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Harnessing the power of human dynamics in organizational change

When was the last time you went through a change? Maybe you moved cities. Got married. Or became a parent. What we probably all agree on is that we are surrounded by a changing environment and constantly adapting to it. Reacting to or acting on changes is a skill vital for us to function and survive as human beings. At the same time we are creatures of habit. Most of us like a certain dose of routine in our lives. It makes the day more predictable, it allows to continuously improve our patterns. It gives us a sense of stability, of development and something to rely on. Each change, be it positive or negative, wanted or unwanted, pushes us out of our comfort zone or at least out of a routine that we have created for ourselves to function efficiently. Change acts as a disruptor, creating a form of energy or positive stress; a tension that triggers new learning and pushes us to deal with a new reality.

The same applies to organizational changes. A corporation will hardly change as long as its people do not change. Harnessing these emotional and human dynamics in the right way can help an organization to successfully manage uncertain times.

Reactions towards change are normal

Over the last years I have regularly conducted a short exercise with clients and university students. I ask the audience to take a pen and write their names on a sheet of paper. (As you are reading, I welcome you to try it.) Upon completion they are told to repeat, now with the pen in their other hand. This disrupts the natural way of writing one's name, introducing a new way of writing, while keeping the tools (paper, pen) and environment unchanged. Unsurprisingly, the quality of their handwriting changes. The focus on the exercise, however, lies on people's behaviors. The commotion in the room significantly rises when people are asked to change their hands, questions are being asked and people start to show emotional responses to this unfamiliar situation. I have observed people respond in quite diverse ways and they later described their experience as "it was frustrating", "it felt awkward" or "it was actually fun and went better than I thought".

These verbal and non-verbal reactions showcase the multitude of different reactions towards a contained and non-threatening change. What I have never experienced during this exercise though, is no response. The change is too real and tangible not to react.

Equally a wide array of different responses occur in organizational change situations. One might find people who actively endorse a particular change, 'fence sitters' who are not quite sure what to make out of the new situation and wait and see without taking much action, blockers who openly block in a sometimes destructive way, and people who quietly resist or change positions depending on who they speak to.

The aim of business change management - a common misconception - is not to eliminate emotions. It is vital for an organization to react. Emotions do not hinder change, but if channeled and managed in a constructive way, they accelerate and 'make change happen'.

Know your stakeholders

In order to effectively lead people through a change initiative and manage potential and expected emotions, one needs to have a clear understanding who in an organization will be directly or indirectly impacted. Missing critical stakeholders can slow down or potentially derail a project. Asking the right questions from the start helps to get a clear picture: Who is impacted by the change? (e.g. all or certain departments or locations); how are they impacted by the change? (e.g. will their roles change; are they expected to use different technology or start interacting with different departments); how are they likely to perceive the change? (e.g. will they regard the change as loss of power; are they at risk of change fatigue due to other ongoing projects; do they have the right skill set required and is there sufficient support and resources to take on the change); what do you expect from each stakeholder group? (e.g. who is required to act as a champion to help drive the change project; who is not directly impacted but needs to be aware and kept informed); is there an external party (e.g. media, labour unions) that needs to be involved?.

Every change programme quickly paints a quite diverse stakeholder audience with different communication needs. For example, a CFO and a clerk both work towards the same strategic goal, however what matters to them in their roles and daily jobs differs. Programmes can lose a lot of effort, time and resources in devising well-meant communication activities to the wrong audience with the wrong messages.

One organization I worked with started a communication campaign, informing departments about a project and what it will bring to the company. Townhalls and presentations happened at the right time within the project, were well prepared and delivered by top management in order to create the need and urgency for change. Yet, they produced little impact. The presentations failed to meaningfully translate the content to the audience and the message got lost. In fact, slides from project updates to senior management were re-used without tailoring them to a non-managerial or non-technical audience. In a nutshell, the project team failed to put themselves into the shoes of others, re-thinking their messages and deploying the language relevant to their audience.

Regularly monitoring the reactions and needs of different stakeholders and adapting messages and activities accordingly is key to successful and impactful communication. A question always helpful to go by is: "After my meeting, what do I want the audience to know, think and feel?". Different reactions and personality types require different communication.

