

THE
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THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

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Why Change Matters And What To Do About It

We live in a world of constant change and it is said that if a business is not going forward, it is indeed going backwards, such is the need for constant change, improvement and invention.

Without change we cannot improve, and there is no change without challenge – be that people, process, timescales, logistics or simply willpower – and anyone who has ever tried to implement change, whether personally to lose weight, exercise more, eat healthily, save up, or in business, will know that it requires effort, perseverance and commitment.

Sometimes change is planned with long term objectives, a vision, measurable outcomes and a progress plan with milestones ... other times that change can be unplanned, forced due to external factors, the environment, the law, the political agenda, the availability of resources – be that human or materials – and you then find yourselves in the hands of these forces and risk being washed away if you cannot get some control over it.

As managers and leaders in today's business world, we have to be prepared to predict, make, manage, monitor, instigate, innovate and create change, however uncomfortable it might feel, and if we fail to get a handle on it, it will manage you. Then change becomes uncomfortable and threatening, people back away from it, and the process becomes even more difficult as pressures build up and restrictions take hold.

Technology, society, economics, politics, innovations, consumer demand and expectations, unprecedented events like Covid19 have all been drivers of change in recent times and all organisations are confronted by the challenge of change at some time – some will rise to that challenge and find a way others may fall by the wayside – perhaps not reacting quickly enough or not having noticed the changing landscape if that change was incremental. Sudden change is clear and obvious but creeping change may not be noticed for some time, especially if other factors are distracting you, and sometimes it can then be too late. Sudden change can bring about a knee-jerk reaction that fails in the longer term, causing disruption, mistrust and sometimes panic whilst gradual incremental change may creep silently and gradually eat away at your business. Think about the local newspapers who failed to notice the increase in people getting their news from other sources. Advertising revenue dried up and newspaper sales tailed off ... newspapers that were once paid for, sought after and in demand were given away free on street corners.

“From the point of view of managers and their organisationsit means that organisations who are prepared to invest time, energy and money in the sensitive and careful managing of change processes are likely to be around longer and probably be more successfulmany organisations don't survive because they are not able to learn quickly and adapt fast enough, and it is clear that we had better get on and do some fast learning about how to manage change, and manage it well”

Roger Plant, Managing Change and Making It Stick

ACTIVITY

Take a moment now to reflect and consider one change in your organisation over recent years or months that was high profile, planned and discussed and perhaps consider one that has been incremental and crept in rather than planned and deliberate.

Can you identify how people responded in each case?

What were the differences, if any?

Which change was the more successful and long lasting?

Managing change is about survival and growth, and often the most difficult part is not the change itself but the way people respond to it. It is important to remember that any organisational change is about people and they will have their own fears, hopes and emotions and if you are not open to considering them and managing them, you will struggle to instigate true and lasting change. When confronted by change, people are easily threatened and will often see the negative side of things, preferring the status quo and “the way we have always done it” – not because necessarily that is best for the business but because it is known, understood and often more comfortable.

Think now for a moment about any personal change that you have made. Maybe moving house or changing job or getting involved in a new relationship. Perhaps a loss or bereavement, the end of a relationship, even something as every day as deciding to diet and exercise and improve your health. What emotions did you experience throughout the process of change? What helped you settle into the “new” way? What stopped you?

For change to happen, people need to see the benefit of it and feel that the value of the “new” is worth the difficulty and hassle of change. That vision of the way it could be has to be compelling – my diet and exercise plan may benefit from a vision of a smaller, sexier dress for the upcoming party or my ability to cope with the change of moving jobs is spurred on by the future prospects, increase in pay or opportunity that it might present. As human beings it is often the case that we need to have a compelling, attractive vision of the future to inspire us to cope with the difficulty and challenge of change – but that is not always possible in organisational change. Sometimes we cannot offer that attractive outcome if the change is forced by external factors and it becomes a question of doing it in order to simply survive. What do you think would need to happen for people to be motivated towards change within your business? What factors would need to be present for them to commit to and persevere if the going gets tough?

Change can cause conflict between people if there is a lack of clarity and any uncertainty will raise stress levels and likelihood of resistance. Sometimes we can give people absolute clarity, especially if the change is planned and part of an overall strategy, however, sometimes where change is forced and we are “making it up as we go along” it is not so easy to sell that compelling vision of the future with every nook and cranny explored and explained. The difficulty is that people are often fearful of the unknown and all too often they feel insufficiently involved, aware, enabled or empowered – people respond much better to change if they have a say in it or are included in discussion around it.

