THE EFFECTIVE CHANGE MANAGER’S HANDBOOK

Change?
Contents

Introduction 3
Why effective change management is so important 4
The behaviours of an effective change manager 6
Understanding the change curve 8
The top five actions to keep in mind 9
The potential barriers to change 10
Like it or not, change is inevitable, in life and in business. Sometimes it is forced upon organisations, due to technological advances, for example, or market shifts. Sometimes it is a proactive decision made by a company that wants to become more competitive or streamline costs and processes. Whatever the reason, it is important that the change process is properly managed.

There is no ‘one size fits all’ methodology for managing change, of course. Each company is different from the next, with its own people and culture, and each company needs to assess the way it undertakes a change programme in relation to those individual aspects.

That said – there are a number of typical barriers that occur when an organisation is going through a significant period of change, and there are a number of best-practice methods and behaviours that will help any business successfully transition a change programme, limiting potentially damaging factors like a dip in morale or employee engagement.

In this how-to guide, you’ll learn:

• Why effective change management is so important
• The behaviours of an effective change manager
• How to understand, and navigate, the change curve
• The top five actions to keep in mind
• Some of the potential barriers to change

If you are responsible for managing change within your organisation, or will be soon, or even if you are just interested in the methodologies of effective change management, this guide should provide you with some helpful advice and information.

Yours sincerely,

The Thales Learning & Development team
Why effective change management is important

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but rather the one most adaptable to change”
Leon C. Megginson

This quote from a renowned management socialist – inspired by the works of Charles Darwin (and often mistakenly attributed to him) – perfectly encapsulates the value of effective change management. Granted, this particular quote was referring to the evolution of living creatures, but the sentiment can be applied to business, too.

It is said that something like 70% of change initiatives fail. Whether you believe those figures are completely accurate or not, experience tells us two things are for certain: change is inevitable, and often poorly managed.

Stability may once have been the order of the day, but innovation has long since knocked it off its pedestal. Technology is developing at an exponential rate, and competition is ever increasing. In order to survive, and thrive, organisations must have a structured plan in place to deal with change. This will not only enable those businesses to limit the potential damage of significant change, but will also help them capitalise on that change and turn it into a positive experience.

Poorly managed change is a missed opportunity

“If you don’t implement change effectively, you risk losing the opportunity”
Colin Forster, management and leadership L&D consultant

But in modern business, change cannot be avoided. It is an integral part of the working world.

The truth is: change in business is not, by default, a negative entity. Unless it is forced upon the business for negative reasons, it can, and should, be a hugely positive experience. But that depends entirely on the way in which the change is managed.

Effective change management is the means by which to achieve that positive experience, avoid any harmful factors, and harness any potential opportunities that the change might bring.
Proactive always trumps reactive

“Change before you have to,” as Jake Welch, former CEO of General Electric who increased the company’s value by 4000% during his tenure, once said.

This is a vital component of any successful change management strategy. When it comes to creating that positive change experience, it is important to be proactive in your approach, rather than waiting until it is forced upon you. You ideally want to be acting out of thought-out, long-term decision making, rather than necessity or desperation. That is why effective change management is so important.

Take Kodak, for example. They spent years fighting against the digital revolution, instead trying fruitlessly to innovate with film products. By the time they realised they had no choice but to focus on the digital market, it was too late. They went bankrupt as a result.

Damage limitation

There is absolutely no doubt that, when undertaking a significant period of change, whether voluntarily or by necessity, there is always going to be a risk of collateral damage to your organisation.

That damage could come in the form of a loss of employee engagement, increased turnover of talented staff, or even external reputational damage if the change does not go to plan or has negative consequences.

The change manager’s role is to guide the organisation through the change in a way that limits (or preferably prevents) that damage from occurring. In an economic environment where change occurs frequently, effective change management is therefore one of the most vital and valuable skillsets there is.
The behaviours of an effective change manager

The responsibility for managing change does not lie with the individual employees. They can only be expected to continue doing their jobs to the best of their abilities. It is the change manager who is responsible for facilitating and enabling the change.

That distinction – facilitation and enablement over training or dictation – is vitally important. The prospect of change can evoke very negative emotions in people if not presented in the right way. You don’t want people to feel like change is being forced upon them – you want them to be willing participants, supporters of the greater cause. And if the change is being done for the right reasons, there will be a greater cause.

