

The Dynamics of Transformational Change

Authored by Anne Barclay, Director, HR Advantage

A thought when under pressure...

It is not the strongest of the species nor the most intelligent that survives, but the ones most responsive to change. Charles Darwin.

The ability to manage and execute change is increasingly regarded a core skill for chief executives, senior executives and operational managers.

The complexities of achieving successful change are well documented with various studies citing failure rates ranging between 50-70%. The risks of not delivering change well rise the greater and more complex the required change is. This can be a sobering thought when competitive and disruptive forces suggest more organisations require transformational change to remain competitive and may need to revise or reinvent their business models.

For managers at all levels organisational change presents many challenges. First and not least is personal management of change affecting the individual manager. Second the ability to move beyond their own needs to provide leadership, guidance and support to colleagues and teams.

During major change managers are often in the position of both being directly impacted by change – for example affecting the scope of their role, range and levels of responsibility, team structure, shifting expectations, the need to gain new knowledge and skills etc. as well as needing to guide others through change addressing team and individual staff needs.

It is common to hear criticism of poorly designed or poorly managed change. This may be judged harshly as a lack of management competence although the reasons are often more complex. Often there is a combination of managers adjusting to and learning about the change as they work on it.

William Bridges in his work describes three stages of transition. A period in which the status quo is ending, a period called the neutral zone in which the status quo is no longer valid but the new ways are not yet well understood or well established, and new beginnings characterised by people making sense of the change and starting to adopt new ways.

Common dynamics I have observed during change – and the larger and more complex the change the more of these are presents are –

- **Decisions are made on imperfect information** – a feature of many decisions. However during significant change there is often more scrutiny on decision making and more cynicism when ‘management doesn’t get it right’.
- **All managers and employees do not have the same access to information** (eg. Information may be sensitive, confidential associated with commercial and staffing concerns, the timing of information to parts of the organisation varies for practical and logistical reasons).
- **Feelings of uncertainty, ambiguity and grey areas.** At some point a ‘leap of faith’ is required to implement – to go from the neutral zone to the new state.

- **Change presents both opportunities and threats.** While threats are often more readily identified, not everyone will recognise the opportunities that often also are present.
- **It usually takes too long to implement** – both in the minds of the change architects and in the minds of managers and staff in general.
- **Change is not neat and linear.** Deadlines are not always met, step by step plans need modification to deal with emerging issues, a predictable predetermined path is rarely achieved.
- **The change itself takes resources to implement** before benefits can be realised. Sometimes this means short term cost increases when the intent is to reduce costs longer term; this can seem counter intuitive.
- Ultimately **managers and staff at all levels need to 'be on board'** to implement and embed desired changes.
- **Staff turnover is not uncommon** and should be expected. Not everyone will want to participate or make the required adjustments. Some will reassess their commitment and look at alternatives.
- **Change is emotional** – expect a range of emotions – worry, frustration, anger, confusion, excitement, anticipation.
- **Resistance to change is normal, natural and to be expected.** It needs to be planned for while people understand what is required, work through their reactions, and make personal meaning of it.

Responding to Change Dynamics – Key Actions

Working with leaders and staff at all levels there are benefits in setting realistic expectations about the change process and what it will deliver. Recognise ambiguity and uncertainties inherent in major change, ensure both threats and opportunities can be understood, and equip people to work through the process constructively rather than leaving it to individuals varied resources to cope.

Without being extensive here are some clear actions that can be taken when designing and implementing change which helps set it up for success:

- **Engage people at all levels from an early stage.** Team leaders and middle managers are usually most influential because they have direct relationships with and tend to be more highly trusted by employees compared with senior executives. Directly engage all levels and equip managers to be ready for the change, both personally and in planning how the change is delivered.
- **Develop organisational change capability.** Beyond managers this may involve central groups such as Business Improvement, Human Resources and others. Equip them to act as change supporters and champions.
- **Provide education** for employees to help them to understand what is required and to support personal transitions. This may be tailored to recognise various impacts (taking into account different roles, structures, skillsets, performance expectations etc.).
- **Tell the change story** - Provide a vision of the change – supported by a purpose, narrative and key messages. Use different communication media. Skilled and supported middle managers and change champions should be equipped to translate this to particular workplaces and teams.

- **Address the culture explicitly.** There is an abundance of evidence that suggest the designers of change need to align strategic and cultural elements. Using the vision and strategy identify the supportive and goal-consistent culture to support it. Identify specific beliefs, values and behaviours. These may incorporate elements of the current culture as well as new elements to be developed.
- Look for opportunities to **demonstrate new ways** – some will be planned, some opportunistic. For example, a Chief Executive wishing to drive greater use of technology set a short term goal for a new way of doing business via an app - and advised customers. This required quick responses from IT to deliver. This created a significant impact. It demonstrated what was expected by greater use of technology in a very tangible way. The story quickly became a concrete part of the narrative as people throughout the organisation learned of the transformation required.
- Establish **a change vision but it needn't be black and white.** Ambiguity encourages engagement at all levels in exploring and making sense of new directions. A level of purposeful ambiguity and instability can help unfreeze the current state and move people forward to engage with and explore the vision.
- **Support and equip leaders at levels** while holding them accountable for implementing the change. Leaders need to be role models and demonstrate in personal behaviour and actions shifting to meet changed expectations. At the same time recognise that they are subject to and experiencing the change and require support to personally understand and embrace it.
- **Leaders and change champions need to foster trust throughout the organisation.** Employees will have more confidence in the change process and be more likely to engage with it when they perceive the people behind it are operating with integrity.
- **Change resistance is normal and to be expected.** Address employee concerns in good faith and see them as legitimate. Methods of face to face engagement such as forms, focus groups, town hall meetings, supported by workplace and team discussions help employees process change and understand what is involved. Treat concerns as an opportunity to build dialogue with employees.
- **Recognise and respect the emotional aspects of change.** People need to make meaning from change and undertake a personal transition. Emotional awareness and a level of sensitivity to relationships is needed. So is energy to maintain momentum over time.

For more change resources look for these highly esteemed authors and researchers: William Bridges, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Margaret Wheatley, John Kotter, Edward Schein.

How to cite this resource: Anne Barclay, Managing People, The Dynamics of Transformational Change, Brisbane, HR Advantage, August 20, 2015.