

The paradigm of change management



So often we talk about change management as a business initiative implying that without a change management “programme” everything would stay the same. We have two challenges for this:

1) why should change have to be managed? Surely you would want an organisation where the way things are done is constantly being improved for the benefit of the customer and the business as a matter of course? Of course you would, but (you argue) unless we manage the process then people will resist and change will not happen. The challenge still stands. Surely the job of a manager is to continuously improve the way things are done anyway? So, if you are managing your business effectively then improvements should be continuously being made and there should be no need for change management initiatives.

2) You are probably still thinking that change does not happen by itself so of course it needs managing, right? Well, your paradigm of change management probably says that it is you as the manager who is responsible for initiating the change. What if the change was initiated by your employees? Would they resist change then?

A definition of change

You might have heard a definition of insanity before – doing the same things over and over again and expecting a different result!

At its simplest, change is just about doing things better. One useful model for thinking about change suggests that change occurs when :

- there is a vision of a better state
- *and* there is positive dissatisfaction with the present state
- *and* people can see how to make the change happen

This makes a lot of sense. However, we come back to the paradigm of change management – whose vision is it? Who is dissatisfied with the current state? And who determines how the change should be implemented? Usually the management!

Our proposal is an alternative paradigm of change where enabling continuous improvement to happen is an integral part of every manager’s job. This new paradigm would modify the above conditions to read :

- we can all clearly see how things could be better
- we know that the current state is no longer working
- people are generating their own solutions to make the transition happen

This helps slightly, but to really make this a part of the way things are done in your business there are a few additional conditions that need to be in place :

- people are constantly monitoring the results of how things are done
- if it doesn’t work they feel comfortable reviewing what they have done and maybe changing again

And Managers :

- are skilled in coaching employees through the consequences of their ideas
- only implement their own ideas when the whole agree that it complies with the first three conditions above

The process of change

Much work has been done to show how people respond to change, whether it be a change in life circumstances or change at work. When faced with a change, everyone goes through an observable series

of stages starting with denial, perhaps anger, sadness through to acceptance and exploration. These stages are not voluntary, they are part of human nature and it is characterised by a sense of loss. It is during these early stages that people may resist change either actively (anger) or passively (denial). The key to helping people adapt to any change is to help them reach the stages of acceptance and beyond as quickly as possible. It is not possible to remove the feelings they will experience before reaching that stage, but it is possible to help them work through those feelings quicker than if they were left to their own devices.

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, it still leaves us with the paradigm that change in business is 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.

Responding to change or taking accountability for making it happen?

Going back to our two original challenges, our argument is that the only real way to achieve sustainable business improvement (i.e. change) is to create an environment where every employee feels accountable for their own results and for constantly finding better ways to achieve those results. How? Well, it is not easy, but here are some practical steps :

1. always try to recruit the brightest people you can. Not just academic ally, but emotionally. People can express their intelligence and abilities in all sorts of ways. If you think about someone’s hobby it is usually something they are passionate about. The key is to tap into how someone applies themselves to their hobby and use that creativity at work.
2. ensure your managers 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..”. The process expert is the person carrying out the process so ask their opinion and listen to them. When presented with a potential idea encourage your managers to 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 the business and they will be able to apply that thinking to their next idea before bringing it to you.
3. create a culture that encourages ideas. This does not mean implementing suggestion schemes. Do not tolerate employees who rubbish other peoples’ ideas or attempt to humiliate them. Do not punish people or attribute blame where an idea does not work. Do recognise people who implement change. Pay them more, promote them more, and always thank them. Do involve people when business circumstances change or you come across a problem and ask for their input on how to solve the problem.
4. give employees accountability to measure the results of their ideas. Motivation quickly disappears if the only feedback someone gets is “not good enough, not good enough”. There is a well used management saying of “what gets measured gets done”. Most people like to feel they are doing something worthwhile so encouraging people to measure the effectiveness of what they do usually results in a stream of suggestions for how it can be improved. Of course guide them to suggest their own measures rather than imposing your own measures.

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?