Insight

Change Dreamers

Paul Davies

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Change Managers need to admit just how messy change is – P. Davies

King Canute[1] was a Change Management Consultant

When a family moves home, actions, dates and checklists can be made and the various stakeholders can generally be relied upon to stick to the script. It could be said, in fact, that the change from one house to another can be managed reasonably precisely.

However, extend the concept to changing from one set of beliefs to another, which is often at the core of business Transformation, and the idea of being able to manage the change seems quaint at best, and downright dangerous at worst.

In fact, in the absence of Totalitarian apparatus, the notion that something affecting the way people think can be 'managed' is not too far removed from the idea that the tide can be 'managed'.

Warning to the Unwary

On the other hand, changing organisations by letting chaos reign and praying that when the dust settles a new dimension of highly motivated employees will have emerged is not a recipe for success either. Most change needs a plan, and identifying stakeholders, conducting an impact assessment, addressing buy-in and communicating the vision etc are valid and necessary interventions.

Change Management theory, therefore, serves as a warning to the unwary that organisation change cannot be left to its own devices.

However, it does us a disservice when it claims to direct, orchestrate, pre-determine or manufacture change.

Nature or Nurture

A key problem for Change Managers is that the research of successful transformation rarely distinguishes between happy circumstance and cause.

For example, where there is, say, a pending bankruptcy, an urgent need for change exists, and if such an urgent need for change exists, a transformation effort is more likely to be successful. However, presumably one doesn't bankrupt a company in order to rescue it with a change programme. The circumstances, therefore, conspire to create a need for change that a Change Manager cannot sensibly recreate.

Stakeholder 'Buy-in' is also heavily dependent on circumstances and is closely related to the need for change and the type of change. Employees facing a genuine choice between job losses or changing to more flexible working practices may readily buy-in to more flexible practices. However, employees facing the offshoring of their jobs and redundancy will probably not buy-in at all.

To Buy-In or not to Buy-In

The matter of 'Buy-in' is a key problem with Change Management theory.

The brutal truth is that a great deal of change, particularly change that falls with HR's remit, is unwelcome, and no amount of stakeholder analysis, vision communicating or training will alter the fact.

Closing front offices, harmonising benefits, offshoring production, introducing split shifts, adopting labour saving technology and any number of other necessary changes are not traditionally embraced by employees and trade-unions whatever the Change Management model requires.

On a more parochial note, senior managers tend not like change either. Take online, self-service or offshore call centres, for example. Given a choice, managers prefer admins to do form filling and personal servants to handle their employment affairs. When putting services online, management resignation to the inevitable is a more realistic goal than Buy-in.

Actually, apathy is just as likely as either Buy-in or resistance. Often, neither management, employees nor the Board care very much one way or another about leadership values or behavioural competencies. Mostly they just want to be left alone to do whatever it is they believe is their real job.

The Show Must Go On

So, what does a leader do with the unwanted change for which there is no irresistible need or quick wins, only a hard, unrequited slog?

This is the conundrum that leaders face in the real world.

A great deal of change has to be implemented in the face of apathy at best and downright hostility at worst. The fact that the pre-requisites for Change Management success couldn't be established doesn't mean that the new business strategy, or flexible culture, or technology isn't the right thing to do.

The real trick is to keep the show going when the prerequisites aren't met; when the vision promises damnation and the only people who benefit are obscenely wealthy shareholders; when the first shuddering crack of broken eggs is noticed and the desire of some senior managers to return to the good old days emerges with a vengeance; when those who never truly believed in the vision, manoeuvre to assert their 'told you so' rights.

These scenarios are not a surprise; they are human nature, and no Change Management in the world can do away with them.

Achieving the Impossible

HR earns its stripes delivering change in circumstances that according to most Change Management theory can't be delivered.

It delivers through negotiation, solution design, compromise, consultation, adjustment, flexibility, tenacity, evangelism, self-belief, execution and realising benefits.

