

THOUGHTPIECE 6

HOW TO AVOID BECOMING A VICTIM OF CHANGE

The reality of life is not only that change is inevitable, but that the pace of change is increasing and will most likely continue to do so. In the public sector there has always been pressure to do more with less, due to the increasing cost cuts in terms of staff and resources. Therefore, undergoing change is a fundamental part of many people's working lives.

The problem with change is that it is a two-way street and which way you walk depends entirely upon your individual adaptability. Some people view change in a positive light and deal with it effectively and others have a very negative perception of change and are extremely reluctant to accept it.

Don't be a victim

The first step in dealing with change is to determine whether you have personally chosen to see yourself as a potential victim - someone who suffers a consequence over which they had no control.

When you think about the change that is coming do you try and ignore it, believe that it is fundamentally wrong or see the whole thing as a negative experience?

If any of the above rings true, then you are displaying victim tendencies. Although feeling this way is often natural when you are faced with unsettling changes, you must be aware that by focusing on the negative, the change you are undergoing is likely to have a very negative impact on you.

ChangeMaker International has been working with an organisation facing privatisation, driven by a senior executive decision that it will be more cost effective. The way that the organisation should deal with this is to endeavour to make sure that their staff gain a positive experience of change.

However, this can be a struggle when the senior executives themselves are feeling like victims and worrying about their own personal futures. They are struggling to take the responsibility of leading their people through the change and hence they are in danger of hastening the very future that everyone fears.

How to get the change process right

There is currently a TV commercial for a well known brand of lager which suggests that you need to "Get the head right and the rest will follow", and the same is true of change.

Employees look to their managers and senior executives to create a compelling and positive vision of how things will be when the change has been completed. Often you will find that rumour, speculation and fear envelop change and create an unsettling vision in employees' minds. Organisation Leaders need to be responsible for replacing this vision with a positive picture of what can actually be achieved.

If the following three questions can be answered positively, then your organisation has the first foundations in place for successfully dealing with change.

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- Can the organisation define in simple terms what their employees will experience through the change?
- If the company picked any employee at random, would they be able to express what it will feel like after the organisation has undergone the changes?
- Do staff get excited when senior leaders tell them the organisations vision?

If there is no single vision for employees to focus upon, the primary result will be confusion.

However, even a clear vision is not some form of mystical panacea that causes people to leap up and joyously embrace change. Whilst they may be less confused, they may well continue to be fearful, insecure and resistant to change.

Addressing fear

The second step in dealing with change is therefore aimed at addressing fear. When you explore people's fears about change within the workplace, they tend to centre upon the fear that they will either lose their job or will be unable to operate in the new environment.

In both cases there is a recognition that they may need to learn new skills and embrace new ideas in order to survive, let alone thrive. It is then up to the managing team to help staff decide how they need to develop and show how they can support their development.

Once again there are three simple questions to test organisation's performance in this area:

- Has the organisation defined the skills and 'know how' that their employees will need to have in order to live the vision?
- Does each member of staff understand how their current skills and 'know how' compare with those that they need in the future?
- Are they excited about their personal development plan and taking responsibility for making it happen?

Incentives to change

Incentives for change are a prerequisite, not just at an organisational level but at an individual level. Leaders need to work with individuals and groups; talk about the vision and the development opportunities. Staff need to be made aware of the benefits of the change for them and they must recognise that they carry the personal responsibility for any consequences, positive or otherwise that will come their way if they choose not to develop.

- Can the leadership team clearly express the benefits that will flow to the organisation and the various stakeholders from the change?
- Can each individual who will be affected by the change, see the benefits?

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- Is there a consequence for resisting and delaying the change?

If the organisation fails to achieve positive answers to these questions, they can expect the change to be slow and painful.

If it succeeds, you now have people fully engaged and their actions and behaviours will start to match the change that is required. What is more they will know that they own the responsibility for making their piece of the change come to life.

Combating resistance to change

But what about the people who still resist? Experience shows that:

- 1) 20% of people enthusiastically welcome and embrace change
- 2) 60% are fearful and hesitant
- 3) The final 20% are the 'over my dead body' brigade

Many leaders focus a lot of time and effort on the final 20% in the belief that if they can convert them, the rest will be easy. This is flawed thinking since it rewards non-compliant behaviour with attention and suggests to others that this is how they should behave.

Instead:

- 1) It's the *Enthusiasts* who need to be paid attention. Reward the way they are dealing with the issue of change, and that will encourage other employees to their way of thinking
- 2) The *Hesitants* need time, patience and reassurance in order to help them understand the vision, their opportunities for development and their incentive for change
- 3) The *Passionate Resistors* do need to be heard and the utmost must be done initially to dispel their fears. However, there comes a time when they need to be told the consequences of resistance and made to realise that their attitude is detrimental to themselves, the organisation's future and others around them.

The process of change – organisational resources

Change is not a 'business as usual' activity, it requires time to be creative and innovative, time to build and test new internal processes, money to fund development and sometimes money to bring in additional specialist help and support.

Above all it requires dramatic increases in the amount of time and effort that is dedicated to communication and some of the following questions will need to be addressed:

- Has your organisation clearly identified the extra resources that they will need during the change period?
- Has it significantly increased its investment in communication?
- Does each team and individual have the time, budget and project management skills to deliver their element of the change?

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Possible consequences

What if the change means that some of your people will lose their jobs or some of their current benefits? Sadly this is sometimes a consequence of change.

Recent history is littered with cases of businesses where leaders resisted change; only to hasten their company's demise. Employees have lost everything that they had believed was secure, even their pensions!

You can't stop it happening. What you can do is make sure that people have the maximum control over their lives by giving them as much warning as possible, guiding them to consider how they need to develop themselves in order to increase their chances of finding new opportunities and, where the funds exist, supporting them with that development.

Are you a Victim of Change?

As the TV commercial quote states; 'if you start right, the rest will follow'. Therefore, it is the start that is the most fundamental step in the process of dealing with change.

From the outset to avoid becoming a victim you need to work out whether you can accept and deal with necessary organisational changes. Leaders in particular, need to decide whether they have the ability to do whatever it takes to give themselves and their staff the maximum control over the consequences of change to avoid becoming the first victims.

However, what if you can't be positive about the change and therefore cannot, with integrity, create a positive vision of the future?

If this is the case, is it because it conflicts with your values or beliefs? And do you recognise that your resistance to change in fact increases what you see to be damaging results to your organisation or people? If you cannot bring yourself to lead this change without compromising your personal integrity, then perhaps it's time to look elsewhere.

What you have to understand is whether the situation proves sustainable for you. And if you're wondering how it could, then it's already the next conscious step towards dealing with change.

**If you have been affected by the topics raised in this article
and your thoughts have been provoked.
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