



Five steps to effective change

The key to achieving change management is common sense, tenacity, planning and last but not definitely not least, understanding human behaviour, says ROBERT WASSON

Bookshops are full of learned tomes on how to approach organisational change, and new theories on change management seem to emerge every other month. The typical senior executive has little enough time to manage the day-to-day business, let alone trying to make his or her way through a forest of methodologies and approaches.

Theoretical frameworks and approaches certainly have value, but when one looks at actual situations where organisational change has worked, there are a few essentials which have made it so. Mostly, it's about common sense, tenacity, planning and – last but not definitely not least – understanding human behaviour.

The steps outlined below do not pretend to be anything more than a

distilling of long experience of real-life situations – and are no doubt less elegantly stated than the management gurus would like – but they work!

STEP 1: UNDERSTAND WHAT NEEDS TO BE CHANGED

This is not as easy as it sounds. Several years ago a bus company in the US had issues with falling revenues and

customer numbers. Management reckoned the solution was getting closer to their customers, using sophisticated customer relationship management processes and systems, offering discounts to frequent travellers, and so on. The real problem was that their buses weren't clean and were rarely on time – so customers travelled with the competition. Management saw the illness, but not the root cause.

What's the lesson? Take time to look deeper into your company's issues. If your profitability is suffering, what exactly is driving this? There is anecdotal evidence of poor motivation among staff – but what's the reality? "Gut feel" is an essential part of management – but you need to back it up with some diagnosis and fact before investing in any significant change process.

STEP 2: CLEARLY DEFINE THE CHANGE PROCESS

You now know what the basic need is. The next step is to define this in detail, and how you will achieve it. It isn't enough to say "we need to improve the sales function". What exactly does this mean? Does remuneration structure need changed? Should sales territories be re-drawn? Are people's role descriptions appropriate? Do you need a new sales system?

Usually there is more than one dimension to change – for example if you change business strategy, a structural change may well be needed. If a new IT system is introduced, it may also impact the structure, and training will usually be required. Think about the key dimensions of your organisation – strategy, structure, people, culture, performance measures, technology, and processes. Make the change holistic, otherwise the result will be like a two-legged stool.

Think about the speed of change. If your business is under threat, it needs to be fast. On the other hand, rapid change can sometimes destabilise a company. Too long a process can result in "change fatigue", and the organisation can also become too introspective. Think about

your company, your situation – what feels right?

Define a clear action plan - what will happen, when? What are the linkages between the various actions? Who is responsible for what? Think about the risks – what can go wrong? How will you deal with it? How should you monitor progress? What does success look like?

STEP 3: RESOURCE THE PROCESS PROPERLY

This is one of the great challenges in managing change – you need to involve your best people directly in the change process – but by definition, because they deliver, you can't risk releasing them from the ongoing business. The unavoidable truism is that, for change to be effective, some of your best managers must be directly involved in managing the process. Consultants can help, but they cannot do it all.

Think about how you can work round this. Perhaps the manager doesn't have to work full-time on the change process – although if you take the part-time approach, make sure that the time spent on normal duties doesn't creep back up over the duration of the process. Think about ways in which some of the manager's duties can be delegated to others. Maybe this can even be an opportunity to develop more junior staff. One final point – remember the old adage "availability is not a skill-set". Think about what you need from a manager working on a change programme – usually they need well rounded skills and attributes such as technical know-how, people management skills, understanding of the organisation, drive and enthusiasm. Ideally they should also be well regarded in the organisation (not the same thing as being popular!).

STEP 4: PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR PEOPLE

There's no easy way to put this: if you don't take account of the people aspects of change, it won't work. The psychology of change is quite well

understood, and again there are some basic principles which need to be followed.

Firstly, people need to understand why the change is necessary – often referred to as the case for change. If you can't make a convincing case to the people in your organisation, maybe you should ask yourself if you yourself fully understand the reasons. However, getting people to understand the change at a rational level is only the start – you also need to recognise two other aspects of peoples' concerns. There is the political dimension – "What does this mean for my power base? Who will the winners and losers be?". Lastly there is the emotional – "I'm not sure I like what this place is becoming".

Recognise that there will be resistance. This is not only natural; it is healthy, once you work through it. Think about the key people you need on board. Who will help the change, oppose it, or just stand by and do nothing? How can you convert an opponent into a supporter? It isn't always possible – sometimes hard decisions are needed, but decisions which will be better for all in the longer term.

STEP 5: LEAD FROM THE TOP

Consultants invariably advise their clients that senior level "sponsorship" is needed, and clients invariably agree. The reality is often different. Make sure that you and your senior team are actively involved. If it's appropriate for the change process to affect senior management themselves, all to the good – and do it early in the process.

On a final note – many companies are now finding that change for them needs to be more a state of being than a once-off event – the Japanese concept of Kaizen (continuous improvement) is one way of looking at this. Maybe you need to think about moving your company towards this kind of mind set. As the old saying goes, "constant change is here to stay"!

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