Worry, if there is no response!

It is a misconception that a project is running well, if there is limited reaction or response. It is actually the time to get worried and look deeper. Without response or even resistance people might feel unaffected by the change, and prevent organizational learning.

Once I observed a lack of visible response from employees to a change project, which affected a highly diverse and global employee base. Mobilizing, energizing and enabling the organization to adopt a new set of behavior determined the success of the project to realize the benefits of the business case. A closer look showed that the reason why people did not fully identify with the project was not so much about a lack of information. The purpose and the benefits the change would bring to their business were understood and widely accepted. What remained unclear to employees, though, was how the project mattered to them in their individual roles and thus failed to see the level of their engagement and energy that was required from them to make this change happen. The changes top management talked about were too abstract to grasp and felt too removed from their daily challenges on the shopfloor. This resulted in a lack of response to the programme, questions asked or actions taken.

It was critical to create momentum as quickly as possible and to move people away from being a 'spectator of change' to becoming 'part of the change'.

Make people participators in change

A lot of projects talk about what will change. A few projects show what will change and how the new world might look and feel like. Making the change real, painting the change journey by showcasing what it means and exploring how individuals are affected in their roles gives an organization the opportunity to learn and get engaged. Involvement allows people to take part in shaping the organization's future within set boundaries. Naturally, an organization has resource and skill limitations, and involving too many in a decision-making process is neither effective nor wanted. However, identifying the right key stakeholders to form working groups will ensure teams and departments that their business needs are being represented. Again, engagement is part of stakeholder management and requires to be tailored to each stakeholder group.

Create a 'Pull-Effect'

Engagement can happen in various forms, and some of the most effective ones I have seen are focus groups, shadowing and rotations to learn from each other, show fairs for people to get in touch with new technology, and simple games to entice curiosity. Communication is often based on a one-way push-effect, pushing information out to an audience. If a project achieves to create a 'pull-effect', having the business ask for information and exchange ideas, chances of sustainable project success and adoption levels are high.

When dealing with a highly diverse blue and white collar population, the use of simple comics has proved effective to engage a critical mass. Comics can be a fun, illustrative and accessible way to explain different scenarios how people's daily work will change. Posters on walls across the office and the shopfloor will invite people to discuss with colleagues and team leads what these changes mean to them at their work stations. At the same time, the creation of such comics acts an engagement activity in itself. Department leaders are engaged and asked to explain to the artist how the project will transform their way of working. This will force them to break the change down and consider what it really means to their teams.

Another engaging activity are show fares, inviting to try out new technology that is about to be introduced. It encourages employees to share opinions and past experience, increasing the con-

fidence in their colleagues, who are less familiar with the new system or equipment At the same time people start talking with their colleagues, spreading the word via unofficial channels and driving the change from within.

Manage expectations

Achieving to have an organization and its stakeholders appreciate what the change means to them in their roles is intrinsically important to the change process. At the same time this is the time when the change becomes more tangible and real. Individuals start to understand the implications and realize that the change requires them to actually behave or work differently and leave their comfort zone For some it might require a new skill set to learn, a new organizational structure to navigate, or an increased work load to cope with before the benefits start to show. This is often a turning point where people might feel overwhelmed. Managing expectations, providing strong leadership support and sharing early success stories help to instill confidence and keep focused.

Leadership support

Going through change, even in a professional context, is something personal. It changes the environment we spend a significant time of our days in. It creates uncertainty. Leaders who visibly sponsor the change and live the new ways of working, send a clear sign that a particular change is necessary and most importantly 'doable'. I personally experienced two projects that operated with an equally resourceful and high-performance project team. One project struggled, one project went viral throughout the organization and won multiple industry awards. The former lacked the consistent leadership, sending mixed signals through the business. The latter was sponsored by a leader who personally spearheaded the initiative by walking the talk and acting as unapologetic role model.

While change programmes are dependent on a complex array of different factors, leaders inspiring an organization to learn and grow with change undeniably play an intrinsic role in successfully managing change and making it sustainable.

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Annahmeschluss: 11.09.2017