

Change Management Overview

Change is one of the few constants. Technology, civilisations and organisations continually adapt and react to the environment and demands around them. In order to deal with change there is a need to anticipate, evaluate, plan for and implement it effectively.

Change management sounds something of a contradiction in terms. It suggests order and foresight and implies that change can be controlled and directed. However, we also know how disruptive, multifaceted and difficult change can be. It is easy and natural, consciously or otherwise, to resist it.

What is change management?

Change management is the process of using tools and techniques to achieve a particular outcome, while at the same time taking into consideration the culture, structure and individuals that make up an organisation. More simply perhaps, change management is the process of making things better in a planned and organised way.

The history of change

There is a bewildering array of material on change management. One reason for this is the particular popularity of **organisational change theory** following World War 2. During this time new organisations emerged whose size and complexity dwarfed those of their pre-war counterparts. [1] This meant that fresh ideas were needed to help evolve the management and development of these organisations.

Further complications come from the sheer variety of approaches to change. For example, two important precursors of change theory, **Frederick Taylor's 1911 Scientific Management**, [2] and **Elton Mayo's Hawthorne Studies** of 1924–33, [3] evolved from remarkably different perspectives.

Taylor, with a background in economics and engineering, envisaged organisations in terms of their machine-like qualities. Although aware of the importance of treating workers well, he regarded them principally as human components which could be selected and utilised according to function and ability. The role of management was quite separate; it was to scientifically observe and analyse the methods and performance of workers in order to establish and perfect new modes of work. Although much of Taylor's work has now been superseded, many change processes, such as **business process engineering**, [4] **total quality management** [5] and **ISO 9000** [6] owe much to his principles.

In contrast, **Elton Mayo** brought a much needed human dimension to organisational change. Although initially set up to study the effect of light on productivity, Mayo's experiments at Chicago's Hawthorne Western Electric Works in the 1920s ultimately became significant contributors to the fields of sociology and psychology. He noted that no matter what changes in working conditions the workers were subjected to, their productivity increased. That the workers had been singled out for the experiment and allowed a degree of control in their work made them feel valued and increased job satisfaction. [7]

Types of change

Change can be:

1. **Planned or emergent**
The extent to which change comes about through chance and happenstance or through careful planned strategy analysis.
2. **Episodic or continuous**
How an organisation develops in comparison to long-term objectives.
3. **Developmental, transitional or transformational**
Concerned with the intensity and range of the change within an organisation.

Change can also vary according to our perception of the world at large. **Kirkbride, Durcan and Obeng** offer three possible viewpoints, with change behaving in a modernist, sophisticated modernist or postmodernist manner. [8]

- **Modernist** views of the world are the most simple. They believe change to be subject to the reassuring law of cause and effect. Change is linear, incremental, evolutionary and continuous; and ultimately predictable.
- **Sophisticated Modernist** outlooks are less straightforward. Change is transformational, periodic, complex and dynamic. Its movement is essentially circular, constantly moving between planned change and spontaneity. A flexible and reactionary approach to change is needed to adjust to its unpredictable nature.

- **Postmodernist** change operates in an arbitrary, hectic, uncertain world which rejects conventional notions of linearity. Such permanent instability means there is no sense of commonality, of the 'right way' of doing things and, consequently, change strategies struggle to make sense of the chaos.[9]

None of these views apply to an organisation all of the time. Change programmes may combine elements from any or all them.

The leading thinkers and models

Over the years many leading thinkers have developed models for change. Some of the most prominent include:

Kurt Lewin

Lewin is considered to be one of the founding members of modern social psychology. His basic change model depicts change in three phases.

1. **Unfreezing** – old ideas and historic processes are identified and improved or removed.
2. **Changing** – new ideas and processes are identified and implemented.
3. **Refreezing** – the new ideas and processes become the accepted way of doing things.

Lewin's model has been used as a basis for many later models.

William Bridges

William Bridges is a veteran on managing change in the workplace. His focus is on the human aspect of change, on the transitions and emotions experienced by people undergoing change. His Transition Model consists of three phases:

1. **The Ending** – individuals are asked to let go of the way things used to be. Managers are asked to recognise there will be resistance to the change and a feeling of loss.
2. **Shifting into Neutral** – individuals expend most of their energy coping with the change, while managers concentrate on communicating the new picture, plan and purpose.
3. **Moving Forward** – focus shifts to the new vision. Individuals who are enthusiastic are encouraged and rewarded while those who resist are left behind. [10]

Bridges' Transition model is considered to be most effective when change is already underway, and when there is an expectation that there will be a psychological implication to the change.

