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TOP TIPS FOR MANAGING CHANGE

Managing change is a key requirement of any professional manager. After all, change is an enduring and even essential part of life at work. It isn't just that the world around us is changing fast, whether we like or not, but organisations *need* change, if only to make things better. Nothing improves by staying the same.

So managing change is key to any continuous improvement programme, profit-enhancement initiative or personal development plan. As the mantra goes, *"If we always do what we always did, we shall always get what we always got".* So the need to embrace change is essential for any business and its workforce.

But you have probably already noticed that very few of us *welcome* change, unless of course it was our idea! Very few people actually like having 'change' done *to* them.

Here are some thoughts that may help any manager implement change more effectively in their own organisation – perhaps one of the most difficult professional challenges we may ever face.

Part 1 starts with recognising some of the obstacles and suggests ten basic requirements.

Part 2 offers some further handy tips.

Part 1 – Recognising the Obstacles

What sort of change do we face?

In seeking to implement change, it is important to recognise that there are many different types of 'change' - and not all circumstances will need the same approach.

For example, the need for change may be:

- <u>overt and predictable</u> (examples might be increasing longevity in an increasingly health-conscious society, or the progressive decrease in demand for routine postal services); or <u>covert and insidious</u> - the 'boiled frog' syndrome – change is happening slowly but no-one really wants to acknowledge it. (For example, employee aspirations and work-ethics are subtly changing and traditional employment practices may no longer reflect current needs; or the costs of running a car are steadily rising but we continue to prefer to drive to work rather than consider other means of transport.)

- <u>local or global</u> – some 'change-management' issues can be universal, across the whole organisation. But often, they are very localised, even if they may be accompanied by the thought: *"Let everyone else change, but not me!".* Separating local issues from corporate issues can be all-critical for successful change.

Managing change can also have many other dynamics to consider. For example, is the desired change:

- <u>Major</u> or <u>minor</u>? – is the change worth 'dying in a ditch for', or just 'nice to have'?

- <u>Strategic or tactical</u>? – will it be long-range or short-term?

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- Structural (encompassing whole organisational-change perhaps) or specific, whether departmental or even individual? (A significant role-change may exemplify the latter?)

- Systemic and procedural; or cultural and even ideological? Should you be embracing first your colleagues' 'minds' or their 'hearts', do you think; and might they be demanding social change or personal change?

- Voluntary or imposed? The best changes may be voluntarily agreed – where everyone sees the need; but some changes may have to be imposed;

- Facilitated or coerced? Even imposed changes can be facilitated - and negotiated; although few coerced changes seem to work well without damaging side-effects that may take years to work through. What will your preference be?

Sorting out all these characteristics of change can be essential in deciding your best way forward.

Why is change so hard to implement?

Understanding *why* successful change may be so difficult to implement is critical. If you aren't sure of the reasons for change, you may always be unsure of the best solutions.

Many of the most common causes for change-management projects going horribly wrong, at many levels, seems to be founded on deeply-held beliefs and attitudes amongst those affected. They may variously include any or all of the following. How many of the following typical responses to change do you recognise?

Here are twenty. I'll bet you can think of more!

- The current way is fine – don't spoil it!;
- We've never done that before – don't let's start now!;
- I have heard of others doing this – it doesn't work you know;
- It's not what we agreed <ages ago?>;
- We have always done it this way and things work perfectly well as they are;
- We have spent loads of time/money/emotion/commitment in learning to do things *this* way; have we really got to learn a new way all over again?
- Change isn't necessary (at least for us);
- No-one else does it this way;
- We tried this before, and it didn't work then;
- It's a great idea – but not just now, we haven't got time;
- It's a great idea for others, but not for us – we're different;
- This change is only for your benefit, not mine/ours;
- I don't believe you;
- I don't trust you;
- You didn't warn me and I need more time to think about this;
- I'll bet my solution is better, but you haven't asked me for it;
- I don't think I can change without a lot of help (are you trying to get rid of me?);
- It isn't 'fair' - it goes against all our values/agreements;
- Not another change! How long is this one going to last before the next bright idea?
- We've had so many changes, we haven't had time to digest the last ones yet!

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Ten basic requirements for change

Managing change requires many critical elements to be successful, not the least to address some of the underlying attitudes listed above. They include:

1. **A clear purpose, objectives and benefits.**
    You and your senior management team need to be clear about these to achieve what you want and to track progress. But so also does everyone else that change may affect!

