



# Change? Think about it

*Helen MacKintosh* describes the planning phase of successful change management

**A**re you one of those rare people who truly enjoys managing change and who knows they are good at it? If not, the happy truth is that if you really put some time and planning in, you too could make change work without too much pain. If you have great skills as a leader, that will undoubtedly help. But to be successful, change needs to be carefully managed. And that takes time.

Think about it. If we – you and I – are asked to make changes for the sake of our organisation – to alter our routines or our jobs, to report to someone new, to accept the need for relocating or even redundancy – we need to be given some good arguments for the change. The reasons need to add up and, if there is a clear imperative, we will probably go with it. But we want whoever is in charge of this change to have thought things through. We need to be treated with at least that much respect.

## Planning

Time spent planning, finding necessary resources, being prepared, can make the difference between success and a miserable battle to persuade people of something they may not want or believe in. Unfortunately, it's a crucial step frequently ignored, which might explain why so many projects stumble and ultimately fail.

One of the first things to do is consider the nature of the change. Is it a practical, project-based issue? For instance a building development, or the introduction of a new box office system? Or is it a broader cultural issue on which the entire organisation will undoubtedly have a strong opinion such as a restructure, a rebrand or a new marketing strategy? Your answer here will help shape your approach and will inform some of the key considerations to take on board.

You need to think about whether your organisation is flat and open or more hierarchical and directional. Does it listen and learn or decide and instruct? How ready is it for change? Who are the people involved and how ready are they for change? What skills and expertise will be needed and how far are they available internally? If they are not already in place, can you train anyone up? And if not, do you need to look outside the organisation for help? And what about the budget? Is there enough (including a 10% contingency), and what are the overall strengths and weaknesses of your finances? How might these be improved?

Of course, you also need to think about time. Not just how long the change will take, but how urgent the need to

introduce it is – a sense of urgency that people recognise makes any change more likely to be accepted.

## Skills

You also need to listen. Some listening may be frustrating and time-consuming. But people need to be heard. And you may just pick up some very good ideas as well as being forced to think through all of your arguments.

Thinking about the people involved, you need to consider individual preferences, styles and skills. It is amazing how most of us immediately start thinking about our teams or perhaps stakeholders – both of which absolutely must be considered – but a truly successful, emotionally intelligent leader or manager will begin with themselves. What are my preferences, style, skills and experience and how are they going to affect things? Do I need to curb some of my enthusiasms? What strengths can I play to? When am I at my most successful and what do I do that jeopardises things?

You won't necessarily need to change yourself, but if you can answer these questions and know how to manage yourself, you will have a better chance of taking people with you: it has been shown that organisations led by people who see themselves as others see them tend to be more successful than others.

You also need to understand how you try to influence others. Different styles here – from the domineering to the compliant, from partnership to bargaining – all have their uses. What's important is to be able to use an appropriate style for the moment.

And again, understanding your own and others' learning styles – whether the preference is for learning by doing or reflecting, by theorising and evaluating or putting things into practice – will allow you to select teams appropriately, to recognise where you might not have all the skills and answers, to be open and unthreatened by others. It is an observable truth that really successful leaders are comfortable in their abilities and clever or intuitive enough to know when they aren't the best person to answer the question, and to find the one who is.

## Teams

If the change is significant, you will need to put together a team who can manage things either with or for you. One great way to strengthen that team, to broaden its skills and knowledge base, its impact and hence effectiveness, is to create a 'diagonal

'slice' group – people from different departments within the organisation and at different levels. A receptionist or box office assistant may have a far better idea of external attitudes to the organisation than the artistic director (though the latter may be well aware of the impact). A stagehand may have a very good take on how well the organisation manages practical issues. A marketing officer may be very aware of where internal resistance is likely to come from. Another way to strengthen that team is to delegate sufficient authority where appropriate and let the organisation know you have done so.

### Ideas, vision, tools

Once you have your team, ideas and vision can be worked up and strengthened – good leaders and managers don't make the mistake of thinking they have all the answers. At the same time there are all sorts of practical tools you can use, most of which are available free on the web: tools such as Gantt charts and flow charts which lay out timelines and milestones, or spreadsheets which keep financial track. Change models can also be used to help everyone understand the process they are caught in – e.g. Tuckman's 'Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing' model or the 'Change Curve' which shows the emotional stages most people go through when major change is introduced.

### Communicating

Once a vision for the change has been created and a project plan is ready, it's time to start communicating: up, sideways and down – in as many different ways you can think of. It is startling how many people think that they have told people by putting a paper out on an email or (worse, because more invisible) sending a link to a central server.

There are many ways of communicating, and you need to use them all: in person, whether one-to-one or one-to-many; on posters; on the intranet; in a short video; through planned briefings; in the lift (so long as that or Twitter or any other brief communication is neither the starting nor the finishing point of communication). You need to keep the communications coming, again and again – and then say it again. It's the best way to stop distorting gossip, to ensure that those against the change don't take the lead, to show that you respect your teams and want to take them with you. It is a sad fact that many people, particularly in large organisations, complain they learn what is happening from outside sources, which is a persuasion disaster.

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### Quick wins

As change guru John Kotter says, you also need to prepare some quick wins to demonstrate that the change is already making life better. The wins don't have to be big, but they should be convincing and preferably imaginative. And if you have listened to what people say, you may be able to satisfy them – new briefer meetings are always popular; a commitment to look at more flexible ways of working; a reward system where people get even just half a day off; and so on.

### The longer term

If by now you are feeling exhausted at how much energy has to go into your change plan and delivering it, gather strength – we have only just started! Because successful change takes a long time to achieve – years sometimes. And if we start congratulating ourselves too soon, the law of least resistance will see the change backsliding, losing its edge, becoming increasingly less effective. So once things have begun, it's time to build on success while reviewing and changing the less successful elements some more.

This is part of the 'change culture' and it may look relentless. But think about it as designing and tending a garden that will look wonderful in years to come, or coaching a football team to be ready to respond to the changing challenges of the league, or building a new exhibition gallery which will continue to attract new audiences over the years. And try to allow yourself some pleasure – as you go, take time to sit back and admire, look at the detail, look at the shape, look at the context. Prune, coach, listen and measure. Then move ahead again. ●



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