

Change Management: a quick overview

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Change management can be described as a structured approach for transitioning individuals, teams, and Organizations from a current state to a desired future state to fulfill or implement a vision and strategy. The origin of the change usually comes from a wake-up call that something is putting the Organization in jeopardy (“Why”). The danger can come from external sources such as economic pressure from competitors or internal reasons like performance issues. Once the problem has been identified, the next step is to find what should be changed. This is where the Organization, through the senior management, has to identify the reasons of the problem and define a vision of the future. This vision shall be a projection of how the organization should evolve in order to function better with the objective of eradicating the problem. Once the vision is clear, the senior management can start developing a strategy (“How”) which needs to identify the extent of the change (“What”), the people involved (“Who”) and the timeline (“When”) for the different stages composing the change.

A fruitful reorganization must take into account several important factors. First of all senior management needs to integrate staff expectations in its vision before sharing it with all staff members implicated in the shift. It’s a key element to get the staff feeling involved in the change process. Making the information flow both ways between low and high levels of the hierarchy and taking into account the feedback from the field will reinforce that sentiment and increase the commitment level. This approach will lead to having the whole organization feeling as being an essential part of the change which is a crucial step for success.

A second key aspect is the pressure for change. The senior management shall demonstrate a continuous commitment to the change. It needs to adapt its behavior according to the defined strategy and continuously communicate on the ongoing change during the whole process. Failing to do so and only emphasizing the need for change at the beginning of the mutation could cause the whole process to get stuck before completion. The pressure for change also includes a feeling of urgency by insisting on the fact the change needs to happen in a given timeframe. This will encourage people to engage more in the process and giving higher priority to it.

The capacity for change is another important factor. The idea behind this concept is to give the staff all resources it needs during the transition phase. For instance there might be a need for additional staff or for current staff training to reach a given strategy step. Money may be needed for extra expenses not included in the standard budgetary provision. Another resource often undervalued is time. At the beginning of the process, and even when the final goal is to make people more efficient, changing the way they work often increases the time they need just to reach the same level of efficiency. For instance, in the learning phase, some extra time will be needed to get used to the new processes and during the transition phase the old and the new processes could co-exist both together at the same time. Failing to take the time constraint into account could put too much pressure on the staff who could lose commitment and feel disgruntled.

The next factor we will consider is related to the structure of the whole change management process. While plenty of specific models exist depending on the type of change required, the Plan Do Check Act (PDCA) cycle approach seems appropriate in all situations. At first, a proper "Planning" will avoid a lot of mistakes during the next phases. Afterwards, the planned changes are effectively put in place according to state-of-the-art practices during the "Do" phase. After the implementation stage, an audit should be conducted to "Check" if the changes are providing the expected outcome by measuring their effectiveness. Based on the results, adjustments can be made during the "Act" phase to correct what is not working correctly. The cycle should then be restarted at least until the initial goals are reached but ideally it should become an ongoing process leading to continuous improvement.

Last but not least, we should also consider what is probably the most important element in the change management process, namely the human factor. Being stressed by change is in the human behavior but the good news is that it's possible to influence how it is perceived. That's why the change process shall be adapted to minimize the negative stress generated by the fear of change which is getting people out of their comfort zone. Indeed it is possible to transform it in a positive stress by reducing the feeling of uncertainty thanks to a good communication and a sharing of a clear vision. Practically this can be achieved by fixing objectives that the staff finds relevant and achievable in order to increase commitment. It is also important to understand that the main obstacle faced during major organizational changes comes from employee resistance. This can be explained by the Bridges transition model. During the first phase, people need to accept that they will have to let go the old situation which they are comfortable with. It can generate fear, resentment and apathy. During the second phase named the Neutral zone, the staff is in the gap where the "old" no longer works and the "new" hasn't been established yet. This can cause confusion and decreased motivation resulting in lack of productivity. Finally, in the last phase, and assuming the change management process has been successful, people feel new energy and new identity and are ready to rebuild and cooperate. While it is beyond the scope of this document to explain how, it is important for the management to understand that the bad feelings encountered by the staff during the 2 initial phases can and should be mitigated in order to improve change management efficiency.

To conclude, in this fast and continuously evolving world, change is needed more than ever to allow human Organizations adapting to new challenges. Far beyond simply following static procedures written on paper, successful change management has to be underpinned by a shared vision, a rock solid strategy, a strong staff and management commitment and a deep integration of the change in the Organization culture. It is only under these conditions that an Organization can guarantee continuous improvement and ensure its future sustainability. Indeed, as pointed out by Charles Darwin: *"it is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones who are most responsive to change"* and we believe this statement also applies to all human structures.