

Does change really need managing?

In this article we're talking about how to gain peoples' buy-in and commitment to change in business. We'll try to avoid the "change is the only constant" clichés and argue that, faced with having to make changes that affect people in our business, we should focus less on change management techniques and more on simply managing people well - if we manage people well then they will not only respond to change positively, but they will start to become the instigators of change.

Why is implementing change so difficult?

Clearly, every business needs to adapt over time and this brings some element of change with it - whether it be a change to your brand, a new product or new offices. The issue in business is that change usually affects people and people are inherently resistant to change. Or are they?

Think back over the last year to all the changes you have experienced in your life outside work. You may have got married, got divorced, had a baby, had another baby, changed jobs, got promoted, bought a new car, changed your mobile phone, etc. etc. Small or large we will all have recently experienced several new things, but I bet that you coped without needing to appoint a "Change Champion" to help you through the process or have a briefing from your HR department? Once your decision was made you probably just got on with it!

Wouldn't it be great if your employees responded in exactly the same way?!

How you deal with people during change will have a significant impact on how much of your time it takes, how much hassle you experience and ultimately how successful the change is.

The Psychology of change

So why do employees apparently resist change at work? The key is that in the changes we mentioned above you were probably the one instigating the change - it wasn't forced upon you. You may have spent time deliberating or procrastinating, but at the end of the day you will have seen the need, the benefits, what needed to be done and how it should be done. The result was that you took responsibility for making it happen and felt a high level of ownership for making the change a success.

Much research has been done to look at how people respond to change, whether it be a change in life circumstances or change at work. When faced with change, everyone goes through an observable and predictable series of stages starting with denial, perhaps anger, sadness through to acceptance and exploration. Click on the image right to view the stages.



These stages are not voluntary, they are part of human nature and it is characterised by a sense of loss. It is during the early stages of this process that people may resist change either actively (anger) or passively (denial) simply because they don't like how it makes them feel. The opportunity for you as a manager is to help people through the curve as *quickly* as possible and to ensure the curve is as *shallow* as possible (thereby minimising the impact of the change on performance).

This is typically where change management programmes claim to help, and there is some merit to the logic that if we communicate the reasons behind the change and structure the change as much as possible people will understand and buy into the changes. However, there are two problems with this:

1. This approach tends to treat change as something that is "done to us" and that we have no control over it. All animals (including humans), when faced with a situation they have no control over, adopt a state of

learned helplessness. It is possible to observe this in people at work – they appear to lack energy and enthusiasm, they pass the buck, they blame others and they resist new ways of working. It is often found in businesses who complain that traditional change management programmes have not succeeded. The resulting resistance, apathy and failure is because the change has been “managed” in a way where the people in the business feel they have no control over the changes being forced on them. As such they have little commitment to the outcome.

2. Our emotional reactions are rarely logical so trying to deal with them as part of a logical process is difficult. Next time you are arguing with your partner at home, notice how ineffective logical reasoning is in calming them down!

So how could it be done better?

By now it should be pretty clear that what we are seeking is a way to gain peoples' buy-in and commitment to change. As always the answer involves doing a number of different things.

One useful model for thinking about change suggests that people buy in to change when :

- they share in a vision of how things could be better
- *and* they feel some *positive* dissatisfaction with the present state
- *and* they can see how to make the change happen

All three conditions are required - taking any one of them away will not result in buy-in to the change.

Here are some practical steps you can take to ensure these conditions are met:

- Always try to recruit the best people you can - we covered in a previous issue how attitude has a major impact on how someone approaches their work. If you can find people who are “up for it” in the first place it will make your life a lot easier.
- Actively encourage ideas and solutions - ensure you seek out and embrace new ideas rather than dismissing them out of hand. This might sound obvious, but it is all too easy to say “we tried that before..” or “that would never work here because..” Do not tolerate employees who rubbish other peoples’ ideas. Do not punish people or attribute blame where an idea does not work - instead ask “what can we learn?”. For every 100 daft ideas there will be one gem, but unless you encourage the 100 daft ideas you will never find the gem! Oh, and don't implement a suggestion scheme - they don't work!
- Give your employees accountability to measure the impact of their ideas - encouraging people to measure the effectiveness of what they do usually results in a stream of suggestions for how it can be improved. If it was their idea in the first place they will feel even more ownership for making it work. Of course guide them to suggest their own measures rather than imposing your own measures and all of a sudden you have people doing their own performance management!
- Involve people in problems affecting the business - when business circumstances change or you come across a problem ask for their input on how to solve the problem. This is not about asking for their permission or asking them to do your job for you, but people feel proud when they feel part of something they helped to create.
- Listen to their thoughts, opinions and feelings - the process expert is the person carrying out the process so ask their opinion and listen to them. When things get tough you need someone to talk to and express your frustration to – so do they. Spending time listening will not only allow you to learn what's going on in the business, but it will ensure that frustration does not go underground and spread throughout the business.

- Coach people to help them think through the consequences of their ideas and actions - when presented with a potential idea ask questions to fully explore the idea being presented. If the idea has flaws the trick is to ask questions so that the employee realises the flaws for themselves. They will then have learned something that improves their understanding of how business decisions are made and they will be able to apply that thinking to their next idea before bringing it to you.
- Recognise people who find a new way to solve a problem - thank them for taking the time and trouble to think about how to improve the business.

People own what they help to create. Being part of something is what generates pride and loyalty. Pride and loyalty are the things that drive continuous improvement. Change management should surely be about the process of helping people take accountability for change, not the process of dealing with resistance to change?