It is perhaps less effective when considering the wider implications of change due to the inward focus of the model. The model's weakness lies in the concentration of attention on the immediate effects rather than considering the larger external community.

John Kotter

John Kotter is widely regarded as one of the foremost authorities on leadership and change. He has written many best selling books about organisational change, the best known being *Leading Change*. [11] *Leading Change* sets out a simple, actionable eight step process framework which was then updated as an allegorical tale in his 2006 book *My Iceberg is Melting*. [12]

Kotter's eight steps are:

1. establish a sense of urgency
2. form a powerful guiding coalition
3. create a vision
4. communicate the vision
5. empower others to act on the vision
6. plan for and create short-term wins
7. consolidate improvements and produce still more change
8. institutionalise new approaches

The framework is regarded as an excellent starting point for anyone embarking on a change initiative. It provides an overarching approach rather than an in-depth and detailed description of how to manage the day-to-day change. Some critics suggest that there is a lack of hard evidence backing up Kotter's work, and indeed *Leading Change* contains few references to other research. However, the framework remains a tried and tested bible to many change managers across the world.

Effectiveness of change in practice

Despite the wealth of material and models available, research consistently shows that around 70% of change efforts fail. [13]

One possible explanation for this is that the choice of model or approach is the wrong one. Accumulating evidence in favour of a particular tool or technique is extremely difficult for a number of reasons.

1. Even relatively modest changes result in effects which are unexpected, hard to quantify, or only become apparent months or years after the end of the programme.
2. Change is inherently emotive, and individuals frequently react differently to each other, or even to how it might be predicted they will react, and so it is rare to find consensual agreement among those affected by a change programme. [14]
3. Even the best change models will not work if applied inappropriately.

Choosing the right approach, and understanding the type of change and the context in which it operates is important. But of equal concern to organisations are the practical aspects of implementing the change programme. A gap in internal skill sets and experience means that some organisations decide to employ a consultant to manage the programme for them.

However implementing change management does not necessarily mean that organisations need a consultant. Involving senior management can make a big difference to a change programme's success. **Jonathan Day and Michael Jung** recommend holding regular and objective formal progress reviews with senior managers to flag up problems early on. [15] These can be followed up with joint meetings involving anyone involved in the change, such as affected business areas, in which they can compare notes.

Day and Jung also suggest linking the success of the change to the compensation of senior managers, reducing the likelihood that they will leave when things start to go wrong. Finally, to lessen the impact if people do leave, more senior staff than necessary should be involved in each stage of the programme. [16]

Commitment and resistance to change

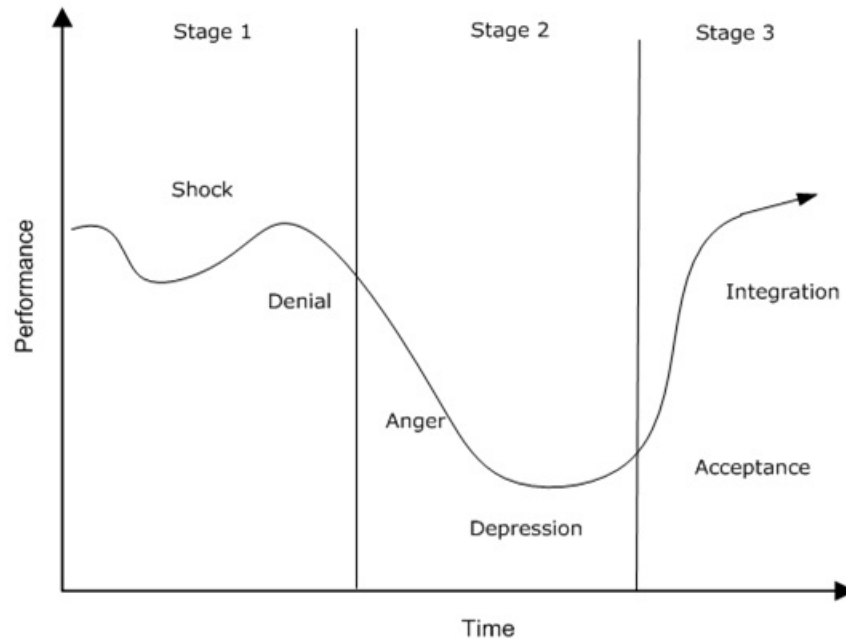
In addition to the involvement of senior management, though, change needs to have the support of everyone affected by it. A strong psychological contract between organisation and individual can reduce the resistance, and this contract can be strengthened with a few simple steps:

