The secret of successful change

The huge disruption of COVID19 presents an almost unstoppable driver of change to which all organisations need to respond. This could range from a relatively straightforward system change in one part of your business through to a highly complex and critical change across your whole organisation.

Whatever the change, you don't want it to leave a nasty taste in your mouth, not to mention a big bill with little to show for it.

So what's the secret of successful change? Simple. Root it in the achievement of real, tangible business benefits. Let a robust business case guide your change, not just at the outset but throughout the journey as you prepare your business, lead the way, equip your people and create real ownership.

Good change

What does good change look like? Good change always has to be about the realisation of tangible business benefits. Why are you doing this? What ultimately are you trying to achieve? If you haven't asked and answered these questions, hold fire on change or else you'll no doubt end up spending a great deal of time, effort and money to little good effect.

No matter how tempting the new idea, no matter how enticing the methodology, change for change's sake is never a good thing. You have to make sure you clarify, articulate and agree the hard benefits of change at the outset.

Seeing and believing

You have to start with a clear sense of where you're heading and why you're heading there. A robust business case should always be the prerequisite of change. It's your passport to change and like all passports you need to keep it with you as you go – referring back to it at key stages to make sure the business benefits you have set can still be achieved and to explore whether there are additional benefits to be gained. It's a good idea to make sure you plan these revisits in upfront. So the business case comes before the change. But what of the change itself? What form and shape does it typically take? What path does it follow? What's its story?
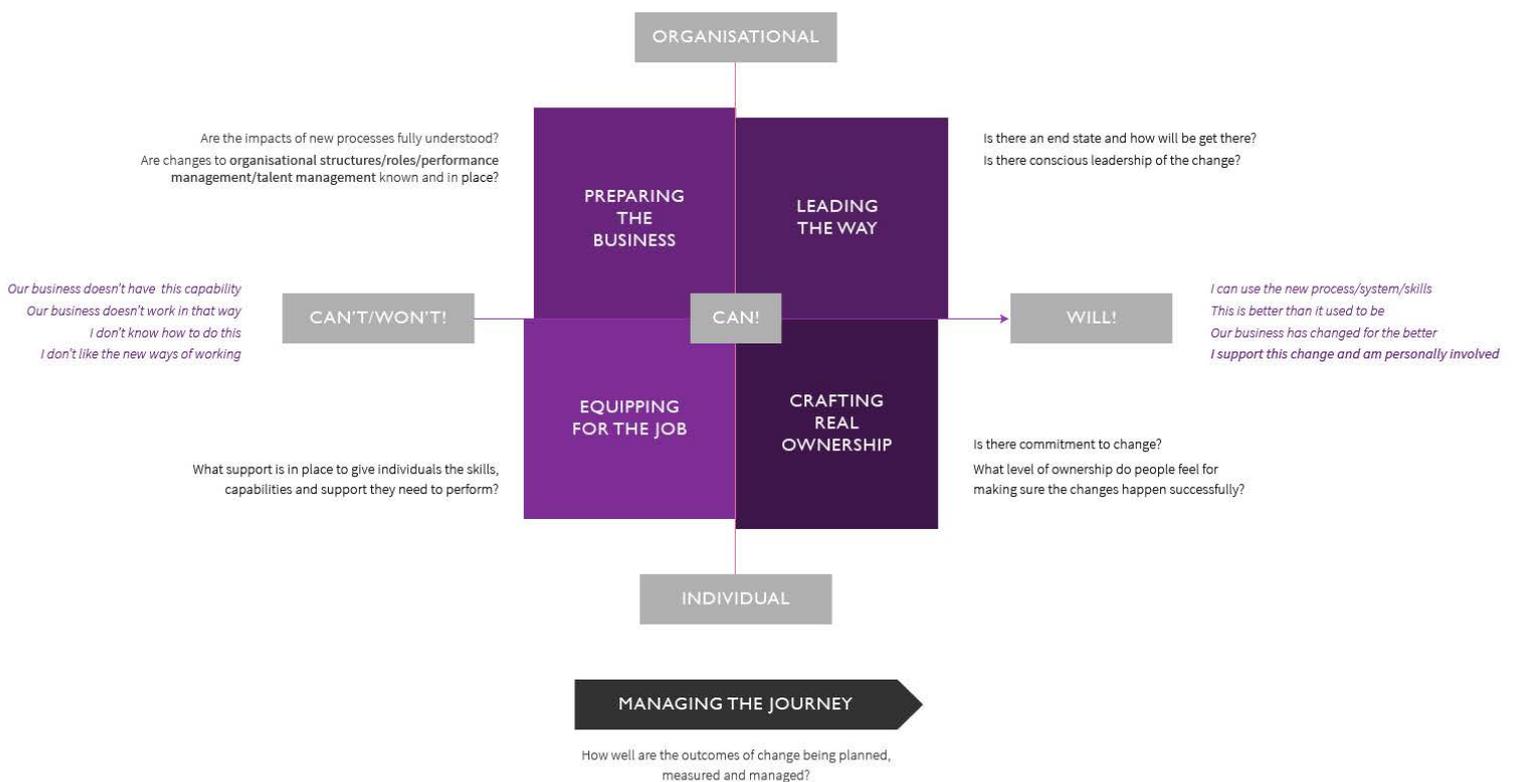
The change journey

To get a handle on what needs to happen, it helps to ask yourself two key questions: What will people have to see or do that's different from today for the change to be deemed a success? And what will people have to believe? Spending time up front to gain precise and practical answers on both counts pays dividends further down the line.