None of us like to be told “because it is” when we question something – and if the organisation does not invite dialogue and discussion, you can be left feeling like a child who is scolded by the parent and told simply “because I say so!” and as adults, none of us respond well to that! Communication is key. People need to be involved, aware and understand the why, even if we cannot accurately describe the how or what. We may not like change but if we at least understand why it is necessary, we might be able to accept it more easily. People are funny like that.

People will often resist change because they see it as too risky, not thought through, there is nothing in it for them, it threatens their ego or status or position. They might feel incapable of adapting, unable to cope, lack the skills or ability to make it work, or even it might make them redundant. Sometimes they may see it as “change for change sake” or that old cynical “tried it before and it didn’t work then” or “if it’s not broke, don’t fix it” Chances are we have all experienced some, or even all, of that during our working lives?

If we are to be motivated by change, our fear levels need to be reduced and we need to feel safe and in control. Look at any model or theory around human motivation and you will see that unless our more basic needs are being met (safety being one of them) we will struggle to strive for higher, better or new ... Lots of research has been done about people’s reaction to change and you may have come across the idea of the change curve, illustrating how emotions can peak and trough and even become stuck when we are confronted with change. So how do we, as an organisation, make sure that we bring our people with us? How do we motivate them and encourage commitment and perseverance? What do we need to communicate? When? How? Why? How do we help people deal with the all too familiar emotions of denial, anger, disagreement, withdrawal, depression so that they are more open and accepting and can move on?

What thoughts do you have already about this? How can we spur people into action? How can we make them feel safe to even explore change? Take a moment to jot down your thoughts.

In any kind of change it is useful to bear in mind a simple cycle that we can share and re-visit, asking ourselves three questions ...

- 1) Where are we now?
- 2) Where do we want/need to be?
- 3) How will we get there? (Or how are we progressing?)



Although simple, it is an effective way to keep bringing back focus and make sure we are where we need to be and have not wandered off piste. It is a continuous process and so simple that we might take it for granted but it is important to build in planned thinking and reviewing time, using the old chestnut of “Plan – Do – Review”. Sharing this with people and having conversations that invite their input will also be helpful and more likely to engage them, assuming you have done the work to minimise resistance and reluctance first! If you cannot involve people fully or even give them the detail they crave, be honest about it! Communicate in a way you have never done before, frequently, regularly, honestly and minimise speculation and manage the rumour mill – the grapevine has a way of moving very quickly indeed if people are suspicious or feel left out.

As a manager you will need to adapt your leadership style as the change progresses. Perhaps starting from a place of “selling the vision” to eventually moving through to allowing the team to run with the ball and make decisions for themselves. Simply telling people what to do and making sure they do it is NOT going to get you the best success, trust me! I have seen change that has been so badly handled that employees actively sabotaged the change process – simply because they did not feel heard and that change was being DONE to them rather than by them or with them.

Please don't make that mistake! It is very different being a Change Agent than it is being a Change Target. As the Agent you can own and influence and drive the change – as the Target you are probably the one who need to change behaviour, skill, process or way of working and having change “done to you” is not a great place to be, for anyone, ever!

You may choose to use common models such as Force Field Analysis to help people see why the change matters and what the risks and consequences of failing to change might be. You might help them understand it better by sharing case studies or examples of such change elsewhere, or simply enlightening them as to the driving force behind it – but you need to be honest with them. You need to share that you are anxious too, but that you recognise the need for this change and the consequences of failure. You might tell them that it also scares you but you have done some soul searching as realise you need to “feel the fear and do it anyway”. It might require you to have some difficult conversations with people – at first trying to sell, persuade and cajole but after time this might need to be more of a directive, push-pull as people get stuck in the withdrawal or even depressed stage and are refusing to be open to it.

Managing change is not an easy process. There are absolutely things you can do to make it easier both if you are the Change Agent AND if you are the Change Target. Managing your emotional state, whatever your role, will be important and being prepared to have an open minded and at least consider the options or indeed any concerns before dismissing it completely. Whether you are the Champion of Change, the Sponsor, the Agent or the Target, we all have to work together in the interests of the business – at the end of the day, “You do not have to do this – survival is not compulsory” W. Edwards Deming.

Much has been written about the subject of change, and many models and theories exist. Perhaps take some time to do a little extra research yourself and if you are the Change Target, practice your attitude of curiosity, practice an attitude of potential opportunity, consider how you might learn more, understand more, feel more comfortable with the proposed change before you close your mind to it.

Best of luck!