Own the vision, and share it
Whether change is on the horizon, or is already underway, withholding key information is not going to win employees over. You may have a sound understanding of why the change is necessary. You may be aware that the company needs to change in order to remain competitive, otherwise the bottom line will suffer, meaning potential disaster and even future job losses, but that doesn't mean the rest of the organisation is aware.

Your employees are not mind-readers. If you do not provide the positive reasons for implementing change, they will be left to make their own minds up. And you can’t guarantee they will see things the same way you do.

Involve the right people
Particularly in large organisations, however, the job of communicating the change vision is far too large for one person. It is therefore a good idea to nominate ‘change champions’ across the business – individuals who can get behind the message and communicate it to the relevant people in their area.

And don’t feel you always have to choose people who already back your cause, as management and leadership L&D consultant Mike Davies explains:

“One of the biggest misconceptions is that you should always pick people who already back what you’re trying to do. Sometimes it pays to do the opposite – healthy scepticism is good, because people may point out potential problems.”
Don’t be ‘cloak and dagger’

It is important to involve as many people as possible in the change process. This serves two purposes: Firstly, you can gauge a great deal from people’s reaction to the prospect of change, and it pays to listen to that feedback. It could be that the change is not the best idea, and employees may be able to see that.

Secondly, by enabling people across the business to shape the change and be a part of it, you are much likely to get commitment from the wider community, and engagement levels will suffer less as a result.

Don’t drag it out

Often, change is inevitable. But that doesn’t mean it needs to last longer than necessary. The key to limiting the damage caused by disengagement is to get the change completed as quickly as possible and limit the disruption.

This all comes down to properly planning and managing the project. If you do come up against unexpected barriers, however, and things are going to be delayed, be sure to communicate the reasons with your staff.

Remember you are dealing with human beings.

For some people, there can be a genuine emotional attachment to their role or the way they do things, particularly for those who have worked at the company for a number of years. Always be aware that people may react emotionally to change.

Be sensitive to people’s emotions, and support them throughout the change process. It can be frustrating when people are resistant to change, but not everybody reacts to things in the same way, and people take differing amounts of time and persuasion to become comfortable with something new.

“Sudden, significant change can be a bit like grief in some ways: you go through emotions like shock, anxiety, fear, denial. Then, eventually, you move on”

Mike Davies, management and leadership L&D consultant

“Treat people with respect – no matter how trivial something might seem to you, for the people going through the change it’s very real”

Colin Forster, management and leadership L&D consultant
The Change Curve model is based upon the four key stages most people go through when adjusting to change:

1. Shock, denial
2. Anger, fear
3. Acceptance
4. Commitment

Once you have a solid understanding of the Change Curve, you can use that knowledge to minimise the negative impact of a change programme and help people adapt more quickly and effectively.

**Stage 1 – shock, denial**

No matter how well you plan a change, the reality is that some people will still be hit hard by its arrival, and some may take a while to adjust. At this stage, people will want answers – they will want to know what is happening and why.

The key to navigating this stage is communication, making sure people know where they can get the information they need, and being available to answer any questions employees have.

**Stage 2 – anger, fear**

At this stage, people may begin to feel negative emotions towards the change, such as concern, anger, resentment, or fear, and they may begin to resist the change or vent their feelings.

This is a potentially hazardous phase, and it is crucial to manage it in a planned and controlled way. Carefully consider any objections, and make sure you address them as early as possible, communicating clearly and honestly.

**Stage 3 – acceptance**

Once you make it to stage 3, you have reached a turning point. At this stage, the worst is over, and you will much closer to making a success of the change process.

Employees will learn and explore what the change means to them at this stage. They will do this at their own pace, but it is important to support them in doing so, whether through learning initiatives or simply allowing them the necessary time to reflect.

**Stage 4 – commitment**

This is the stage at which the changes have become fully grounded in the organisation, i.e. employees have embraced the changes in their everyday work and the business is reaping the benefit.

At this stage, you can call the change a success. But it is important to communicate that success to all stakeholders. This solidifies its importance to those affected, while also helping to secure buy-in for any future change projects.
The top five actions to keep in mind

“Sometimes change is welcome, sometimes it is unwelcome. In the latter case, it can be very unsettling for individuals. Those who can, i.e. your most talented people, may simply leave”

Colin Forster, management and leadership L&D consultant

1. Plan

Before any change process takes place, or even any decisions about whether to undergo a significant change, certain questions need to be asked (and answered). Lots of organisations look at what they want to change, but not all of them ask why.