Successful change needs a vision and a plan. It benefits from the toolbox of Change Managers: the Stakeholder Analysis, the Impact Assessment, the Communications Plan. Sometimes even, theoretical Change models can be replicated in real life.

However, more often than not, the great, unheralded secret of successful change is learning to cope when the change is the last thing in the world anyone in the organisation wants to do.

Coping with Change

An organisation that plans to cope with change is much closer to the reality of transformation than one that sets out to manage it.

Coping does not assume that non-believers can be converted and it admits the reality of consultation and Collective Bargaining. It understands that just because the CEO wants something to happen doesn't mean that the rest of the organisation has to go along.

Coping does not assume that MS Project-like order can be brought to the process of transforming hearts and minds.

Coping addresses the change barriers buried in the solution design, the financial case and the quality of implementation. It does not separate between the solution itself and the management of the change. The nature of the solution, the benefits of the solution and the way the solution is implemented are the principal change levers.

Coping also acknowledges the need for a communications plan but does not rely upon controlling people's minds. It deals with concrete steps for ensuring organisation readiness rather than pretending to manage what people believe in.

Design a Solution rather than a Problem

Because the vision or the solution determines the size of change the organisation will experience, Change Management rightly begins at this point.

On a continuum ranging from 'employees will volunteer a drop in pay to accommodate this new approach' to 'any sensible person would prefer open heart surgery', one should, wherever possible, articulate a vision with which the organisation can cope, rather than pick a Mission Impossible and trust to a Change Management strategy.

The solution fit is, therefore, imperative.

Make sure the Solution realises Benefits

After the Solution, the reliability of the base financial case and the allocation of the costs are, within management circles, arguably the most influential change coping mechanisms.

There is little more toxic for successful Change Management than expected savings not materialising or the allocation of costs reducing the financial performance of the business receiving them.

Benefit Realisation is important to employees too.

Hence, plain old bribery is also a change coping mechanism, albeit one which is often scorned. Obviously, this excludes the "Corrupt Practices" variety that the US, for example, likes to label "Foreign". However, in the correct circumstances, nothing brings about a modicum of acceptance to an otherwise unpalatable change like lining employees' pockets. Just like not firing people whose jobs have been offshored might bring about more cooperation with a transfer of work.

Don't Mess Up the Implementation

Assuming that the proposed solution isn't going to occasion violent revolution and that a change initiative isn't a financial disaster, the other critical Change Management intervention is floorless project execution.

Transition Management, in the form of communications, training and launch preparations, plays a significant part in ensuring implementation success.

However, the best communications plan in the world is worthless if the new order doesn't work. Whether the change consists of a new Performance Review process, on-

line self-service or an "Engagement Programme", as soon as they are observed not to be working, they will start to decline.

The lesson, then, is to make sure that the solution, whatever it is, is implemented successfully, with minimum disruption to the organisation, and in particular, no impact on business performance.

Four Golden Rules of Change Coping

This is not a call to ignore Change Management. Quite the contrary; change cannot be left to its own devices.

However, it is a call to be more realistic about the limits of Change Management and recognise that the bulk of change is achieved in the solution, the benefits realisation and the implementation. It is not a separate entity called Change Management.

It is also a reminder that Change Management models are fickle and that all change projects must cope with this fact. If the rules of coping were summarised, the following 4 Golden Rules would apply:

Absolutely aim for senior manager Buy-in, but at the same time, absolutely don't rely on it sticking around.

When designing the solution, bear in mind that the loudness of most organisations' devotion to risk is eclipsed only by their aversion to it when confronted with the reality.

Very often, a company that gets the Project Management right, gets the Change Management right.

Perception of success is, unfortunately, as important as actual success.

Notes

[1] King Canute was a Danish king of the Anglo Saxons who reportedly set up his throne on the beach and ordered the tide to stop at his feet.