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Leadership - the only safe ship in a storm

by Karen Brush

Professional Matters

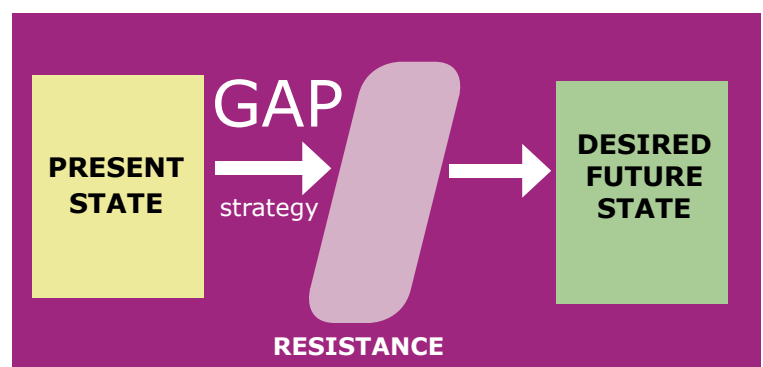
Change is a fact of life. Our personal lives are a series of endings and new beginnings. Relationships start and end, children are born, people die, we move houses, and change jobs. Change is also a natural organisational response to competition and to shifts in the socioeconomic environment, as well as being a route to gaining advantage and building business performance proactively. But organisational changes are complex - each stakeholder group has its own part to play and the most important of these are the staff, because, without staff there can be no organisation.

Our sector generally agrees that life is best approached in a spirit of exploration, adventure and enterprise, that we should influence and better inform attitudes towards risk; build wider recognition that chance, unforeseen circumstances and uncertainty are inescapable features of life and that absolute safety is unachievable; and we should demonstrate that sensible education and preparation enable an appropriate balance to be achieved between risk and safety and achievement and opportunity.¹

Change - the need for, and management of, is not just the domain of big business. Organisations are expected to meet the endless requirement of legislation, financial sustainability, competitiveness and diversification. These 'disturbances' lead to transformations or transitions by the organisation and cause differing changes, generally termed 'morphogenic' (changing to become

different) or 'morphostatic' (changing to stay the same). In both types of change, the key to success will always lie with the guiding principles of change management and good leadership.

Knowing where you are now, where you want to be in the future and a guess at who (or what) will be the major obstacles to succeeding is a great place to start. This rough analysis will show the gap between the two states and an indication of likely areas of resistance so that you can begin to plan the change strategy.



By using practices, tools and techniques as a systematic approach to change, we, as leaders, can understand what to expect from the change, how to manage our own personal change and most importantly, how to engage the entire organisation in the process.

Of equal importance is setting a tolerance to the number of consecutive changes (or risks) the business or organization (or your heart rate) can sustain. We do it in the outdoors all the time – unconsciously. Do you take a group you don't know, to a place you don't know, to do an activity you don't know? I guess that your answer would be 'it depends'; perhaps on the group, the place, the activity and you. Is it an art exhibition or a remote expedition, are they experienced or unpredictable? In business the same is true - if you want to implement multiple changes, you weigh up the multiple risks and set a manageable threshold of acceptance.

Understand, Accept, Do - three simple steps to successful change

- Make sure that everyone involved with the change understands the change – why it is necessary, how it will affect them, what they need to do to make the change work.
- Make sure that everyone involved with the change accepts the change. People must become committed to making the change work.
- Make sure that everyone involved with the change can do what they need to do to make the change work. Change means that people will have to learn and use new skills. Sometimes this means that massive training is necessary for a change to succeed.

Communicate - it's good to talk

There is much evidence to suggest that effect, on staff, of changes within a workplace can be likened to a bereavement process. Staff may focus on what they will 'lose' and may embark on the roller coaster ride of shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, questioning and acceptance². Differences in personality mean that it is likely that not everyone will be traveling at the same speed through the process.

If all change is given equal weighting and communicated to staff regardless of whether it affects them or not, communication becomes background noise. Change fails, before it even starts, on many occasions because leaders blast out mass communication under the assumption that everyone wants to know all things. In reality, most people feel overwhelmed with information and are more concerned with teasing out the bits that are relevant to them. So the answer is to **'Target your message.'**

Good instructors do much of this automatically with groups but do we remember to treat staff with the same level of good leadership practice?

Five simple examples of good change communications include:

Use face-to-face communications. Putting leaders in front of staff to provide information and answer questions helps them gain credibility with staff. It can go a long way toward alleviating stress for staff and keeping them focused.

Be aware of employee anxiety. When a significant change is announced, staff will be focused on themselves and their futures with the organisation. Anxiety will shift their attention from doing their jobs, so communicate with them to help them through this time.

Don't lie. When staff ask questions, don't lie. If you don't know the answer, get it for them. If the answer to a difficult question is unknown, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Staff appreciate honesty.

Use FAQs (frequently asked questions) and talking points. Share talking points with supervisors and keep FAQs current to make sure everyone has the same source of information. Consider posting information on notice boards as a great way for instant information.

Listen. It's easy for leaders to get into a "tell" mode and forget to listen for reactions, discussions and emotional hot points.



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'It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change'.

Charles Darwin
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In our sector, we employ large numbers of freelance and seasonal staff and many of these will be working at only a small number of centres on a regular basis (some for many years) – they too need to be included, but again, may require a different 'message'.

Reality - not always how we planned it



No change program goes completely according to plan. People react in unexpected ways; areas of anticipated resistance fall away; and the external environment shifts. Effectively leading and managing change requires

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"Management is efficiency in climbing the ladder of success; leadership determines whether the ladder is leaning against the right wall."

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Stephen R. Covey

continual reassessment of its impact and the organisation's willingness and ability to adopt the next wave of transformation.

Change management isn't a new skill for any of us – just a relocation of an existing skill to a new context

Check this out (and if you're not a mountain leader then you'll, no doubt, have the same skills in a different environment): The Mountain Leader Award states that some of the key responsibilities of the leader are to:

- manage the group effectively by setting and reviewing targets, performing ongoing risk assessments, positive decision making, delegating where appropriate, group control, discipline and good communication.
- to meet the changing needs of the group paying particular regard to the health and fitness of its members, whilst maintaining confidence and enthusiasm.
- make suitable route choices, interpret and evaluate terrain, revise routes where necessary.
- identify and manage risk.

How is this any different from what we need to do in organisational management?

So, get out there and help your business transform! ■

..... Author's Notes

After moving to the Lake District Karen worked as Visitor Services Director for the Cumbria Tourist Board responsible for marketing and ICT. In 2006 Karen was appointed Managing Director for IOL with the challenging task of developing the business plan, increasing membership and creating a framework for professional development. Karen is about to start an MA in Professional Development at Lancaster University and is a current member of AAIAC. An all-rounder in the outdoors Karen is particularly involved in skiing and mountain walking, is a dog handler with a local mountain rescue team and still retains a keen interest in rugby union as a qualified referee and coach.

References

- 1 Campaign for Adventure – www.campaignforadventure.org
- 2 Keubler-Ross E (1998) 'The Wheel of Life: A Memoir of living and Dying', Simon and Schuster