

Making a strong case for change

In 1969 one of the most complex change projects ever attempted was completed successfully with the words, *“Houston, Tranquillity Base here. The Eagle has landed”*. Later, as he put his left foot down on the moon’s surface, Neil Armstrong declared, *“That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”*

It was, of course, the first moon landing. The project had started in the mid-1950s and culminated in success in 1969. In 1962 John F. Kennedy, during a speech in Houston, Texas, announced that, *“America would put a man on the moon by the end of the decade”*. This was a powerful and compelling vision for a change project. One of the major contributing factors for this bold project was the launch by the Russians of Sputnik 1 in 1957, followed by the new R-7 Semyorka rocket with a ballistic missile carrying capability. These events came as a shock to the Americans, and to NASA in particular. If the Soviets were left unchecked, their early domination of space had potentially significant implications – giving them the possibility of some measure of political and military supremacy over the US.

Kennedy asked Vice President Lyndon Johnson to make recommendations on a scientific endeavour that would prove US world leadership. This led to a series of political decisions that culminated in the successful Apollo programme.

This story demonstrates how a powerful vision – *“put a man on the moon by the end of the decade”* – together with creating real dissatisfaction with the status quo by playing on fears of Soviet dominance were combined to build urgency and momentum for change. This is what we call shared change purpose.

There are three components of a successful shared purpose:

- **Imperative:** people are dissatisfied with their current ways of working and understand the cost if they don’t change
- **Vision:** people have a positive and clear picture of the outcomes of the change
- **Solution:** there is a set of milestones to show people how progress will be made

Let’s look at these in more detail.

Imperative

Edgar Willie of the Ashridge Research Group investigated 178 organisations from around the world to identify exactly what the triggers for change were. What he found was that:

- 24 per cent of change was instigated as a result of financial loss or drop in profits
- 23 per cent of change was instigated as a result of increased competition or loss of market share
- 23 per cent of change was instigated as a pre-emptive strike by management who foresaw issues arising if they did not change
- 16 per cent of change was instigated as a result of having a new CEO

- 8 per cent of change was instigated as a result of technology
- 6 per cent of change was instigated as a result of recession

With the possible exception of the impact of a new CEO, all the other triggers originate from a realisation that the status quo is no longer good enough. This could be because of unsolved problems or potentially missed opportunities.

If we take it back to the individual for a moment, we know that there is a strong desire to maintain the status quo. We often talk about the power of “*control*” and how it is so important for people to feel a sense of control. The reality is that it is the status quo that gives us that sense of control and comfort. As a result, focusing solely on an attractive vision leaves us unprepared for the inevitable setbacks and barriers we meet during the change process. If a change initiative is to be successful, vision is not enough: you also have to help people see that the status quo is no longer viable for them or their organisation. The desire to not stay where we are can be a more powerful motivator of change than a picture of an attractive future. I remember reading Eric Clapton’s autobiography where he talked about his battle to overcome drug and alcohol addiction. He wrote about his vision of being sober, drug free and having a good time with his children. He would paint that picture and, sure enough, he was able to change for a while – but he always relapsed. He didn’t begin to really change until he had an “*epiphany*” that he didn’t want to be the way he was any more. The status quo was no longer an option. Clapton moved from being temporarily inspired about a future vision to being fully engaged in changing.

A powerful shared change purpose will make people dissatisfied with their current ways of working and allow them to understand the costs associated with not changing. In our experience, it is this imperative that is so frequently missed out of successful change. People are not told why the change is happening. They are not told why it’s important for the business and, perhaps most importantly, they are not told why it’s important for them individually to get on board. This is at least in part because managers often find the imperative hard to deliver. It feels negative and can create uncertainty, while all of their training tells them to be positive, focus on the vision and appear upbeat.

Explaining the imperative for change therefore flies in the face of established management thinking. Yet if people don’t know the reasons for change they find it hard to engage, and as soon as inevitable challenges arise in the transition period those affected simply retreat to the way work was done before.

Easy on the imperative!

The crafting of imperatives that work is a potentially difficult task, and you face three potential traps.

The first is that imperative morphs into fear, uncertainty and doubt (FUD) which in turn create immobilisation. You want people to feel that they can’t stay where they are. You want them to believe that the current state is an unattractive and untenable place to be, but you don’t want to terrify them. You may have experienced a strong sense of wanting to move on in your personal life. Perhaps you have felt like this in a relationship, or even in a house or apartment you were living in. Knowing it’s time to make the move is a great first step and a powerful motivator for creating real change. The problem is that when this “*imperative*” turns into fear it creates panic, and panic is unhelpful. Say you decided to move house. Even if you could envision your new place and were really excited about the move, you’d be overwhelmed by the imperative to change if your landlord told you that you had to be out in a week’s time as the building was being flattened for development. Your job as a change leader is to move people

out of their comfort zone, but not too far. If people become afraid of change and afraid of the status quo, they become immobilized and unable to act. I have seen a number of situations where people in companies feel so threatened both by the change and the imperative to change that they cannot function, and all working time is consumed by informal gatherings at the coffee machine.

Second, you can't turn every change into an *"end of the world"* event; it simply loses the power of the message. I was talking to a mid-level manager one day. He said that the change he was working on at that moment was the fourth time he had been told by senior management that he would be *"outsourced if he didn't pull the change off"*. After the fourth time, this manager neither believed nor cared what senior management said: a clear case of them crying wolf too many times.

Lastly, avoid criticising either the past or any individuals. Doing so will only create resistance. We have probably all seen the *"macho"* manager come in and make pronouncements that he (or she) was going to fix everything that had gone wrong before their arrival. They position themselves as saviours, only to be seen as ungrateful destroyers. I was in an organisation recently where a board level director had come in a few years earlier, told people they had failed and said he was there to fix all their mistakes through his programme of change. Two years later I could still feel the palpable dislike, distrust and anger towards this man. He was a walking, talking resistance creator. The only people who went to his farewell drinks were there to make sure he was really leaving and wasn't coming back!

