

Managing culture in a climate of constant change



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Dr Paul Brewerton talks about work done by culture change specialists Blue Edge in various areas of the public and private sector

THE PRESSURE TO 'CHANGE' HAS NEVER been greater. It seems that over the last ten years, change has become a near permanent fixture for many organisations as they strive for 'improvement', 'accountability', 'partnership', 'professionalism' and 'effectiveness' in the face of reduced budgets and, for some, increased scope. As specialists in culture change and leadership, Blue Edge has been asked to work with many public sector organisations as they attempt to balance the requirements of government with the need to keep their people focused, motivated, engaged, and ultimately able to deal with an ever-changing landscape at work. By way of example, for the Royal Air Force, this has meant the co-location of two historically disparate, geographically separate headquarter functions on the same site, while maintaining active operations across the world.

For the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the need has been to fulfil the requirements of the Patten report (outlining a fit for purpose policing service for the region) while remaining cognisant of the organisation's history and its people. For the Crossrail project in London, meanwhile, leaders have had to wrestle with the need to transform the culture from academic and introspective to that of a delivery vehicle for a major capital investment project (indeed, the largest in Europe, with a greater spend than the 2012 Olympics). For each of these organisations, they have wanted to keep the best of the past (in terms of people, process, structure and system) while modifying those aspects of the organisation that are no longer aligned with its new purpose. Naturally, this has resulted in some pain, as the organisation looks deep into its 'psyche', its culture, history and origins in order to establish whether the fundamental assumptions on which its operations have been based remain acceptable or whether these need to shift with the times. For all these organisations, there has been a clear need to consult their people on all required changes, involve their people in the re-design and re-alignment of the organisation towards a new purpose, and engage their people in the process of change, helping them to see how and why their behaviour and conduct – and in some cases, their values and assumptions – must change if the organisation is to survive and thrive. And with the current changes in the global economic climate, people in the public sector are experiencing ever greater uncertainty as opportunities to cut costs and improve efficiencies are sought by governments across the world, in an attempt to stave off deep and long-lasting recession. Which means that managers and leaders of public sector organisations are faced with the considerable challenge of maintaining an engaged, productive workforce as an underlying sense of uncertainty as to the medium to long term employment future affects their people.

The Philosophy of Change – Head, Heart and Hands

But in spite – and in the light – of recent economic events, the world continues to turn and organisations continue to push for change and improvement. In order for organisations to effectively manage their people through change, it is worth bearing in mind the 'head, heart and hands' philosophy. In effect, employees need: to know why a change is required ('head'); to have the opportunity to articulate their fears, concerns and aspirations ('heart'); and to gain or refine the skills they need to operate in a changed environment ('hands').

If each of these three 'arenas' of change is effectively addressed, resistance will be lessened and people are more likely to feel part of the change rather than change being seen as something which is 'done to' them. However, most organisations tend to focus almost entirely on one, or possibly two, of these three aspects of change, rather than genuinely addressing all three, and the failure of change programmes can often be put down to this incomplete approach. In practical terms, addressing the 'head' aspect of change means building a clear business case and set of explanations as to why change is required, what will be the consequence of not changing, what the new future will look like for individuals (ie how will it affect people's jobs, behaviour and working lives) and for the organisation's structure and processes.

For some organisations, there may be an absolute necessity for change, which some term a 'burning platform' – for instance a government directive to reduce cost/headcount or to achieve a particular performance benchmark. This makes the development of the business case to an organisation's people a little more clear cut, but time still needs to be taken to translate this into something meaningful for staff so that they can see the sense and logic of the changes they are being asked to make. Working in the 'heart' arena of change means channelling emotional responses to change in a positive direction – for example, by seeing resistance to change as an opportunity to amend the change process by taking on board the feedback provided by employees, even if this is presented in a negative or obstructive way.

This requires the organisation and its leaders to have the emotional maturity to encourage and promote 'adult to adult' conversations between line managers and their direct reports, and between employees and change agents within the organisation so that all can benefit and learn from emotional reactions to change. Practically speaking, this can mean setting up steering groups, focus groups and the like whose role it is to inform the change process by presenting people's concerns in a reasonable, objective way and seeking opportunities to build these views into the change process rather than regarding people's reactions to change as attempts to sabotage or as low-level whingeing.

Finally, the 'hands' aspect of change relates to people's skill-set in delivering changed behaviour, perhaps in light of a process change (eg new safety regulations) or a new way of managing people, for instance to promote

increased autonomy of decision making. In particular, the 'soft' elements of change are often overlooked, so that while organisations are adept at training staff in the use of a new technology or a new procedure, they may overlook the change that is required in the way that managers need to work with their teams in order for the changes to embed fully. To avoid this, leaders need to think through all the skills that will be required at each level in order for a change to occur and be embedded as 'business as usual' within the organisation in terms of both hard and soft elements.

