

Change Management - What on earth is it?

by Malcolm Anderson

Change Management Programs produced one of the lowest satisfaction scores in a Bain & Co survey of management tools used by U.S. organisations. That's how management articles often start - a sound-bite from a survey and it starts you wondering whether you should rejoice, panic or question the statistics. If you earn your living helping others manage change you have no choice with this kind of information but to reflect on the validity and impact of such results.

Of course there are many variables. The American market, their culture and their approach to management, is very different from Australian approaches. I am reminded of a strategic review I undertook for the Australian arm of a U.S. software company some years ago and the horror the Australian management team experienced - faced with a charismatic American sales guru-cum-cheerleader - the first time they attended a sales session at the U.S. parent's annual conference in Bermuda (OK for some!).

The Australian management culture doesn't work this way, but we do have sufficient of the pioneer spirit in common, for many not to want to admire a problem for too long, not even long enough to understand the root causes in some cases, before we try to get in and fix it. That was one finding in a survey I conducted a few years ago. Little wonder then that one of the key roles that has fallen to me as a change manager is what I call 'ambulance chasing'. Essentially it is being called in after the horse has bolted to help analyse and fix a failed change. I very experienced at this now, and I admire the managers who are honest enough with themselves, and others, to bite the bullet and seek a cure - rather than throwing further good money after bad.

But it is certainly a pity that in such cases that I wasn't asked to provide advice when the change was being planned. Remember the 'stitch in time' adage? Why is that? Why does the first round of change management sometimes fail?

It was Bill Clinton at his inauguration in 1993 who enjoined us to 'make change our friend, not our enemy' and we have since been increasingly reminded that 'the only constant is change'. And the result is that one often encounters groups complaining of change-weariness, which in turn is building resistance to further change - even though more change is fundamentally inevitable. How do organisations become caught in such a downward spiral? The answer is clearly not simple. Indeed it has a number of layers that need to be peeled away like an onion.

So What is Change Management?

Most important is the big question posed by my title to this article. What on earth do we mean when we use the term 'change management'? The answer of course is in the eye of the beholder. There are those who decry it, those who practice it and those who have it inflicted upon them. The fact is that like many management fads that have been surfed, it is a phrase that is misunderstood and misused. As many who suffered some variation of it had a bad experience, 'change management' was to blame and the baby should henceforth be thrown out with the bathwater.

What do we mean by 'change'? Huge question - many dictionary definitions and academic theses! But for the sake of brevity let us agree that it implies a reshaping of the human environment. Even with that concept, I have some sympathy with those who say, 'You can't manage change', as if life is a random walk, a rushing river in which we mere mortals are flotsam in its wake. It is these acquiescent thinkers who have followed such mantras as 'If the people feel good about change all will be well.', and 'Our people are change resistant'. People need tools and methods to adapt their ways to achieve what you want them to, within their changed environments, and if they don't receive them it isn't their fault, it's the fault of their managers.

I am not going to suggest that all of our people are battering at the gates of the status quo to be allowed to do change everyday. Some individuals and groups clearly need more help than others coming to terms with the demands of change but this is always a symptom of past management failures, not some vicious mole of discontent. Most will readily take on new processes and behaviours if they are suitably engaged and developed. Of course the operative word is 'suitably', and depends heavily on the needs and constraints of the circumstances. While it is possible to understand the kinds of tools and processes that are likely to be effective in making change happen, the art is in the selection, adaptation and coordination to meet the business goals of the moment.

Can Change be Managed?

Can change be managed then? What is management? The word 'manager' is from old French and literally means 'holder of horses' - which if you mean young thoroughbreds, can take some doing. There are many modern definitions but we could simply say that it is the exercise of planning and control over processes and people within an environment for a purpose. Putting the two together then, 'change' and 'management', I guess the argument is whether the reshaping of ways and means and peoples' thinking and behaviours around us, can be planned for, and controlled for a purpose.

Well clearly the answer is yes. Humans don't achieve the things they achieve at random. Was Everest conquered by accident? Was Australian peacekeeping in Timor L'Este hailed as a success by coincidence? Did Microsoft become the supplier of the world's PC software by chance? Obviously not! We would all agree that such achievements were not just the result of sound planning and control but because one needed to rely on the good training and thinking of the implementers of the plans. They adjusted what they were doing to meet the new and different circumstances encountered downstream from the planning, required because events turned out somewhat differently from those envisaged by the planners.

None-the-less, plans were made, uncertainty was managed, and changes from the status quo were effected and embedded. So maybe the real issue is two-fold. First, some no longer like the label 'change management' and second, successful change depends on the quality of methods and implementation and less on some formulaic reproduction of what we learned on a course or read in a book. Experience and training do count, labels and language are important, but leadership and execution are crucial.

The House with all Mod-Cons

So the critical question for me is: do you want to be a tenant or an architect in the new house? A passenger or a driver on the journey? The house is going to be built and the journey is going to be travelled. Will you as a manager just let it happen to you and react or will you endeavour to shape events to your purpose. Following the analogy further, would you prefer a house that was designed for leisure with no running water or one with all the utilities but no lounge room? Stupid question, but it is the simplest way of pointing out that the single most common reason for failure in organisational change is the absence of holistic thinking in the planning and execution. Great technology without suitable process planning or careful engagement of people without a connection to business outcomes will not deliver business goals.

Many things can go wrong, but with good systems, methods and planning, the risks can be minimised and business goals achieved without causing huge stress to all concerned. And if you don't believe me, give me a call and I'll give you the phone numbers of many sound converts to this view that have been through the journey and are now reaping the benefits.

Don't be discouraged by the naysayers or the failed fadsurfers, take the driving seat and effectively control the reshaping of your organisational achievement. Don't fall for the random walk. We have to keep on putting the systems and the rigour into organisational change to make it work for us. And you have decided the change is necessary and worthwhile then you have to stand up and lead it!