

# Be more effective during change

**David Miller** outlines the role that e-learning can play in enabling managers to deal with change

**A** couple of years ago, I was talking to the MD of the subsidiary of a large global company. He had been recently appointed to the job from another part of the group.

I asked him what he had found, from a change management perspective, and his response was: “Permafrost.” He went on to explain that so many of his managers when faced with change seemed to act as resisters rather than supporters. As a group, they seemed to constitute a massive block to the changes he wanted to happen.

A few months later, we began to work with these managers in change management workshops. During the workshops, we talked to them about how they saw change in the organisation and, in particular, how they had been engaged or not in previous change efforts.

Three consistent themes emerged:

- 1 Low trust in the executive team because these people hadn’t trusted them. The executives had, for example, consistently told them about changes at the same time as their teams on the grounds of ‘confidentiality’
- 2 A real sense of being overwhelmed by the sheer weight of initiatives that were coming down the organisation. Like “trying to fill a wine glass

from a fire hose in full flow” is how one manager described it to us

- 3 Technical specialists promoted to management positions with virtually no management training to help them. There was an assumption that you could learn these skills by simply watching others. A bit like making the best player in a football club the coach. Not usually a recipe for success.

When you work with organisations to help them improve their capability to implement their strategies more successfully, as we have for 15 years, you have to deal with all these issues. You have to create real executive alignment and skills, help them generate focus in their organisations, train change agents to produce and execute change plans effectively and you have to help middle and front-line managers become change leaders and enablers rather than being “permafrost”.

The latter is what this article discusses. What skills and tools do these managers need to be successful? Then it discusses how these skills and tools can be learned. In particular, what role can online learning play in building these skills?

## Putting your own oxygen mask on first

Firstly, managers need to get themselves personally better prepared for change. It’s a bit like when you hear the safety briefing on a plane the crew always tells you to “put your own oxygen mask on first”. If you don’t, you will find it hard to help others and you could actually pass out before you can help someone else stay conscious.

We believe you can help managers become more resilient. As Martin Seligman explains in his book *Learned Optimism*, resilience is the ability to bounce back from uncertainty and change. His 25 years of research points out that our level of resilience is determined by the experiences we have had in

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our lives. Those experiences directly affect how we perceive change. For example, do we tend to think of change as a threat or as an opportunity?

We have found that workshops can help people become more resilient: they can become more receptive to new tactics that will help them in change, or they can take greater control of the changes that are having an impact on them.

### Helping others

Once managers begin to be more personally resilient, they can be more effective in executing change and helping other people adapt to change. We have given examples of the key development areas below. But first two *caveats*: one, we want to focus on the specific skills for change rather than a set of generic management capabilities; two, this list assumes that managers are being given changes to implement rather than initiating change themselves. We are assuming the change has been cascaded to them and they need to make it work in their business.

In addition to helping their own people become more resilient, let us look at four examples of where training can make managers more effective during change.

- **You can show managers how to communicate a powerful case for change** Managers need to be able to take the organisation's case for change and share it with their people in a way that is relevant to what they do and know. They need to

## Learning should be a business tool that is funded by organisations

feel comfortable talking not only about the future state but also about why people cannot stay doing what they are currently doing, ie that the old ways of working need to be left behind

- **You can help managers role-model the new ways of working and new behaviours** You

can help them see the difference between communicating through 'doing' *versus* communicating through 'talking'. A participant on a workshop recently gave me a great example in which his manager had joined a team, on his day off, to help them work through a set of basic technical problems associated with the change. He didn't need to say anything – the message was clear and motivating. So you can train managers to identify opportunities where leading by example can be powerful and effective

- **You can show managers the powerful impact involvement can have in shaping their teams' attitude towards the change** Most research seems to show that people tend to value what





they create far more than what is given to them. You can help managers see how they can engage people in shaping the change and being proactive in implementation. Participants on workshops can work out where involvement might help them and how they can make it effective

- **You can show how rewards can shape change success** A lot of the recent findings on rewards are powerfully supportive of the manager's role in change. You could make a case that most organisational rewards are ineffective and that managers using small, personal and appropriate rewards can have a positive impact on the success of change efforts. We found it really helpful to engage managers in thinking about what rewards they have at their disposal and how they could use them most effectively.

