

How to effectively manage the pressures of change

When implementing major change within an organisation both sponsors and agents face the challenge of managing pressures that the change creates.

In this article we examine two main pressures of change, their effect on sponsors and agents and then provide advice on what organisations can do to manage these pressures effectively.

Pressure 1 - Achieve Results

The economic turmoil of the past few years has brought about three main consequences in business. One, organisations are leaner and the talented people who are left have their plates piled with initiatives. Two, many organisations are seeing low levels of employee engagement. Three, cash issues exist that are being dealt with in various ways. Whilst managing these concerns there is still a necessity for performance and a strong demand for achieving results that are required now not just for growth, but also for survival.

Despite these negative implications of the recession, positive effects can be seen for change efforts. Organisations are striving to stay ahead by attempting to change faster and more comprehensively than their competitors. This is creating a strong bias to action supported by a highly effective execution capability, which is a 'must' to create meaningful strategic change. Today more organisations are taking action and realising the business case for developing change capabilities.

A problem remaining is that many organisations still find effective change execution difficult. As Larry Bossidy (ex-CEO of Honeywell) commented *'Things that are supposed to happen don't happen'*

Pressure 2 - Need for Inclusion

Shifts within society and business have created a demand for increased inclusion among people at all levels of the organisation. The traditional 'top-down' command and control approach is no longer effective, except in extreme circumstances. This need for inclusion is reinforced by two trends:

1. **People are becoming increasingly exhausted by change efforts.** Therefore sponsors and agents are looking for ways to increase the involvement of people on the grounds that if people are involved their 'buy-in' is higher and consequently they will have more energy to engage in the change.
2. **There is a desire to create a more positive view of change** by trying to replace the old 'top-down' change planning in favour of one where people create their own future. The rationale is that people won't resist a future they created, and it will feel less like change and more like on-going improvement.

In summary, the second pressure is the demand to include people and to use this inclusion as a major vehicle to drive change as employee involvement is critical for execution success.

The problem here is that this critical need for inclusion in many organisations has metamorphosed into 'happy talk'. Where this happens there seems a belief that just talking gets change done and as long as people leave a meeting feeling positive the change agents or sponsors' work is completed. Unfortunately, when people face challenges to their values or substantial changes in their expectations this belief is woefully inadequate.

Effect on Change Sponsors

'.....managers must manage more participatively, more collaboratively, and more creatively, but also more systematically, more tightly, and more rapidly'

Harold Leavitt

Stanford Organisational Behaviour Professor

In other words, sponsors need to be able to use inclusion as a powerful lever of transition for change. So how can change sponsors and agents deal with this dilemma?

The answer to this is complex but three actions stand out:

1. Keep the organisation focused on business critical changes. To meet the twin pressures of results and inclusion organisations will be stretched to fully implement more than just the most critical change imperatives.
2. Become skilled in designing and facilitating involvement strategies that really engage people. There is a 30 year old change maxim – *'plan long / act quick'* which more than ever holds true in this environment. This includes:
 - Giving sufficient time for involvement, particularly in the design and implementation stages of the change.
 - Moving to action quickly and decisively once you feel that people are engaged in the change. Transition involvement which is characterised by people talking about the change into involvement that is about people doing things and taking action.
3. Motivate and train sponsors to adopt a more flexible style that is a balance of inclusion but also gives real direction to the change effort.

Summary

In today's business environment where the important statistics in the boardroom are sales, profits, and share prices - the dilemma during change is how to achieve results and how balance the focus on results with including and engaging people in the change process, which ultimately contributes to those results. Sponsors and agents can overcome this dilemma by keeping the organisation focused on those changes which are critical and becoming skilled in engaging people in change.

This paper is one of a series on a number of change related topics all of which are available from the [Knowledge Centre](#) on the Changefirst [website](#).

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