

Hope Is Not a Method

– *what leaders do instead of hoping*

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In August 1995, around 150,000 refugees arrived in the Banja Luka area in roughly 14 days in connection with the war in Bosnia. I was head of Danish Mobile Hospital in the middle of the city. No one had a rehearsed contingency plan. But we were trained to act when the unforeseen happened.

In business it is rarely a matter of life and death. But the mechanism is the same: When reality changes faster than the plan, you find out whether the organisation has a method – or just a hope.

This article is about what leaders do instead of hoping when a change has to succeed.

The book that was misquoted

When I came home from Bosnia in 1998, I read “Hope Is Not a Method”, written by the former US Army Chief of Staff Gordon R. Sullivan together with Michael V. Harper. Sullivan led the US Army from 1991 to 1995 – in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when a huge organisation had to change fundamentally while being ready to carry out missions every single day.

The title is often quoted as “hope is not a strategy”. But that is not what the book is about. It is about method: The concrete practices, techniques and habits that make change happen in practice – even when nobody knows exactly what the future will look like.

That is exactly why it is still relevant. Today it is about new conflicts, cyberattacks, AI and markets that move faster than the budgets. The challenge for leaders is the same: To shape the future rather than wait and hope it will pass by itself.

The Stockdale paradox: Brutal facts and unwavering faith

In “Good to Great”, Jim Collins made another military role model famous: The American admiral James Stockdale, who spent almost eight years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Collins asked him who did not

make it. The answer was surprising: The optimists. Those who were sure they would be out by Christmas – and then by Easter – and who finally broke when their hopes were dashed again and again.

Stockdale survived because he combined two things that seem to contradict each other: An unshakeable faith that he would prevail in the end – and the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of his situation as it was right now.

That is the dilemma in any change. The leader who is only an optimist promises it will all be over soon, and loses credibility with every deadline that slips. The leader who only sees the facts creates helplessness. It is the combination that creates the ability to act.

Hope is good to have. But it is no plan, no method – and no substitute for facing reality.

Expect to be surprised

One of Sullivan's core principles is to expect to be surprised. Not as pessimism, but as professionalism. The future never follows the plan, so the organisation must be built to act when it does not.

It is deeply rooted in me from my time as an emergency management officer. I still reverse into parking spaces so I am ready to drive off quickly. It sounds small, but it is a way of thinking: Prepare while things are calm, so you have reserves when they are not.

Readiness has two sides. One is the physical plans and arrangements: Who does what, what do we prioritise, and what must be protected at all costs? The other is mental – what I call inner readiness: The surplus mentality and the ability to mobilise strength when it matters. In the Danish special forces they say you must always be ready to be ready. I have written more about it in [“Ready to Be Ready”](#).

In organisations this means that leaders do not only ask “what is the plan?”, but also “what do we do when it does not hold?”. And that employees know the intent so well that they can act independently when reality departs from the plan.

Intent matters more than the plan

In military leadership you talk about the commander's intent: Why are we doing this, and what does it look like when we have succeeded? A plan can become obsolete the moment it meets reality. A clear intent lasts longer, because it allows people to make the right decisions when the plan no longer fits.

Stephen Bungay describes the same thing in “The Art of Action”, which I used during my CBA studies and still use in my work advising and running development programmes for executive teams and leadership teams: Clear direction, freedom to act close to the situation, and continuous adjustment as long as the shared intent holds.

You can read more here about a current, concrete case of a C-level development programme called [LEAP: Leadership Execution Acceleration Program](#).

Many change projects do the opposite: The plan is detailed, but the intent unclear. As soon as the plan meets resistance, people stall because they do not know what to prioritise.

Coalitions that ignite the combined firepower

Sullivan is a strong advocate of the idea that leadership in change is about building strong coalitions and teams that bring the organisation's combined firepower into play – to use a military expression. No leader carries out a major change alone, and no change succeeds if it only lives in the executive team.

That is exactly the thinking behind my method [Ildstorm \(Firestorm\)](#). Instead of presenting the whole vision at once and hoping for support, you find one passionate change agent who wants to carry a specific initiative. Then one more. Gradually a ring of fire forms across hierarchy and seniority, working its way towards the centre – the strategic goal. The energy grows because people have chosen to contribute themselves.

Management and leadership are two different tasks

As early as 1990, John Kotter described the difference in Harvard Business Review: Management is about coping with complexity and creating order. Leadership is about coping with change.

Many organisations have plenty of management – budgets, steering committees and status reports – but too little leadership of the change itself. The point is not to choose one over the other, but to know which task you face and switch deliberately.

Resistance to change, by the way, is neither ill will nor a bad attitude. It is a natural attempt to find a new equilibrium, as I have described in [“When strategy meets Monday morning”](#). That is why it must be planned in from the start as a working condition – not handled as a surprise along the way.

Learn along the way – not afterwards

Sullivan was one of those who made the After Action Review a fixed habit throughout the US Army. After every exercise and every mission, four simple questions are asked: What was supposed to happen? What happened? Why? And what will we do differently next time?

The genius is not the questions, but the discipline of asking them every time, immediately and without looking for scapegoats. Then learning becomes part of operations rather than something that happens at an evaluation six months later – and you can adjust while it still makes a difference.

Sullivan also saw fast learning as the key to one of the hardest leadership disciplines: Being ambidextrous – exploring the new and unknown while exploiting and optimising what already exists, equally good with both hands. Few organisations master it, but it can be trained, best through learning by doing. You can read more about this in the article [“Action Learning in Practice”](#).

Six practices instead of hope

How to do it in practice:

- **Face the brutal facts – together:** Say out loud what is not working before you talk about what needs to happen.
- **Hold on to faith in the goal:** Do not promise that it will soon be over. Promise that you will get there.
- **Formulate the intent before the plan:** Why are we doing this, and what does it look like when we have succeeded?
- **Build the coalition:** Find the passionate change agents who will carry the change – one at a time and across the hierarchy.
- **Expect to be surprised:** Agree in advance what you will do when the plan does not hold.
- **Learn after every milestone:** Four questions, immediately and without scapegoats.

Conclusion – method beats hope

Change rarely succeeds because management hoped it would. It succeeds because the leaders faced reality, held on to the goal, made the intent clear, built a coalition of passionate change agents, prepared for surprises and learned along the way.

It also demands something of the leader: An inner readiness that makes it possible to stay calm and keep your reserves when the plan does not hold. It can be trained – and it is the best insurance against hope becoming the only method you have left.

So the question for your leadership team is simple: Which of your ongoing changes is in reality built on hope?

This article builds on my LinkedIn article “Forandringsledelse i praksis” (2025).

Are you in the middle of a change that has to succeed?

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