2. **Shared vision, values, standards, principles.**
    If you are going to implement change successfully throughout an organisation with integrity, these are vital.

3. **Tangible drive, enthusiasm and energy, with consistent and coherent leadership.**
    Successful change-management requires huge and co-ordinated forces to overcome organisational inertia, and above all, leadership from the top. It is not to be delegated!

4. **Clear, frequent and unclouded communications, in all directions.**
    Most change is greeted with scepticism: why me?, why now?, why this? These sort of issues can only be productively resolved by regular, open and frequent discussion. Not the least because coerced change rarely last for long.

5. **Trust and mutual respect, with some shared positive experiences together.**
    Trust is rarely won over-night, but it can be helped by all the above, and some quick easy wins that are good for all before embarking on more difficult matters.

6. **Capability, information, skills and knowledge.**
    One of the most frequent reasons for resisting change is that it will require new skills that may seem beyond our grasp. Investing in these skills and demonstrating positive results may be amongst the most beneficial investments an organisation may ever make.

7. **Acknowledgment of the past**.
    Another important reason for resisting change is an adherence to how things used to be. If you had spent 10 years of your life or more doing things 'this way', presumably you believed that was because it was the 'right way'. And it may have been, then. Acknowledging the past may be an essential psychological step to take before people can bear to move on and adopt new ways.

8. **Transition-time to let people 'grieve for the past' before moving on.**
    Research shows that embracing change is very similar to going through the familiar stages of grief on the loss of a loved on. First denial, often anger, and then resistance and then even rejection, as in 'it can't possibly be true!', 'it can't be happening!', or even, 'it may be happening, but surely not to me!'. Accordingly step 7 above requires a very subtle and yet critical phase – allowing those affected by change to grieve for the past. Don't rush it?

9. **Successes which are acknowledged and rewarded.**
    Change for change's sake alone, without very good and credible reason, soon produces cynicism and resistance. So don't under play sincere acknowledgement and reward for progress made, which most certainly doesn't have to be financial - it may well 'only' need to be peer-group appreciation.

10. **Leaders who give the spotlight and credit to others**.
    Nobody likes a 'leader' who takes the credit for others' efforts. Be sure you don't!

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Part 2 – 10 Top Tips

Managing change is an essential part of any manager's role. Making improvements without change are clearly not possible. But deep change is rarely achieved without a sound understanding all the dynamics involved in the sort of change you want to achieve, and the probable obstacles you may face, as we discussed above. So here are some essential tips that may help you further.

1. **Establish trust**
    It is, self-evidently, very hard to introduce deep change in any organisation where mistrust abounds. In smaller organisations, this trust may often be presumed, not the least because distinctions between organisational hierarchies and differing ambitions can often be minimal. And with fewer people, it may often be much easier to deliver change collaboratively.

    But as organisations grow, this becomes much harder. So, well before you ever choose to embark on any major programme of change, build, believe and behave, as follows!

2. **Build, Believe and Behave…**
    The essence of achieving deep change in any organisation is a) to build clear agreement by all of its core mission and purpose, with an appealing vision of the future that all can aspire to, with core values that all can espouse in practice which will guide all management decisions and communications; b) to believe in these passionately; and c) to behave utterly consistently in support of them.

    In particular, for these values to be at all credible, management behaviour must be coherent, consistent and applicable to all, without exception, and most certainly not be 'just fine words'. This is a leadership challenge, to offer clear and unambiguous behaviours as exemplars to others with consistent and demonstrable conviction. This can be a demanding challenge, because leaders are always 'on stage', always in view of their colleagues, and your colleagues will be the first to spot and deride any inconsistencies.

    Any senior manager can inadvertently kill any change programme stone dead by a misguided throw-away comment or negative body-language, far quicker than almost anything else. So forewarned may well be forearmed!

3. **Change <u>must</u> be driven from the top.**
    The reasons for change may be internal or (often) external, and may apply to any part of an organisation. But accountability for the actual management of change must always stay with those at 'the top'. You can be sure that if a senior management team does not believe in the reasons for change and the changes proposed, first of all these changes will almost certainly not be implemented, and secondly, any change on the next occasion will be even harder to achieve.

    This does *not* mean that senior management must take all the decisions, let alone do all the work! It is very important to devolve responsibility for detailed change to whoever may best discharge it at the point of delivery. But the senior management task is to make sure that agreed initiatives are properly supported, that the requisite resources are made available, to keep track of progress, to help resolve any problems and remove obstacles, and provide acknowledgement of others' successes.

