The only constant is change

Project managers are, essentially, change agents. But too few are seeking advice on how to manage change effectively.

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WHEREVER PEOPLE ARE, THERE WILL BE change, and wherever there is change it needs to be organised. This pretty much makes change management the structural underpinning of every strategy in every business.

Implement that change efficiently and effectively and, according to Prosci’s 2009 change management bible Best Practices in Change Management, you are six times more likely to achieve your original objectives successfully.

But de-prioritise it with under-resourcing, or mismatch the methodology to the problem at hand, and the foundation of change – people actually accepting the change and adjusting their work practices – will be riddled with cracks.

“All too often we forget that a solution delivered on time, on budget and to business requirements delivers zero value unless people adopt the change in their daily work,” says Catherine Smithson, Managing Director of change management firm Being Human.

As the name of her company suggests, Smithson believes that a focus on people is crucial for successful change management, a sentiment echoed by many involved in developing change management strategy.

Sound simple? Unfortunately, people are not machines. They are fickle and their habits hard to break, says Dr Lynda Bourne, a project management consultant and AIPM Fellow, and this means that reshaping an organisation’s culture to be more conducive to change requires a lot more work than most project managers realise.

Leh Simonelli agrees. “A lot of organisations fail in their change quest because, as Professor Paul Brown (Neuroscientist and co-author of New Science for New Leadership) says, the human brain is hardwired to actually prefer predictable patterns of behaviour,” Simonelli says.

Research is increasingly backing this up. “Change may ask people to develop new skills in a quest to change their behaviour,” says neuroscientist and co-founder of the NeuroLeadership Institute Dr David Rock. “Some may feel unable to do that [...] consequently the fear kicks in.”

Fear, of course, dramatically reduces motivation to undertake change. Dealing with this effectively is essential to project success, and may require what Bourne describes as ‘sensebreaking’, a deliberate strategy to undermine the current status quo. The aim is to destroy ingrained ways of thinking, interpreting information and managing the business. Bourne warns that once broken, they cannot be repaired.

A new strategy must immediately fill the void, she continues, and project managers play an important role in its longevity by identifying and encouraging early adopters to champion change.

“If you are working in projects in the long term you can try to do that,” says Simonelli. “But I take a slightly different approach. I get a sense of people, if they are in what...”
CHANGING CULTURES

Trice and Beyer offer eight essential considerations for implementing a change to an organisational culture.

1. Capitalise on propitious moments, for example poor financial performance, and make sure people actually perceive the need for change.

2. Combine caution with optimism. Create an optimistic but honest outlook regarding what the change effort will bring.

3. Understand resistance to culture change, both at the individual level (fear of the unknown, self-interest, selective attention and retention, habit, dependence, need for security) and at the organisational or group level (threats to power and influence, lack of trust, different perceptions and goals, social disruption, resource limitations, inter-organisational agreements).

4. Change many elements, but maintain some continuity, for example, identify the principles that will remain constant.

5. Recognise the importance of implementation. Initial acceptance and enthusiasm are insufficient to carry change forward:
   a. adoption
   b. implementation
   c. institutionalisation

6. Select, modify, and create appropriate cultural forms. Employing symbols, rituals, languages, stories, myths, metaphors, rites and ceremonies.

7. Modify socialisation tactics. The primary way that people learn the corporate culture is through the socialisation process at the beginning of their employment. Because of that, if these socialisation processes are changed, an organisation’s culture will begin to change.

8. Find and cultivate innovative leadership. Members are unlikely to give up whatever secure stability they derive from existing cultures and follow a leader in new directions unless that leader exudes self-confidence, has strong convictions and a dominant personality, and can preach the new vision with drama and eloquence.


"""TAKE CHANGE MANAGEMENT BEYOND INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS, INTO THE ORGANISATION AS A WHOLE"

Brown calls ‘survival mode’ or they are in ‘thrive mode’. There are going to be opponents and there are going to be promoters. The promoters understand the case for change and the vision, because you’ve communicated, you’ve engaged, you’ve entrusted.”

Back in the late 90s, the focus was on a parochial self-interest, the belief that people were concerned with the implications of change for themselves, rather than considering the success of the business or the organisation. Convincing people to accept change may actually be a more complex issue than mere self-interest though.

“I mainly find that resistance is about lack of engagement, misunderstanding, communication problems and inadequate information,” says Simonelli.

“That’s generally because the case for change and the correlation to the organisation’s vision is not communicated. We often don’t say, ‘this is why we are doing it.’”

Simonelli recalls turning around some absolute opponents; the key has been what he absolutely refuses to refer to as a ‘soft skill’ communication.

