

Leadership Activities for Effective Team Change.

Whilst the concept of **Change Management** has had many books and articles written on it for leaders aiming to implement change on a local level these can seem overly complex and ignore the fact that change is happening all around us every day in our personal and business lives. It might be considered therefore that the relevant questions to consider about change are as much to do with its ongoing effective management as with its implementation. If we see change as an inevitable part of our environment driven by the pressures on business then as leaders our role should be to develop a process to engage with people, gaining their confidence and trust to enable them to make the personal adjustments required to ensure smooth transitions.

Of course for large organisations strategies for change are driven from a corporate or global perspective and require huge effort to redirect resources. This is the realm of large consultancies providing extensive research and coaching services and may take years to develop and implement. The reality of many business environments however is that leaders often need to make smaller process, structural and cultural changes to their teams or business's without the benefit of combined consultancy best practice and support. For these leaders working with real people at the front line of the business these smaller incremental changes provide a more personal and visible challenge to their leadership skills.

Working with clients has shown that often leaders postpone or poorly implement change due to fear of unsettling the team or creating even more difficult situations to manage. The effect of this is to create a stop start environment where the same difficult situations have to be dealt with over and over again. For people to respond positively to change situations they must have the confidence and trust of their leader and this will only come from a visible and consistent approach. If the leadership is not confident and clear how can their people be?

By developing a structured and consistent approach both the leader and the team/organisation can build a pool of knowledge and experience that can be drawn upon during each successive process providing incrementally smoother implementation and quicker business benefits.

This article aims to identify steps to thinking through and implementing change on a local level although the approach could provide a template for larger process. The focus is on the leader and their people. There is no way this approach can be described as rocket science or groundbreaking however it covers the areas that have contributed to or stalled success over some of the projects I have worked on. It provides more of a thinking template than a tick list.

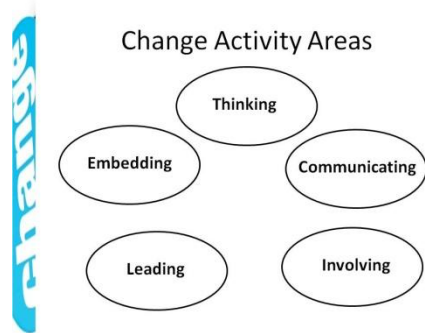
With that in mind I have divided this approach into five activity areas that leaders may wish to spend time on as the situation demands. The emphasis may change depending on the nature of the change or the experience of the leader or team.

Activity 1, Thinking it Through

For many leaders gaining the mental space to think through the future requirements of their

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team or business can be difficult due to the pressures of the business environment. There can sometimes be an awareness that things need to be different or a feeling of dissatisfaction with the current situation that seems important at the time but can be pushed back as other more immediate priorities emerge. Leaders need to create reflective space to explore these ideas and feelings over time and allow a period of gestation and idea development.



Leaders must be clear in their own mind of what change they wish to implement/ why it is appropriate and the benefits it will provide. Leaders who do not do this display fuzzy thinking and will not create a firm foundation for the process. Other questions to be considered are the potential implications of the change on people and their possible reaction and support. This reflective thinking process takes time but allows the leader to build their own confidence and explore potential issues that the change may produce. Whilst it is important to think in output terms equal time may need to be given to the people implications. Many leaders who have not thought through their reasons properly can come across as vague or unprepared when explaining their ideas to more senior management.

A second aspect of the thinking stage is to be able to develop a vision that will effectively communicate the change to the wider audience. The vision is the synthesis of the

leader's ideas and is the start and end point for explanations and discussions. Rather than being an exercise in management speak this vision provides clarity and a reference point that all involved can relate to.

It should be simple and clear, could you explain it to a 5 year old? If not it could be too complex to be meaningful. For some leaders I have worked with it is difficult to make things complex enough for them. The vision is your headline message, your positioning statement for gaining the support of the people concerned.

Activity 2, Communicating the Message

To gain commitment to the change message leaders should engage support from those the change may both directly and indirectly affect. A leader may need support from senior management, other departments and customers, they should be able to realise the benefits for the proposal and understand its implications.