The Practicalities of Change – 'How to' Guide

As well as working through the 'head, heart and hands' model, it is also worth considering the organisational implications of change in terms of what is practically required. At the organisational level, it is worth considering the following steps:

- **Work out where you want to be.** Establish how a change will look and what you want it to achieve as the first step in any change process. The more clearly this can be identified and articulated, the better.
- **Find out how far away you are and how deep you need to go.** At this stage, some form of diagnostic is helpful for organisations to understand the depth and breadth of the changes that will be required. For some organisations, there may be a requirement to challenge head-on the beliefs and values of the past if these will not best serve the future purpose of the organisation. For others, these deeply held beliefs can be left intact, if they are already aligned with the new behaviours and processes that are required.
- **Engage, then leaders model the new culture.** Leaders need to be engaged in the change process from the beginning, allowed the opportunity to openly discuss their fears, concerns and hopes and emotionally buy into the change so that they 'own' it personally. It can then be presented to the wider organisation in an honest, authentic way. This also requires leaders to model any new behaviours or approaches as early as possible in the change process so that employees can see evidence of their leaders taking change seriously and 'leading the way'.
- **Structure must support change.** If change is required, the way that organisational tasks and processes are structured needs to be examined closely to ensure that they are not inadvertently blocking or undermining change. If 'matrix' or 'mission command' working is required in the future, then a siloed divisional structure will not easily support change or allow it to embed readily.
- **Reward, recognition, promotion systems.** The organisation's core people processes also need to be examined in order that the appropriate level of reinforcement is available to embed new behaviour. Those people who are seen to embody the changes required in the organisation and who champion this change should stand a better chance of promotion, reward and recognition than those who behave according to the accepted, historic order.
- **HRM systems built on correct values/competencies.** The DNA of many organisations' people processes are their competencies, particularly if the demonstration of these competencies forms a key aspect of performance management within the organisation. Competencies may need to be re-appraised and amended in line with required organisational changes and then used consistently in order to reinforce appropriate behaviour and extinguish old behaviours.
- **Selection systems ensure right cultural fit.** The selection of the right people into the organisation is fundamental to achieving and embedding successful change. Pick those who embody the organisation's changed culture and change will be achieved speedily; pick those who are more 'old school' and change may take far longer, if it ever happens at all. An adjunct to this is that conventional wisdom on change management has it that people that do not buy in to the changes required should be exited (top first). However, this can present a tall order to many organisations. Instead, it is worth persevering as far as possible with those who may not, at first, appear to be on board with changes, whilst ensuring that the majority of energy is expended on those who are more willing and able to change and who may drag the resisters in the right direction over time.
- **Changes communicated through training.** Training can be a powerful tool in communicating changes to organisational members, in terms of learning new skill sets but also in positioning changes so that people have the opportunity to comment, emote and challenge as necessary so that, ultimately, they buy in individually.

Change in a Complex World

Our experience has shown that by following the guidelines above, both philosophically and practically, negative resistance to change can be minimised and level of engagement in change can be maximised. Recent work in the field of neuroscience suggests that to get people to engage, own and personalise change, they should be asked to do at least some of the work.

Practically, this means that a vision for a changed organisation should, at the initial stages at least, be presented to employees in a way which requires them to help make the decisions as to how the changes should be achieved. Neurological evidence is growing that the process of problem-solving and decision-making that this requires, both individually and collectively, leads to a sense of ownership of the change which encourages people to stick with it when things get tough, because it is something that they, in part, built and believe will work.

With this in mind, it seems clear that one of the solutions to ensuring that people remain productive and engaged in increasingly unpredictable and uncertain times is to get them involved, right up to their ears, in the changes that are happening. While this may at first appear risky and difficult to manage, it seems the surest route to embedding positive, long-lasting change.

About the Author:

Paul Brewerton is widely acknowledged as a leading practitioner in the area of organisational culture and culture change. He has helped many world-class organisations to map out and develop sustainable high performance cultures, designed to achieve strategic goals. Paul's clients, amongst many others, include Orange, Abbey, the Royal

17/04/2009

Managing culture in a climate of con...

Air Force, Crossrail, OCS, Natural History Museum and NATO.

A chartered occupational psychologist and author of *Organizational Research Methods*, Paul is regularly invited to speak at industry events and trains on behalf of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) and the British Psychological Society.