“I’ve dealt with people who are very difficult to deal with, but if you lay it all out and be sincere, communicate what’s happening and why it’s happening, the whole concept of engagement kicks in. They may not like it, but they trust you and know what they have to do and how to go about making the necessary changes.”

AIPM CEO Margie O’Tarpey agrees: clear and thought-out communication is the key. “You need to communicate, communicate, communicate to every level of the organisation,” she says. That communication needs to start at the top with sponsor and stakeholder buy-in.

O’Tarpey, who sees change management as falling within every project manager’s brief, says that stakeholder buy-in will determine the success or failure of any change project, and that successful change management involves firstly knowing why you want the change to occur. This vision must then be communicated to key stakeholders in order to get them on board. A change manager must know how to best communicate this methodology, which stakeholder is best to deliver this message and how this message could be received.

Not everybody is resistant to change, O’Tarpey notes. Early adopters often want change, but need a vision of how operations will improve and how it will best fit into the organisational culture. The change itself must not only translate into a positive outcome with tangible benefits, but also take into account the social and economic environment at the time.

Successful change management

Let’s think back to the motor vehicle industry during the early 1900s, when Ford conceptualised the theory of the production line. Previously, cars were manufactured individually, by hand, by
Time for the heavy lifting

Reshaping an organisation’s culture to be more conducive to change requires more work than most project managers realise, as well as a team working together.

a single craftsman, so Ford’s concept would completely revolutionise the industry and heavily impact the organisational culture. Initially, employees resisted this change due to such a large cultural shift, and some even left the organisation. But the results of this technique were so great that an increase in production occurred of almost eight to one.

Industries more susceptible to technological, social and economic change must constantly re-evaluate their internal processes. The automotive industry is no exception, with leading manufacturers in the current environment competing heavily in order to develop change. Increased operational efficiency and cost reduction are top of the list for many modern day manufacturers, and are considered essential in order to develop a competitive advantage over rivals.

Clearly communicating the ‘why’ of the change program meant that the majority of stakeholders, whether liking the change or not, accepted it as an inevitable and essential survival mechanism.

Success is also dependent upon whether a project manager chooses the right methodology to implement change, especially as change management methodologies are as varied as change projects. Trying to retro-fit a method to a project can lead to many failures associated, according to Smithson, who has seen projects in which a number of large, strategically important change programs are adopted by only two to 32 per cent of a business.

“It’s very expensive and time consuming to extend these projects to achieve a higher utilisation rate,” she explains, adding that investing in change management at the front end is more cost effective.

Long term, ensuring the failures are few and far between means change management and effective communication must be injected into an organisation’s DNA – a development that is slowly happening with the emergence of enterprise change management, Smithson says. This approach deploys change management skills and competencies throughout an organisation to increase its capacity for change and the value recovered from change projects.

“This means taking change management beyond individual projects, into the organisation as a whole” she adds.

O’Tarpey agrees with Smithson’s view, reflecting a growing acknowledgement at C-Level that a culture that embraces change has many operational and financial benefits.

DEALING WITH RESISTANCE

EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

Where there is a lack of information or inaccurate information and analysis, one of the best ways to overcome resistance to change is to inform and educate people about the change effort beforehand, or the case for change. This helps employees see the logic and reduces rumours.

PARTICIPATION AND INVOLVEMENT

Where the initiators do not have all the necessary information to design the change and where others have considerable power to resist, it is important to involve others. When employees are involved in the change effort they are less likely to resist it.

FACILITATION AND SUPPORT

Where people are resisting change because of adjustment problems, they may need more support.

The basis of resistance is likely the perception of detrimental effect occasioned by the change, so managerial support helping employees deal with fear and anxiety may prevent resistance.

NEGOTIATION AND AGREEMENT

Where someone or a group may lose out because of a change, and where that individual or group has considerable power to resist, managers can combat resistance by offering incentives. People who are resisting the change may be allowed to veto certain elements of change that are threatening, or the people who are resisting the change can be offered incentives to leave the company.

MANIPULATION AND CO-OPTATION

Where other tactics will not work or are too expensive, Kotter and Schlesinger suggest co-opting people who are resisting. Co-optation involves bringing leaders of the people who are resisting into a change management planning group for the sake of appearances rather than their substantive contribution. These leaders can be given a symbolic role in decision-making without threatening the change effort. If they feel that they are being tricked though, they may push resistance even further than if they were never included.

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT COERCION

Where speed is essential, and only as a last resort, managers can explicitly or implicitly force employees into accepting change by making clear that resistance can lead to jobs losses, dismissals, employee transfers or non-promotion periods.