- involving employees in the change programme
- developing excellent communication channels
- rewarding and celebrating successful change

It is also important to understand that individuals will all react differently to change, and that emotions, drops in productivity and resistance to the change are all natural responses which can be expected as part of a cycle.

The **Change Curve** is one of the most widely utilised as a method of helping people understand their reactions to significant change or upheaval, and can reassure them that what they are feeling is normal, and will pass.

The curve also demonstrates how performance is likely to be affected by the announcement and subsequent implementation of a significant change.



Each person reacts individually to change, and not all will experience every phase. Some people may spend a lot of time in stages 1 and 2, whilst others who are more accustomed to change may move fairly swiftly into stage 3.

Although it is generally acknowledged that moving from stage 1 through stage 2 and finally to stage 3 is most common, there is no right or wrong sequence. Several people going through the same change at the same time are likely to travel at their own speed, and will reach each stage at different times.

Conclusions

Change management is undoubtedly a complex field. There are, however, certain things anyone leading change can do to improve the chances of success.

- Acquire knowledge of the history of change management. This will provide context for managers or consultants to start to construct the change initiative. Many of the best change models are decades old, yet despite this, are still highly relevant.
- Develop an in-depth understanding of the models, tools and techniques available in order to make informed decisions about the most suitable for the situation.
- Remain alert to what is going on both inside and outside the organisation, from employee demands to wider economic and social trends.
- Be flexible and adaptable. What works as a change strategy today may quickly become obsolete. Any change programme, and the approach of those who lead it, must be flexible enough to evolve with it.

[1] W Warner Burke, *Organisational Change: Theory and Practice* (Sage, 2002), pp 20–26

[2] Frederick Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Filiquarian Publishing 2007)

[3] Richard Gillespie, *Manufacturing Knowledge: A History of the Hawthorne Experiments* (Cambridge University Press Reprint edition 2008)

[4] [//www.prosci.com/w_0.htm](http://www.prosci.com/w_0.htm) (February, 2009)

[5] [//managementhelp.org/quality/tqm/tqm.htm](http://managementhelp.org/quality/tqm/tqm.htm) (February, 2009)

[6] [//www.iso.org/iso/iso_catalogue/management_standards/iso_9000_iso_14000.htm](http://www.iso.org/iso/iso_catalogue/management_standards/iso_9000_iso_14000.htm) (February, 2009)

- [7] Read more about the Hawthorne effect at [//en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawthorne_effect](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawthorne_effect) (February, 2009)
- [8] P S Kirkbride, J Durcan and E D A Obeng, 'Change in a chaotic world', *Journal of Strategic Change* , Vol 3, pp 151 –163. Paraphrased in: B Senior, *Organisational Change*, 2nd ed (Financial Times/Prentice Hall, 2002), p 356.
- [9] Ibid
- [10] William Bridges, *Managing Transitions* (Nicholas Brealey Publishing Ltd, Revised Edition, 2003)
- [11] John Kotter, *Leading Change* (Harvard Business School Press, 1996)
- [12] John Kotter, *Our Iceberg is Melting* (Macmillan, 2006)
- [13] [//harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/hbsp/hbo/articles/article.jsp?articleID=651X&ml_action=get-article&print=true](http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/hbsp/hbo/articles/article.jsp?articleID=651X&ml_action=get-article&print=true) (February, 2009)
- [14] *Organisational Change* (NHS, 2000), p 13
- [15] Jonathan D Day & Michael Jung, 'Corporate transformation without a crisis', *The McKinsey Quarterly*, No 4 (2000) p 120
- [16] Ibid.

Related Items

Related Resources

- Major Drivers for Change
- Change and the Organisational Lifecycle