the plan flawlessly. It was a huge surprise to see them all walk into the cafeteria at the same time. People could not believe it! News of the event spread through the organization like wildfire.

The manufacturing VP followed this up by inviting the marketing VP to his staff meeting to answer questions and exchange feedback. People got the message: we are working together as teams now! Two Type 1 Experiences in a row is about all it takes to reset the belief system and capture the needed momentum.

Connors: There is an “invalidation instinct” that people have when it comes to change, which is the tendency to ignore the evidence that change has occurred when presented with little contrary evidence. The follow-up experience between the
manufacturing VP and the marketing VP in their staff meeting was critical to overcoming this problem and actually shifting the mindset.

By the way, it is important to point out that a Type 1 Experience can also have a powerful effect on suspending belief bias. In fact, we coach leaders to create Type 1 experiences early in the change process so that they can affect belief bias and get people looking for the change they want. At the outset, it’s all about getting people to look for and recognize the evidence that supports the change effort—both in terms of why the change is important and the fact that the change is occurring. Human behavior is generally predictable—we find what we look for.

Smith: If we are looking for why the change should fail, we will probably find evidence. However, if people are looking for why the change should succeed, and if they are looking for evidence of the change actually succeeding in people’s daily work, they will find that too. We want them looking for the latter, so it is essential to enroll them in the process of “looking.”

How do you make this easy to do?

Smith: One way that we help clients create a framework for repeatedly providing experiences that shape beliefs is the use of what we call the Four Culture Management Tools. These tools are Focused Storytelling, Focused Feedback, Focused Recognition, and Focused Accountability. All four of these tools are focused around the Cultural Beliefs and the C² culture you are working to create. These four tools are integrated into existing meetings and one-on-ones.

Connors: That integration is really important. You don’t hold a lot of special meetings to change the culture; you use the meetings your team regularly holds to make that happen.

Smith: That’s absolutely essential. Of course, there is a role for special meetings, but culture changes within the intact team and happens in the context of the meetings that team holds on a regular basis. Each of these tools is simple to use. Many leaders begin their meetings with Focused Storytelling, which uses a simple pattern to share a brief story on where they see the culture change happening. Focused Recognition builds off of this and is usually given as a card that is handed out or a digital card sent through email.

Connors: Some management teams have a stack of cards sitting in the middle of their conference table. During the course of the meeting, as they become aware of someone or some team they can recognize, someone at the table fills out a card that is passed around for everyone to sign. The card is then delivered to the person or team being recognized after the meeting.

Smith: It’s a powerful tool. Focused Feedback is usually done in one-on-ones and involves sharing both appreciative and constructive feedback on progress towards achieving the Key Results and living the Cultural Beliefs. Focused Accountability is about the important, critical shift the team needs to make from C¹ to C² and the Type 1 Experience they most need to create for their team to reinforce that shift.
These four tools provide a simple framework for integrating the culture change effort into the day-to-day operation of the business.

**What is The Cultural Transition Process Certification™ all about?**

**Connors:** A Type 1 Experience that can be created is a leader-led organizational commitment to getting every employee certified using the Professional Accreditation Certification program on PILtools. This blended learning approach enables people to continue to engage with the content after the formal workshop. By using the Application Tools and Learning Tutorials we provide, they have additional experiences that suggest a new way of looking at things that will help them get better results. Certification only takes about 6 hours and is often done over a 90-day period. There is also a Team Leader Certification that takes an additional 6 hours and is usually done over a 6-month period of time.

PILtools is an industry-first, powerful integrated digital tool suite that is used in conjunction with the transformational Cultural Transition Process.

**Smith:** Certification is a win-win approach for the organization. The employee population sees the organization investing in their personal development through the Professional Accreditation Certification by Partners In Leadership that travels with them throughout their career, and the organization gets people who are more proficient and competent in making the culture change happen. Access to PILtools and certification are already included with their training investment, so it makes sense to use it.

**Connors:** The commitment to getting everyone certified on PILtools shows everyone that this is not a “one-and-done” effort like many training initiatives; rather, a commitment to really changing the way they do business on a daily basis. It communicates a serious intent to improve their ability to achieve the desired results.

There are three continued-use tools: the Automated Feedback™ Tool, the Solve It® Tool, and the Assessments Tool. All three are social collaboration tools that allow users to reach out and collaborate across geographic and cross-functional boundaries. These tools are ideal for fostering collaboration for any distributed team.

All of the certification activities are focused on the application of the training for improving the results of the intact team. The certification is also a Professional Accreditation Certification that people will appreciate receiving as a part of their personal and leadership development. It signals the organization’s commitment to investing in their people.

**So how do we make all of this stick?**

**Smith:** Our change methodology is summed up in three words: Train. Retain. Sustain.® First, in order to suspend belief bias and get everyone open to new beliefs about what do to and how to do it, you have to “Train” everyone in the organization. The training is designed to suspend belief bias and unfreeze existing mindsets.
Connors: We are often asked if it is really necessary to train everyone in the organization. Our answer to that question: it depends. Who do you not need thinking and acting differently in the organization? You only need to enroll those who need to be involved in the culture change—but you better involve everyone you need to if you want to accelerate the change.

