

People aspects of change

From the primacy of people to the critical importance of communication, from the opportunities to challenge and improve accepted ways of doing things to the dangers of stress, Dr Richard Kwiatkowski, Senior Lecturer in Organisational Psychology at the Cranfield School of Management, shares his insights on change – the emotions that surround and drive it and how to make it a success.

What does good change look like to you?

Change involves both processes and people. However some organisations find the change to processes occupies their minds and energy, while naively assuming that the people aspect will take care of itself. For change to be a success, people in the organisation must be continuously involved; there should be no big surprises; communication needs to be targeted; support needs to be in place; any new skills and incentives need to be deliberately addressed.

This relates to the universal human need for respect and makes good business sense. Who can possibly believe that an unhappy workforce could provide sustainable competitive advantage over the long-term? Who could possibly believe that disgruntled receptionists, angry waiters, disillusioned cooks, and a depressed manager would make for an excellent meal in a restaurant?

Change can be uncomfortable, but accidental discomfort – for example through not communicating clearly or early enough - should be minimised. Sometimes an organisation just has to change and this can be a good opportunity to challenge people. This can best be done through a shared problem-solving approach. In life-threatening situations command and control is effective, but organizational dictatorship is a very primitive leadership style.

Organisations that are able to change well will often do so around shared values. People have a choice - whether to work for an organisation, and how much effort put to put in. We can often sense if an organisation is vibrant or in decline; if there is a spirit of cooperation and comradeship and 'all hands to the pump' or if it's 'every man for himself'. People can be physically present but mentally absent. It is only with highly motivated teams working together for a common purpose that organisational change can be successful.

What are the emotions that typically surround change?

There is always an emotional loading around change. It is very hard to be emotionally neutral when things are changing around you. For people in an organisation who have not been part of the process, change can be particularly problematic. It is often the middle that needs to be attended to. So while a new method of stacking shelves using different-sized cages may be easy to absorb by people on a supermarket shop floor, the consequent changes to logistics, ordering, storage, training and so forth may cause initial dismay among branch managers.

Where customer demand is changing, where global competition is increasing, where a new management team has been brought in, or losses declared, intellectually, most people can understand that change is important or necessary. But emotionally the uncertainty that change creates can be unsettling and frightening to some. For others the status quo is boring and they seek change. But for those people who are aware that their status, autonomy and income is linked to the situation as it is, the prospect of change can be frightening. So you have to engage and win over not just the head but also the heart.

People at senior levels in an organisation may forget that they went through confusion and doubt in the initial phases of the proposed change. Six months or a year is a long time to remember exactly how you felt at the beginning of the process; few senior managers take the valuable step of keeping journals and examining their emotions in a systematic way during times of change. So while there may be waves of uncertainty rippling through an organisation, those in the middle of the pond have forgotten that they landed with a splash a while back. They caused ripples, but because the centre, for them, is now relatively calm they forget. Indeed they may be heading forward to the next period of change, little realising that those earlier waves are still causing smaller boats to wobble, and some to be swamped.

How do you manage the emotions?

Organisations ultimately are all about people – shareholders, customers, employees. The human factor is critical in organisations, and yet the machine metaphor favoured by so much of western thinking suggests that people are replaceable cogs in a machine. But if people feel like this during the process of change it is likely that stress levels will rise, sickness absence will increase, and efficiency may be affected.

Organisations need to ensure the psychological safety of those people working within them. They owe a duty of care to their staff, including paying attention to and managing stress. Safety executives have copies of guidelines about stress; and the issue of stress at work is increasingly recognised as both an individual and national concern.

So involving people is critical. People need time; they want information; they search for meaning. In a time of change you simply cannot over-communicate. Ensure that any consultation is real, Be upfront and honest; if you are simply going to inform people then simply inform them, and if every single person in the organisation says 'we knew that already' or 'we made those changes' then your communication has succeeded. So as well as delivering external messages to various stakeholders, analysts or the press, make internal communication a priority in a time of change.

Can we live without change?

Change has always been part of our lives. Change is challenging. The Kubler-Ross curve, initially applied to people who are dying, frames change as a process of denial, anger, depression, acceptance and finally recovery.

The type and pace of change is critical. If we have change after change superimposed on us we can find ourselves in a downward spiral; stress is often a consequence of change that is outside our control. In the 1960s Holmes and Rae came up with the notion of life change units; if things change in your life and, crucially, this can be for the good or ill, this has physiological and psychological consequences. So for example getting married is a stressful event but it is not generally as stressful as serious illness; taking an exam or driving test cannot be compared with the death of a family member, and so on. Change can have a cumulative effect, and studies have shown that as the number of life change units increases over a six to 18 month period so an individual's susceptibility to illness or accident increases – studies show that you are more likely to get a common cold, and if you play sports you are more likely to be injured. Some people do not realise that they are becoming stressed. There can be a slow accumulation of stresses. An organisation needs to be very careful in a period of change to take care of its people, and to notice some of the tell-tale signs of increasing stress levels.

Why does change go wrong?

The plan or strategy may be wrong. On the other hand, people as well as organisations have inertia; even if they know that they need to change it can be very slow and difficult to accept and implement. Human beings create habits, follow routines, recognise patterns and act on them. That's a huge strength and limits the amount of neural processing that has to go on. But by the same token, once these pathways have been laid down in the brain they are quite difficult to shift. In evolutionary terms this makes sense; once you have learnt to hunt you wish to continue this successful strategy. To be

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told that now you have to farm means questioning all sorts of fundamental assumptions, and at a more fundamental level involves rewiring. And that isn't easy.

What's the key to getting it right?

My view as a psychologist is that people are absolutely fundamental to any sort of organisational change. People should be treated with respect; they should be trusted to find good and effective ways of implementing strategy and policy; they should be provided with training, skills and support; there should be an understanding that different people will react differently to the change process; that the emotional and unconscious aspects of change should be acknowledged and worked with rather than denied or suppressed; that political aspects should be acknowledged and worked with; that an understanding of stakeholder positions should be incorporated; that openness should be modelled and exhibited; that communication should be prevalent; that problems should be treated as legitimate rather than as a sign of an individual being a naysayer; that participation and co-operation should be the order of the day.

This all helps in managing and minimising the stress that surrounds change – enabling stress inoculation by making the upcoming events and associated emotions clear to people so they are better prepared and less worried before, during and after change. Simply knowing that the change will last a finite length of time, that it will pass, makes it more bearable. Just as in a sea voyage if you're feeling seasick, knowing that you have an hour to go before you reach dry land is reassuring and makes the journey bearable. If you do not know how long you will be on the boat and how long you'll carry on feeling queasy, the process becomes much more stressful. So it is helpful for individuals to know that the changes will naturally be stop-start, not smooth, sometimes bumpy and anxiety inducing, sometimes exciting, but that they will be finite, that the change journey will have an end – a shared destination, a new steady state, that everyone can head towards. This can be a welcome destination, and a relief if it is based on shared values and a shared positive future.



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