

Embracing Change

Considering Culture During Change

1. Context

Organisations spend a lot of time, money and effort on trying to achieve Change and yet McKinsey has reported that 70% of Change programmes fail (Scott Keller and Carolyn Aiken, Mckinsey&Company).

To improve the likelihood of success and durability of your Change programme, this paper examines the importance of developing and delivering Change in alignment with the predominant culture of the organisation.

It will explain the notion of organisational culture and outline why understanding and respecting that culture benefits any Change programme.

Following this it will bullet point methods for aligning your programme with the culture, to enhance the evolution, delivery and embedding of Change.

2. Introduction

Organisations have cultures. Just like any group of people acting together, over time, they generate and perpetuate ‘the way we do things around here’ (McKinsey, 2003). Culture is about how the group organises itself, its rules, procedures and beliefs. These will make up the culture of the company and whilst very influential in the way people behave, its value and impact are often under-estimated.

For example, some countries drive on the left, others on the right. It is not until you move from one to the other that you have to work harder to adapt to the predominant culture.

The important point here is that those driving in their home country are not constantly thinking ‘remember, drive on the left, drive on the left’. This knowledge is natural and comfortable and operates very effectively below any conscious consideration.

If you contravene this rule, you will certainly inconvenience people, upset some of them, get nowhere very quickly and quite likely cause an accident.

Many Change programmes require culture change as a prerequisite for success. This is not the case in all instances – but *every* Change initiative needs to embrace the cultural dimensions if it is to succeed. To address this often overlooked aspect of Change Management, and to improve the likelihood of success and durability of your Change programme, this paper also examines the importance of developing and delivering Change in sympathy with the predominant culture of the organisation.

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History is replete with examples of failed attempts at top down imposition of cultural change. The success and longevity of your Change programme will reflect the extent to which you can successfully align its vision, its methods of implementation and evaluation with an evolution in culture rather than imposition of dogma.

Alignment of the culture to the vision, strategy, goals and HR processes together with employee engagement is essential to achieving sustainable Change and is key to ensuring that the Change programme's critical success factors are achieved.

The journey to engagement will initially require employees to make sense of the proposed Change. The Change must be understood by managers and leaders who need to set an example by consistently living the behaviours required to achieve cultural change.

3. Guidance

To align your Change programme with the culture of the organisation the Senior Leadership Team should regularly ask themselves 'Can we relate what we are doing now, to where we were, and where we are going?'

This cultural alignment will allow employees to understand the changes proposed and how they will be affected by them. Even if they are opposed to the change or feel it works against their better interests, if they can see and understand how what they have done in the past is relevant to what is happening to them now, they are more likely to feel able to accommodate and work with the changes.

Understanding organisational culture has been explored by Johnson and Scholes (Johnson, G. & Scholes, K. 1993 & 2002). Analysing an organisational culture is a complicated process in itself. The following checklist provides an effective framework to keep your programme in line with the culture and in touch with employees and other stakeholders.

- Select your internal Change team to reflect the areas affected by the Change, the organisational make-up and culture – consider members from differing levels of seniority, formal and informal authority, influence, geographic locations and departments.
- Embrace experience by 'Talking to the old guy' – short-termism undermines Change, leads to 'initiative fatigue' and can leave people feeling – 'here we go again'. Find out what has failed before and don't do it again. Don't repeat your predecessor's mistakes.

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- Select any external Change partners who have a proven track record of partnering organisations with similar challenges and who are able to mirror your organisational culture whilst offering a neutral, third party perspective.
- Consult on vision. Whilst not everyone need sympathise, everyone subject to any change should understand the words and intent. Ensure anyone subject to the change could describe the whys and wherefores to their peers.
- Use established methods for implementation, the things the Change team can intentionally affect to move the organisation in the direction of the desired change. Don't create new and unusual roles, processes or procedures to achieve things that are currently achievable through existing channels.
- Don't be afraid to do different things e.g. it may be that processes are dealt with through hierarchy and silos and what is needed is cross functional working.
- Where new or different methods are to be introduced, be clear why they are needed, create them in the spirit of precedent and set them in the context of an evolution.
- Use simple measures and systems of measurement that are transparent and coincide with or are clearly related to the vision.
- Where new measures are necessary, develop them with those who are impacted and/or responsible for delivering them.
- Never invalidate or ignore the contributions of things or people that have gone before - make change progressive and positive. No one will support a future that ignores or that makes nonsense of their own past.

4. Conclusion

Throughout the Change journey, it is crucial that an organisation occasionally stops and takes stock (through feedback and objective evaluation) before moving on to the next stage of the journey. Some consolidation of progress may be required.

If done carefully and effectively, this will allow the Change process to manifest as an evolution, built upon and progressing from what came before, rather than trampling and invalidating the work of those who came before, and whose support is very much needed for the success you want to achieve.

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Lindsay works with organisations to support Change through facilitation and training. Clients include: Mercedes Benz, DHL Logistics, Local and Unitary Authorities, Department for Communities and Local Govt.

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A2Z is a consortium of over 100 experienced business experts. Fay and Lindsay are members of the A2Z Webinar Team.

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