#### How do you learn about change?

If we accept that the above lists cover a good cross-section of the manager's change skill set, what is the best way to learn this? Can it be taught online via e-learning or must people come to workshops? Changefirst offers both solutions so we might be in a good position to delineate the possibilities.

In 2000 we developed our first online e-learning module; we initially saw it as a quick, easy way to distribute pre-reading for workshops. The interactivity also added a touch of 'sexiness' to it. But we were a bit like Charles Duell, commissioner of the US Patent Office in 1899, who supposedly said: "Everything that can be invented has been invented." We thought that, at best, online would be a useful support to face-to-face coaching and workshops. We didn't predict its impact on the way people learn:

**Online collaboration** Participants can now share practical applications online, in their offices or at home. We had a group of project managers working on a large programme coming together to review some online change training they had completed and then agreeing how they could apply it to their global project.

**Webinars** Applications like Skype and WebEx have made it very easy to run online workshops. We recently ran a face-to-face workshop for the CIO and his executive team in a large global company and then delivered it in a series of 45-minute webinars for their teams around the world. Fast, effective and inexpensive *versus* the alternative.

**Changes in the way all people seem to view the web** People have got used to using the web for so many parts of their daily lives, whether it be paying bills, using eBay or buying books on

Amazon. In the UK, every driving test applicant completes the theory test online. Therefore people seem much more receptive to completing training online.

**The mother of all recessions** As costs became the most important factor, we have seen an increase in webinar workshops with global virtual teams, an upswing in telephone and web coaching and people far more willing to accept the trade-offs that online presents.

**Increased imagination about the possibilities** People seem to be more open to blending different applications than they were even five years ago. They are seeing the very real possibilities of blending different approaches. We had one client who brought people together for a change management workshop and then used webinars, Skype, collaborative software and a community site for people to share learning, receive coaching and maintain momentum. It was a very cost-effective solution that turned a learning event into a set of practical actions that brought real value to the organisation and the participants.

### Where online may be less than optimal

Some workshop materials are perfect for the web. We have been delivering online learning solutions for ten years and what we have found to be the most successful are the more process-orientated modules, such as change communication planning. We have found that users can easily learn the topic while also benefiting from sharing ideas and collaboration, which online lends itself to so easily.

However, we still harbour doubts that 'soft skills' like counselling can be learned well in an online environment. We also accept that, for many people, learning is about, at least partly, dialogue and practice with other human beings (I am one such beast).

If you take the subject of resilience, we are less convinced that a purely online application will work. Certainly people could understand the basic subject matter – they could learn how people could be more resilient and they could review real-life examples of people improving their own resilience – but we are not sure it's the best medium to learn and practice some of the basic personal skills and receive feedback.

However, we have been to conferences at which practitioners have laid out a very different view and would argue that people are getting more used to using the web, applications are improving day-by-day and that it can be more effective because it's more impartial and impersonal.

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### Trade-offs

Learning should be a business tool that is funded by organisations. Given that, trade-offs are a realistic factor in all business decision-making processes these days. What you want *versus* what you can have means that sacrifices need to be made.

Here are some of the questions you need to ask yourself about implementing any learning programme:

- **Quality** Can this material be learned using any or all of the different online applications?
- **Expense** Do we have a limited budget for training?
- **Numbers** Do we have a lot of people to be trained?
- **Convenience** Do people want to learn and use it when it's convenient to them?
- **Time** Do people have the time to go on a workshop?
- **Urgency** Do I need to get started right now or can I wait for a workshop?
- **Learning** Does this online application fit with participant learning style and our culture?
- **Experience** Do people have enough experience to be able to pick this application up and use it?
- **Support** Do we have people in the organisation who can support learners with this application?
- **Sponsorship** Will managers give people the time and space to complete online learning?

### Conclusion

The distinction between traditional face-to-face training and e-learning is blurring.

How organisations decide on the best approach is up to them – there is no right or wrong delivery method – however, there will be trade-offs and preferred learning methods, and most likely a greater preference amongst younger or future managers to learn online. **TJ**

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