It also pays to see change as a journey from 'I can't or I won't' to 'I can', 'I want to' and, crucially, on to 'I will'. Once you understand what will need to be different round here and what it might take to get all the way to "will", you have the insights from which to put together a journey that above all engages people, changing their attitudes and emotions along the way. A journey that is managed by focusing on four key areas at each and every stage: preparing the business, leading the way, equipping people for the job, and creating real ownership. One which always ties back to the key benefits which are the reason for changing in the first place.

From can't to can to will…

MANAGING THE DIMENSIONS OF CHANGE

ORGANISATIONAL

Are the impacts of new processes fully understood?
Are changes to **organisational structures/roles/performance management/talent management** known and in place?

Is there an end state and how will be get there?
Is there conscious leadership of the change?

PREPARING THE BUSINESS

LEADING THE WAY

Our business doesn't have this capability
Our business doesn't work in that way
I don't know how to do this
I don't like the new ways of working

CAN'T/WON'T!

CAN!

WILL!

I can use the new process/system/skills
This is better than it used to be
Our business has changed for the better
I support this change and am personally involved

EQUIPPING FOR THE JOB

CRAFTING REAL OWNERSHIP

What support is in place to give individuals the skills, capabilities and support they need to perform?

Is there commitment to change?
What level of ownership do people feel for making sure the changes happen successfully?

INDIVIDUAL

MANAGING THE JOURNEY

How well are the outcomes of change being planned, measured and managed?

Managing emotions

Many change programmes end with an implementation, for example of a new HR system. But this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. It is more like the messy middle. Clearly, just because people can turn on a new system doesn't mean they will embrace and enjoy making the most of it. You have to go further – focusing on embedding a genuine sense of buy-in and emotional ownership of the change.

This is all the more critical when you consider that at the very point of implementation, attitudes and emotions are often at their lowest ebb. It's the point at which people are faced with the change actually happening, when they may well still have uncertainties and reservations despite all your best efforts to prepare the ground for and with them.

It's akin to the 'valley of despair' highlighted in the diagram. The imperative clearly is to recognise that this is all just a natural part of the journey and keep on going, like a marathon runner hitting their wall and running on through it.
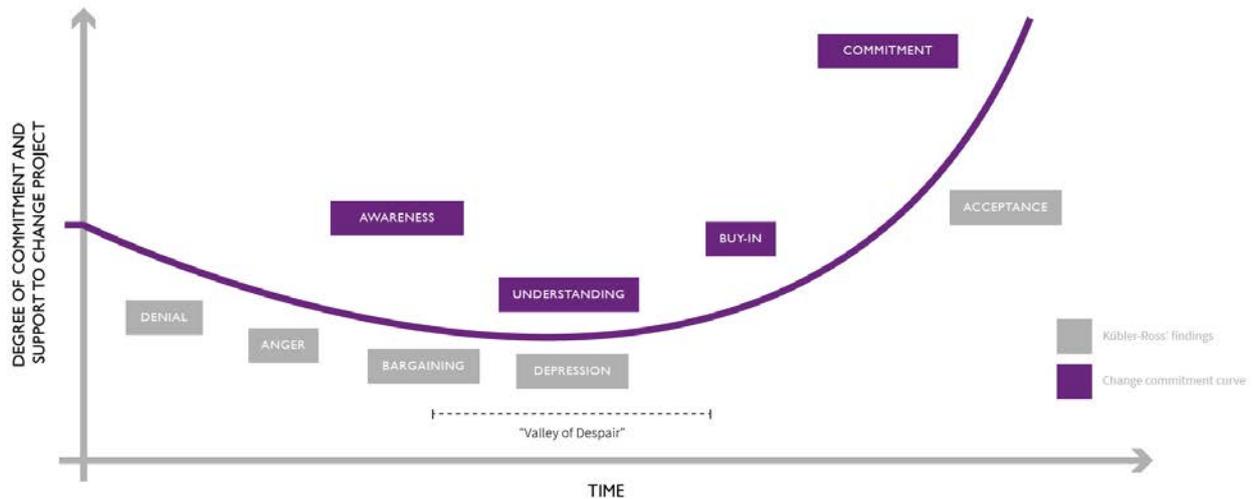
Advancing through the valley of despair

POSITIONING CHANGE: ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS - THE CHANGE COMMITMENT CURVE

The key to successfully navigating change is to "manage the journey" - viewing change as a journey rather than an event

The Change Commitment Curve shows how change can be perceived as a journey and how the level of commitment to a change project can vary over time. This is founded in research by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.