That’s particularly true with the front line. Ultimately, any change process that does not reach the front line will fail in its intended objective. The front line is where the customer experience is generally created.

Smith: It’s also where a lot of the critical work gets done.

Connors: Exactly. Suspending belief bias on the front line and enrolling people in the change process is critical to an enterprise-wide culture initiative. In fact, the front line may have more to do with achieving R² in the long run than anyone else in the organization.

The organizational culture should positively affect the customer experience. In fact, it should drive it. The culture also promotes the brand experience. These are all tied together—culture, customer experience, and brand. The front line is often the intersecting point between these critical strategic factors.

Smith: We have learned in our 25 years of helping organizations achieve transformational change that the change process gets the needed traction when it is an enterprise-wide effort. We understand the challenges of training the front line—costs, complexity, availability—but we also understand the impact on the culture change and the organization’s results when you include those who are key to making it all happen.

Connors: Training the entire organization is facilitated by a Partners In Leadership Enterprise-wide License. The License provides you with the needed assets and methodologies that are cost effective and efficiently trains your people at all levels in the organization.

The “trickle down” theory of change for the front line falls far short of the objective of making lasting change in an accelerated time frame. If the speed of the needed change is important and the stickiness of the change is important, then you need a deliberate, thoughtful process and methodology for enrolling people on the front line.

What do you mean by “Retain” and “Sustain”?

Smith: Once that training happens, then the focus is on “Retain” by reinforcing what people learned in the training so that they apply it in their daily work and start consistently living the C² culture. This is done by creating multiple points of contact with the curriculum over time, usually accomplished by certification on PILtools and by providing early Type 1 Experiences that reinforce the new beliefs we need people to hold.

Of course, then the effort moves into the “Sustain” phase, where strategies are employed to embed the new way of thinking and working into the culture and
daily operations so that it becomes a new way of life. Here we are talking about continued use of the tools, continued learning, and systems integration.

**Connors:** It’s a comprehensive approach to accelerating culture change and making true and lasting change stick. The fruit of the effort in creating the C² culture is achieving the R² desired results the organization needs to get.

**Finally, is your approach research-based?**

**Smith:** Yes, it is. Partners In Leadership has produced the most comprehensive study on workplace accountability and culture ever conducted. Over 40,000 people participated over a two-year period. Participants were sampled from scores of industries, hundreds of companies, and a wide variety of job titles. In addition, our methodology has been developed over 25 years of research, and it is well documented in our books and publications.

**Connors:** All of our work is designed to help leaders achieve the Key Results their organization needs to accomplish. This process is designed to help them execute at every level of the organization on that strategic direction and deliver their R².
Roger Connors and Thomas Smith are the cofounders of Partners In Leadership and are three-time New York Times bestselling authors. They have authored the most extensive body of knowledge on workplace accountability ever written. Their books are featured on numerous bestselling lists, including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, Publishers Weekly, and Amazon.com. They are recognized as the worldwide experts on the topic of workplace accountability. They bring extensive expertise in helping management teams facilitate large-scale cultural transition through the Partners In Leadership Accountability Training® methodologies and models that they have developed and authored.

Tom and Roger authored the classic New York Times bestselling book The Oz Principle: Getting Results through Individual and Organizational Accountability, ranked year after year as one of the top five bestselling business books in the leadership and performance categories. They also co-authored the New York Times bestsellers How Did That Happen? Holding People Accountable for Results the Positive, Principled Way and Change the Culture, Change the Game: The Breakthrough Strategy for Energizing Your Organization and Creating Accountability for Results.

As pioneers and industry thought leaders on the subject of workplace accountability and culture change, Roger and Tom have been published and interviewed extensively. Their articles have appeared in many magazines, such as Life Science Leader, Leadership Excellence, Talent Management, Personal Excellence magazine, Chief Information Officer (CIO.com), Journal of Business Strategy, Executive Excellence, Inside Supply Management, and many others. Their radio, television, and webcast appearances include CNBC’s Power Lunch, KWHY-TV “Market Talk,” OCN-TV’s “Prime Story,” Leaderview Fortune 100 Executive Teleconference, Business Radio Network, UPI, Voice of America, Business Matters, and numerous other broadcasts.

Founded over 25 years ago in 1989, Partners In Leadership is the world’s premier provider of Accountability Training and culture change consulting. Partners In Leadership has assisted thousands of companies and millions of people in more than 100 countries to achieve dramatic results—breakthrough growth, record-breaking profitability and shareholder returns, reduced costs, and successful implementation of previously stalled organizational initiatives.

The Partners In Leadership client list includes all 13 of the “Most Admired” pharmaceutical companies in the world, almost half of the companies comprising the Dow Jones Industrial Average, and nearly half of the Fortune 50 largest companies. The company is privately held and based in Temecula, California (USA).