



Thriving As a Change Agent:

Lessons from the Spanish American War

By: Ward Keever, CTG HealthCare Solutions Executive Director of Executive Services

Your challenge in advocating change is to maintain the right balance. You can't sit back and do nothing, but neither can you get so far out in front that you can't be seen as an optimistic team player.

In 1898, our country was engaged in the Spanish American war. During that war, the U.S. Navy fired on the enemy's targets 9,500 times. It hit its target only 121 times, for a success percentage of .013. At the time, those figures represented world-class performance—the industry benchmark—and we won! And in spite of such seemingly haphazard results, the same firing technique continued to be used for some time, with a similar outcome: in 1899, a firing test was conducted where a target one mile away was hit only twice in thirty minutes.

Three years later, the test was repeated. During the same thirty-minute interval, the target was hit every single time, with 50% falling within a fifty-square-foot area. What changed?

This dramatic performance advance was brought about by a single person. William Salmon Simms, a senior navy artillery officer, conceived a vision for improvement, pursued it with a passion, and ultimately convinced President Theodore Roosevelt to become a sponsor. Simms developed a continuous firing technique that accommodated ship roll and set out to communicate his new idea. He bombarded Roosevelt with thirteen letters suggesting a change in firing practices. Finally, Roosevelt responded by appointing him to head up navy target practice.

Simms' technique achieved a 3000 percent improvement in accuracy and changed both the Navy's priorities and its firing techniques. The emphasis shifted from correctly positioning the ship (navigation) to accurately firing its weaponry (artillery). Simms himself ended up as one of the most-decorated admirals in navy history and president of the War College. His story suggests a few important lessons of value to corporate executives like you:

- Your position offers you the ideal opportunity to promote change. However, it's not enough to have a vision, an idea, or an opinion. It's equally essential to understand how to win acceptance of your vision—without getting fired!
- Selling skills are an important attribute. Seeking and winning senior management support can be the key to gaining acceptance of your vision. Sharing ownership with as many persons as possible minimizes the number of naysayers.



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- Surround yourself with high-quality employees and managers who have the requisite skills and knowledge, who share your vision, and who know what is necessary to be successful. We can be certain Admiral Simms selected his team carefully and practiced the new firing techniques assiduously before conducting an 'official' test.
- Develop and apply a sound metric to compare results and define success.
- Although our story doesn't do more than touch on this point, keep in mind that celebrating success is a terrific way to broadcast results and recognize participants' input and ownership of the results. Once you've proven yourself a winner and shared the ownership of a victory, achieving buy-in for your next good idea will be much easier.

This past year, CIOs have experienced a higher-than-average turnover. Quite often, such turnover happens because an otherwise capable person has a vision for change, but hasn't been able to gain senior management support or share ownership of that vision. Your challenge in advocating change is to maintain the right balance. You can't sit back and do nothing, but neither can you get so far out in front that you aren't seen as an optimistic team player.

Several years ago, my teenaged son was an avid, totally committed surfer. His room was plastered with posters from various surfing magazines and he and his buddies spent several hours each day in pursuit of the perfect wave. Opportunity is just like surfing. We can sit on our board, keep bobbing, and watch others catch the wave. Or, we can start paddling, catch that wave just right, and enjoy a heck of a ride.