DEGREE OF COMMITMENT AND SUPPORT TO CHANGE PROJECT

COMMITMENT

AWARENESS

ACCEPTANCE

BUY-IN

DENIAL

ANGER

UNDERSTANDING

BARGAINING

DEPRESSION

Kübler-Ross' findings

Change commitment curve

"Valley of Despair"

TIME

Awareness
The introduction of change often causes a drop in business, individual or stakeholder performance.

Understanding
As stakeholders transition into a change, they may dip into the "Valley of Despair" where there is resistance to the new ways of doing things.

Buy-in
As the change project progresses, stakeholders will come to accept and buy-in to the changes and new ways of doing things.

Commitment
Following buy-in, the stakeholder commits to the new change and there is an acceptance that this will be the future, continued way of doing things.

It's OK to flex

Particularly when you're dealing with big, complex change, it's important to understand that the journey will be neither neat nor straight. That's simply unrealistic. You prepare well and keep an agreed destination of business benefits in mind, but you also have to be ready to weave and wiggle, to flex and adapt as you go.

So how do you bring some much needed rigour to the journey? This is where an appreciation of the four key areas and how they play out across the journey is particularly helpful.

As you'll see in the diagram, all four areas are important throughout the journey but at different points you turn the volume up on one or more of the areas to keep the change flowing and build ever greater momentum behind it.

In and around that critical messy middle stage of implementation for example, it's good to reintroduce a greater emphasis on senior folk leading the way. By stepping back in and reconfirming the commitment and the good reasons to press on with the change, leaders can help to minimise any last minute pre go-live worries and wobbles.

Adapting your emphasis across the key stages of change

THE CHALLENGE IS TO TAKE THE CRITICAL ACTIONS AT JUST THE RIGHT TIME…

… to minimise performance downturns and maximize benefit achievement:

Phase 1

MOBILISE

Focus:

Size the change challenge
Map the journey – milestones and benefits
Place the change in the context of other initiatives
Visible sponsorship and strategy
Communicate rationale and potential impacts
Mobilise the change team

Phase 2

DESIGN

Focus:

Identify executive sponsors
Communicate the journey
Define the change enablers
Develop the detailed change plan

Phase 3

PREPARE

Focus:

Manage and communicate progress
Build deeper involvement
Operational readiness
Training and Capability Development

Phase 4

IMPLEMENT

Focus:

Ensure adoption of new behaviours and attitudes
Measure uptake
Communicate successes
Transition to 'Business As Usual'

Phase 5

BUSINESS AS USUAL

Focus:

Embed new behaviours and attitudes
Drive benefits realisation and continual improvement
Drive benefit realisation

A critical combination

So the art of good change is to start by making sure you have a clear sense of where you want to get to, rooted in hard business benefits. You then need to combine this clarity with project management rigour to keep you focused on getting there together with the willingness to flex and adapt as you go – taking people on a journey of change from can't to can to will. Ultimately to success.

Find out more about our change management consultancy work.

Strike the right balance

Executives who ask for help to turnaround a failing project or programme often state that they lose confidence in its management because they do not trust what they are hearing in the board meetings. This loss of trust can be caused by presenting the board with a rosy picture of progress when, in fact, the project or programme is actually really struggling to make headway. It is human nature to be positive and optimism bias is just as much a threat to accurate status reporting and sound decision-making as it is to realistic project estimating and planning. That said, the opposite end of the spectrum is not a healthy place to be, either. Some governance bodies become so closely entwined with the day-to-day management of a project or programme thanks to the hair-trigger escalation of all issues and risks, however big or small, as soon as they surface. The trick is to strike the right balance by being open and clear with all attendees on whether they would appreciate early notification of issues and risks or whether they would rather just focus on interventions and escalations that they are required to decide upon or execute.

Summary points:

- Be conscious of the pitfalls of both optimism bias and raising the alarm too early as both can be damaging to the success of your project or programme.
- Agree the balance stakeholders want to strike between gaining early visibility of risks and issues and only being told when there is a problem that requires escalation.

Be prepared to change as required

Businesses these days rarely stand still and nor should the good governance of your project or programme. Whether driven by a significant change or simply by things not quite working as well as you'd hoped, do not be afraid to make changes to the governance arrangements that will help to improve the chances of your project or programme succeeding. Such changes could include the Chair, attendees, agenda, meeting frequency, meeting duration, purpose and terms of reference.

And finally, as soon as a governance body has served its purpose and ceases to add value, stop it in a controlled and constructive way that allows for it to be restarted if needed. That way, you'll free up valuable resources for other investments and tasks.

Summary points:

- Change aspects of the governance as and when required.
- Bring it to an end when it has served its purpose.