Vision

Once you have shared the imperative for change, a positive, clear and attractive vision for the future state of the change initiative needs to be put in place. This was well illustrated by the lunar exploration vision that Kennedy painted in 1962. When you listen to his speech there is absolutely no doubt about what would happen if it was successful. The speech was ambitious, unambiguous, concise and clear. More than anything, Kennedy created a picture you could see and imagine. There could never be any debate about when the target was reached; it was self-evident. With the moon landing, people knew that it had been achieved (well, apart from a small minority who thought it was a Hollywood production). Similarly, it acted as a motivator for people, a way they could give meaning to their work. You may have read about the cleaner at NASA who was asked what he did in the organisation and said, *"I am helping to get a man to the moon"*. You want something like this in your change projects. You want people to be motivated and directed by the change vision.

Kennedy's promise to the nation was short and to the point – both enviable qualities. The same applies to any change project: people need to know where you want them to go and why. I remember a client's vision some years ago. It was aimed at a health and safety change initiative in an industry and business that had seen more than its fair share of mortalities. His vision was *"no one killed while I am CEO"*. It was crystal clear and to the point; everyone understood what was required.

For your vision to be seen as strong, your communication to people needs to be clear about the outcomes to be achieved when the change has been delivered, the picture of success when the change has been implemented and how work behaviours will need to be changed.

Kennedy's vision was very compelling and exciting. And wherever you can you should, of course, aim for that. You want people to be excited about your change programme. But that's not always possible. So think of base camp as being "*clarity*". In fact, it is better for people to be very clear about a change than it is for them to be excited about an unclear, somewhat foggy change definition.

Balancing imperative and vision

We talked about how you need a balance between imperative and vision. Too much imperative, and you cause people to be fearful without them knowing what to do about it. It makes them fall back on old habits rather than embracing the new. Too much vision, and people can become overoptimistic and ignore the true costs of changing, and they seem to be less able to deal with setbacks. Being overly optimistic can be harmful in change situations. Being too optimistic can actually cause you to misjudge what it will take to be successful and can make you less resilient as you try to deal with the inevitable barriers you run into. What seems to work is when you can create a balance between "*this is why we can't stay where we are*" and "*this is where we are heading*". Somehow managers need to be able to talk about these two thoughts simultaneously. We want people to be realistic about the current state and yet willing to try out new things.

Solution

The shared change purpose should also include the way the change will be achieved. We call this the "*solution*". People want to know how they are going to get to the vision. Is there a road map which you can give them? If you don't provide this solution you may create more anxiety and concern.

However, there isn't always a solution in this initial stage. Often change becomes necessary without the solution presenting itself so readily. Being open and honest about that in your organisational communication can be beneficial. If you don't know what the solution is, then tell people how the solution will be designed and built. Reassure them that the change process you are using will facilitate the design of the solution. Think carefully how you might want to involve them in doing that. Even if there is no immediate solution to share, people just knowing that there is a process that will give them steps to confidently build the solution is often enough to keep uncertainty and anxiety at bay. Energy and urgency for the change is assisted if people can see the change as possible and understand their role in it.

As part of the solution-building stage remember to pay particular attention to behaviour. Identify what behaviours you need to see more of in the future for the change to be lasting and successful, and which behaviours you need to see less of.

Involve people in creating the solution – when the conversation starts, the change process begins

You have probably noticed an underlying assumption in this book – that the change has been given to you to implement by senior executives. The "*What*" is decided and you now need to implement it. This is because, in our experience, this is what happens in most large organisations and we are trying to provide you with tools and processes to help you with what you need to do. This approach was confirmed by a recent HBR

Advisory Council survey in 2010 that showed that 59 per cent of respondents agreed, at least somewhat, with the statement, “*There is an imaginary line in my company’s organisation chart. Strategy is created by people above the line, while strategy is executed by people below the line*”. This confirms our perception of what constitutes reality for most people.

The data from the survey then states that the people involved in strategy development are most likely to buy into it, and hence this little diversion I am taking you on. One of the most powerful ways to create commitment to change is by involving people in its creation. This involvement can be done at a local level by techniques such as “*Work-Out*” or “*Appreciative Inquiry*”, or at the organisational level by large-scale organisational planning techniques. We are not particularly concerned with the former at this stage, but let’s pause for a moment on the organisational type of interventions. Additionally, as the title of this section suggests, the moment people hear about a prospective change they start talking, reacting to it and forming views and ideas. There is a huge advantage if you can enlist these people to help you build the solution. You can create some early commitment to the change, rather than resistance.

We have seen large-scale interventions work in changes such as cost cutting, planning mergers and improving organisational performance. They can be very effective where you need people’s input and ideas, and where commitment is central to success. They can also create solutions which are easier and better to implement because the people actually doing the jobs have had an input.

Successful large-scale change is often characterised by involving most of the people in the organisation in the process, creating greater speed by having everyone participate at the same time and allowing shared change purpose to develop through the open sharing and synthesising of ideas. Other characteristics include creating a set of solutions with participant ownership and participants seeing their goal as solving real business problems or seizing opportunities.

When done well, all these techniques can create high levels of commitment to change. People always feel more ownership toward things they have helped create. By engaging people right at the start of the process you have the opportunity to create early commitment and reduce potential resistance before it gets started.

This is an excerpt from David Miller’s book *Successful Change*.

You can find out more about *Successful Change* on the Changefirst [website](#). It is available for or purchase from [Amazon](#) and other retailers.

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