

Improving results by developing your change leadership capability

Change is not what it used to be! The only certainty we have about next week is that it will certainly be different from today. That's one reason the ability to manage change effectively has become so critical for organisations to survive.



While the good news is that there are many concepts available to help companies identify what to improve, the bad news is that most fail as soon as they enter the change implementation phase.

The question is, why is lasting change so difficult?

Most change projects put a lot of energy and money into assessing the opportunities, developing a strategy, analysing the situation and communicating the business need for change. Those projects that survive this "thinking" phase often then continue by launching pilots. A small team, sponsored by the senior leadership team and supported by external or internal consultants, develops a 'blueprint' solution for the rest of the business. But presenting this ideal 'blueprint' is most often the last sign of life. Moving from a pilot phase to full implementation either never happens or takes so long that by the end the external conditions have changed so much that the results are disappointing. What remains are puzzled senior leaders and project leads jumping for the next magic formula—and the story begins again.

A common misunderstanding that some senior executives have about change efforts is that there is one big fix, a quantum leap forward that if delivered will then allow you to rest for a few years. Unfortunately, this is only an illusion. What most leaders find is that as soon as they launch one effort, the marketplace forces them to change in other areas as well. Change becomes like a never-ending marathon race.

Another misconception is that if ideas work well on paper everyone in the organisation will quickly buy-in. So, a lot of good thinking and energy goes into developing a strategy and designing the effort. After this phase, people assume that the implementation will soon follow. But, real change works exactly the opposite way: The most difficult part is the implementation.

These false assumptions have triggered a move toward change in perspective. In the past, the focus was on process and technology, not people. Now, most leaders realise that the most important element of every change effort is to change the way people do things i.e. change their behaviour. For organisations to change, people must change. Unfortunately, this is also the most difficult part of every change effort.



Our understanding of change management and the deployment of Lean Sigma has changed significantly over the last few decades.

The first generation of focused change management programmes began as being mechanistically led. Once an organisation's leadership realised the need for change, they developed a change strategy and ordered people to change. Internal or external 'experts' told line management what to do.

This approach did not work too well, and even when things changed the results could not be sustained.

The second generation recognised the need to involve staff. Most of these improvement programs comprised broad, corporate-wide training and education programmes. Employees were taught the organisations change strategy and were given a set of tools to use. The underlying assumption was that changing people's attitudes would modify people's behaviour, which would inevitably lead to some results. This approach was very popular in the early days of Total Quality Management (TQM).

Sponsorship of these efforts came from the corporate level, and programme effectiveness was often measured by the number of training days per employee. However, many organisations began to realise that teaching alone did not change behaviours. What seemed logical and rational in the training session was not always applicable in the real world. Often, the training did not help to improve bottom line results. Employees developed expectations but were frustrated when they could not apply their new knowledge and skills immediately. At best these programs were irrelevant, at worst they promoted cynical behaviour and inoculated people against change.

The third generation, including Lean Sigma focused change management emphasised ideas that employees implemented themselves such as breakthrough improvement projects. This practical approach focused on solving concrete and specific business problems through teams, aiming for breakthrough results. Training was aimed specifically at those involved in the pilot projects.

These projects were usually quite successful, at least during the pilot phase. However, a narrow focus, such as a single process or piece of equipment, and the difficulty in involving the entire organisation due to lack of resources, made it very difficult to roll out the projects successfully.

Conclusion

Strong change leadership succeeds when all phases are managed successfully as an integrated process; Designing; Training; Piloting; Roll-Out.

The focus should be as concrete as possible, concentrating on real business problems instead of abstract concepts or undefined issues.

Measurable results are critical for any successful change project, especially in organisations that are already known for never reaching the implementation phase.

Without results, it is extremely difficult to obtain buy-in from employees and management. Even more important, these results must be sustained and replicated. Success attracts people, and learning new behaviours is most likely learned from a successful model. It is also critical to involve the entire organisation to realise the effort's full potential.

Early attempts at change failed not because of a bad concept, overly complicated tools and techniques, or poor ideas, but because people were not held responsible for solving the problems they identified.

If you have a question around Change Leadership, or if you're looking for support with a specific situation, or maybe you'd like to develop your own coaching/mentoring skills – feel free to get in touch on 01926 633333 alternatively you can email us at info@bourton.co.uk.