There is a lot to think about before deciding on a change project. What are the benefits? What are the risks? Are we balancing those benefits and risks and ensuring the former outweighs the latter?

One of the reasons a large proportion of change initiatives are reported as not having worked is that many organisations do not undertake the necessary level of planning and analysis before making the decision to go ahead with the change.

2. Achieve buy-in/commitment

The first people from whom buy-in should be achieved are senior leaders within the business. This is an essential step. If senior influencers are committed to what you are trying to do, they can act as champions, filtering that enthusiasm down through the organisation and helping to remove some of the potential barriers.

You also need to achieve organisational buy-in. If you don’t, you risk alienating your staff and, at worst, losing them.

3. Communicate

This is by far the most important point of the five. Imagine that you are the individual employee, and your employer tells you huge changes are happening, but they don’t tell you why. Or imagine you find out about the change via a colleague in the lunch queue, rather than hearing it from the people instigating the change. How would it make you feel?

A lack of communication can seriously damage moral, and prevent you from achieving the necessary buy-in and commitment from your staff. It is therefore vital that you keep people updated at every point in the change process. Tell them why the change is happening, how it will affect them, and what they can do if they have any problems or queries.

“Communication is absolutely crucial, not just at the beginning, but throughout the entire change process”

Mike Davies, management and leadership L&D consultant

4. Review and adjust

In the world of learning and development, we are constantly talking about the need to assess everything you do and adjust as necessary, not just before and after, but at regular points during the intervention.

Going through a change programme is no different – it is absolutely essential that you keep reviewing what is working, what isn’t, where the impact has been, the budget, the reception, then take the necessary steps to fix any issues as they arise.

Don’t continue with something that is clearly not working. Better to change trajectory early on in the change process than to get so far into it that the damage is irreversible. Consistent assessment and adjustment will enable you to keep on top of the change programme’s success.

5. Be resilient

Resilience is hugely important when going through a significant change. The truth is, many change programmes that could have been successful probably failed, in part, because the organisation in question could not overcome the barriers that presented themselves.

“Communicate as much as possible, as soon as possible. People are much more likely to endure an uncomfortable situation if they can see a good reason for it”

Colin Forster, management and leadership L&D consultant
Potential barriers to change, and how to overcome them

**Resistance**

Naturally you are going to experience some resistance to change, and this could be for a number of reasons. It could be that people have been doing the same thing for a long time, and feel a sense of attachment to doing things ‘the old way.’ It could be that they don’t see the point in going through the change, or perhaps they think it is a bad idea altogether (note: in some cases, they might be right, so do take on board any negative feedback).

The important thing here, once you are sure that the change really is the right course of action, is to properly communicate your vision and message so that people can see the benefits. Nominate ‘change champions’ across different parts of the business, and get buy-in from senior influencers. This will make the job of getting people on board and involved much easier.

But remember: everybody reacts to change in their own way, on their own time scales, so make allowances for that.

**Timing**

Sometimes it is just not the right time for a business to go through a change. In the case of Kodak, as mentioned above, the timing was far too late. Equally, an organisation might make a change before they are really ready for it.

The way to overcome this potential issue, again, comes back to the research stage – making sure the change really is the right thing for the organisation at that particular time and assessing all the potential pitfalls. But it is also important to take an outward-facing look at the things which might affect your business in future.

“Some organisations are very inward-looking, but it is important to be open-minded and aware of what is happening outside – just because something doesn’t immediately affect your business, that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be thinking about it”

Colin Forster, management and leadership L&D consultant

**Financial**

This is perhaps the most obvious barrier. No matter how vital the change programme is, if the financial situation of the business cannot support it then that change simply cannot happen.

The way to overcome this is to plan, plan, and plan again. Work out the costs of the required change, deciding exactly how much can realistically be dedicated to the programme.

Then, keep assessing and reassign the budget at every stage of the project. This is where the need to review and adjust becomes particularly important – it is not just about seeing whether the change is going as planned and on time, but also about whether the change is on budget.
Contact us

If you have any questions, or if there is anything within this guide on which you would like further clarification, or if you would like to know how Thales Learning & Development can help you identify your own learning and development needs, please do not hesitate to contact us.