Those directly effected, the team and the individuals in it should as a matter of respect be properly briefed and notified. In this case the quality of the Thinking Stage will have a direct impact on the quality of the message. The basis of the briefings or communication should be the vision and the thinking that has led to it.

The effective leader uses the vision as the headline grab for discussions and the thinking that led up to anticipate potential objections. This positions the leaders thinking as clear and the proposal necessary.

Leaders should take every opportunity to communicate the message through 1:1 sessions, team meetings and peer meetings. Leaders may also find it effective to engage in more informal approaches with key people

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who may be seen as supporters or potential saboteurs.

To back up the message and appeal to a wide set of communication styles leaders should publish their vision if appropriate along with a distilled overview of the thinking process that led to it.

Activity 3, Involving.

Effective leaders will recognise that involvement and participation will potentially lead to greater commitment and support. Leaders should be open about receiving ideas and welcome questions.

The tangible consideration and inclusion of value adding ideas will help people feel involved and valued in the process and demonstrate that it is a process done with people rather than to them. Of course there are some business threatening changes that are not open to involvement and require immediate action but for business development and improvement change the openness and transparency of the process will build confidence.

The involving stage is a good time to gauge the commitment of the population. Their effectiveness of their personal contribution will be based on their understanding of the need for change and the impact it will have on their activities or aspirations. People will often contribute more ideas if the issue is positioned around themselves and what they do. Involving people in the planning and execution provides an environment where people can internalise the message in their own way and create their own frame of reference.

For some leaders there is a fear that change will always be seen as negative and people do not want to move outside their comfort zones. This can lead to not tackling issues to

the detriment of business development. Leaders who actively engage in involvement are often pleasantly surprised by peoples support for change they understand.

Some leaders create a list of frequently asked questions from the groups and distribute it to all concerned.

Activity 4, Leading

It may be an unreasonable goal, depending on the change proposal to expect every one to be on board however that should not stop the process. If you do not have the support of key influencers than it may be you have to do more communicating and involving. If the bulk of support is in place than the changes should be implemented whilst the message is clear in people's minds. If there is too long a delay then momentum is lost providing time for enthusiasm to drop or resentment to develop. Implement the change swiftly and act as though it is business as usual. It is important to provide any training or support and where possible this can be best done on the job. Create the new environment and expose people to it early. During this time it is vital that leaders and key people within the team act as role models and visibly support new behaviours and practice.

This support will often be most effective in terms of recognition and 1:1 feedback. Individuals displaying the required levels of change should be recognised appropriately and those not supported to improve performance. There should be a high level of focus on the new activity to ensure it is seen as important and worthy of leadership attention. If this is not evident then it is easy for people to return to previous practice. This is often the case with behavioural or culture change that people are not committed to.

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Activity 5, Embedding

To ensure the change is seen as business as usual the process and its consequences should be kept high on the leadership and team agenda. Depending on its nature and scale it might be included as an agenda item in team meetings and reviewed in appraisal meetings and 1:1 sessions.

Some managers have included in this activity process reviews to get feedback on the success of the change both as a discrete item and also as a process in itself. By reviewing change in this way leaders build an expectation for future change and confidence in their team.

In Summary

- Understand the need for the change you wish to see and think through its implications. Avoid fuzzy thinking by giving yourself time to develop your ideas.
- Create a vision to sell to your people and others concerned. Keep it simple and use it as the basis for your communication and influencing activity.
- Canvas support from the people who can help or hinder the change. Get people on your side so you can rely on them when you choose to communicate wider.
- Be clear in your message. Don't overcomplicate things but ensure you have the thinking behind the message to back up your proposal.
- Be inclusive by being open and transparent in your process. Invite ideas and questions as the process will help people internalise the message.

- Start immediately you have support to take advantage of momentum and show you are serious.
- Role model the change you seek, you should be its best advocate and supporter.
- Provide feedback to all, encouraging and redirecting as required. Show you are noticing activity.
- Maintain momentum by highlighting emerging benefits and laying the process foundations for future change

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