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4. **Establish teams of local Change-Champions**
    Few like having change 'done' to them, and change should certainly not be imposed if it can possibly be helped. A very powerful tip is to set up and empower local Change Champions to help plot and deliver specific parts of the overall change programme. And if you can, do encourage them to seek some quick, easy gains early on, to help build momentum?

    It is important your Champions have clear remits and are properly supported with training and funds if needed. It is often best if your Champions can volunteer for this work of their own free will, but you do need them to be quite knowledgeable about 'how things work' at the moment – both good and bad – and preferably be seen to be opinion-leaders within their peer-groups. Interestingly, some of the very best change champions can be those who may strike you as being amongst the most change-resistant – as there can be nothing so powerful as a 'poacher turned gamekeeper'!

5. **Plot where you are now**
    Before you change anything that is at all radical, you will need to recognise just where you are already, most especially in terms of your colleagues' own understanding and attitudes. Regular surveys of employee attitudes and your organisation's overall culture will not only help you to avoid 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater' when it comes to implementing such change; they will also help you to monitor and manage progress in times of change and no doubt deep uncertainty.

    Most especially, you will want to survey your colleagues' own fears and aspirations about their workplace, their own ideas of what works well and what needs to improve, and probably even what drives and rewards them. As these are inevitably quite sensitive questions to ask many workforces, any survey may well raise both genuine concerns that will need to be addressed corporately, and even some 'special pleading' of vested interests that must of course be acknowledged locally - that may not perhaps influence far wider matters.

    Such exploration will almost certainly require the guarantee of individual confidentiality and impartial feedback to your respondents, and of course mutual trust. So conduct such surveys regularly and ethically as a matter of good practice, in confidence, preferably long before any major change is actually necessary, and feed back the aggregated results honestly so they have credibility and integrity.

6. **Change needs a reason**
    The prime difficulty with managing change is that too many colleagues may see no good reason to abandon what may appear to them to work perfectly well already. *'If it ain't broke – why fix it'* might well be their motto. (And if they have been around in the same organisation for a while, almost certainly they will have experienced plenty of new ideas before that *didn't* make things better!) So in implementing change, it is vital to have every good reason why it is necessary, and why maintaining the *status quo* is not an option.

    However, as many of us may only listen selectively to what we really wanted to hear when given such explanations, there are two other ancillary steps you also may find particularly helpful if you can help these come alive:
    a) make sure that colleagues really do experience that the old world is actually *less* attractive than they might think it to be;
    b) make sure their new world is as *more* attractive for them to live in as you can.

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7. **Communicate these reasons!**
Whatever the planned change, small or large, never assume 'overpowering logic' and the reasons for it (such as "it's great for us", or even "it's great for you") will persuade your troops of its benefits alone. You will need to appeal to both their hearts and their minds!

So a good place to start is with your organisation's avowed Mission, Vision and Values. Having communicated these consistently with passion, from the top, make sure they are fully understood and that your colleagues know what these mean to them, in practice. And note? First, this communication must be two-way, not just top-down; and secondly, it should be regular, consistent and often.

8. **Acknowledge the past**
It is important to recognise that most people have a great emotional engagement with how they have done things in the past, often with great pride, and this is especially so for those who feel they have no control over any changes being proposed. Asking them to change can be a huge emotional wrench, not the least because it can suggest a sense of futility of all their past hard work, and raise great concerns for the unknown future.

Identifying, recognising and dealing openly with historic barriers to change in your organisation is critical. Some concerns may appear to be quite irrational, and then appealing to reason is most unlikely to work. But ignoring them is also most unlikely to be very productive either. What you can and should do, is to *acknowledge* these concerns, even if the reasons that created them may be buried long in the past.

9. **Build a transition phase into your change-programme**
Because responses to change can so often be emotionally driven, especially for long-standing colleagues, a very powerful aid is to consider allowing a grieving period to value the past as part of a transition phase, before changing to the new.   A short amount of time invested here may save much more time in resentment and resistance later on.

10. **Reward change**
Finally, acknowledge successes regularly (for nothing succeeds like success!) and give others the credit. This does not necessarily mean you need to offer financial rewards for success – and often you may feel you shouldn't. But you can at least offer non-financial rewards, such as peer recognition however delivered, increased security, promotion and much more. But do beware of the impact on others who may not be included?

Successful change-management does not happen over-night, and requires careful planning, a lot of talking and listening, and some very clear objectives. I wish you all good fortune!

This article was first published by the Daily Telegraph Business Club.

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