

The precursor to change

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Every organisation is constantly changing and evolving. Those that didn't change, probably no longer exist and we've seen many examples of these recently. So, with change being a critical fact of business life, how well do we manage change across organisations?

Not very well it seems.

A startling 75% of all change management initiatives fail. That's a worrying statistic. On top of this, 33% of change fails because of poor management behaviour not supporting change. It seems we're in good hands then...

It would be useful to understand why change has become such an important issue. In the recent Deloitte Human Capital Trends Report 2019, the top leadership challenge identified for the 21st century was the 'ability to lead through more complexity and ambiguity'.

Considering all of the technology and data we have at our fingertips which is meant to make our lives easier, this seems initially contradictory. But technology itself, has a huge part to play with regards to the pace at which things are changing, combine this with the sheer volume of data being generated by all this technology, and it's easy to see why the solution has also become the problem.

The greater the uncertainty or change, the greater the risk of a threat.

Effective decision-making within organisations needs to be based upon accurate information. It's impossible for many organisations to sift through all the data being generated, to triangulate it and identify insights, allowing them to come to informed and impactful decisions.

Add to this the question of how often strategies should be reviewed as a result of this pace of change and volume of data, and it becomes obvious why things are complex and ambiguous. This explains why so many organisations seem to have reverted to an emergent strategy – gone are the days of rigid three- to five-year plans.

As a result of focusing on limited aspects of the huge amount of data that organisations are being bombarded with, leaders can begin to incorporate 'gut feel', biases, and outcomes

from previous experiences, no matter how closely related they may or may not have been to the issue at hand.

This can seem to provide a level of certainty compared with the complex world of data ambiguity.

Insights from neuroscience have shown that our brains crave certainty. Our brains are constantly looking for ways of working as efficiently as possible. This is why habits play such a crucial role, allowing our brains to momentarily 'power down', as we go through ingrained routines, saving valuable 'brain energy'.

When things begin to change around us, especially at work when change can impact upon our established structures and routines, our brains go into high alert, scanning the changing environment for possible threats. The greater the uncertainty or change, the greater the risk of a threat.

Data may highlight insights that contradict what we believe or what we see, and this can also create uncertainty. It's a bit like relying on your Sat Nav for journey information, and it sending you off on a different route to the one you are used to.

Many of us end up choosing to ignore the Sat Nav at this point, thinking it must be wrong, relying on the certainty of what we know, only to often realise that the Sat Nav was actually taking us on a route to avoid the heavy traffic we're now stuck in. It's happened to us all!

But in the workplace, we don't always get to see the impact of our actions as directly as seeing the 'traffic' that the data was trying to help us avoid. This can then reinforce our view of the world as we repeat our approach to decision-making, through the perceived certainty of 'gut feel' and biases.

Just to be clear, the impact of these decisions will come out in the data somewhere – if you take time to look.

Now consider the employee's perception of the people making the changes, which is often the senior leaders, who very few people know within the organisation or can relate to.

This environment where leaders are remote and often not visible, not very well known, often making decisions without the involvement of employees, combined with a lack of transparency of the data used to make the decisions for change, form the components for a failed change programme.

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Communication and clarity are a key focus area in any change programme. Sharing why change is needed, as well what is and isn't going to change, is crucial. There's nothing worse than speculation. Often any news considered bad news is removed from any organisational communication cascade, as leaders might want to protect employees.

But an important consideration that is often missed, is that any news can provide certainty, the phrase 'no news is good news' really does not apply, as even bad news is better than no news.

There are many examples of where even in situations of redundancy and downsizing, engagement levels have gone up, because of the certainty provided through transparent communication which allowed employees to plan ahead and prepare for change. But then, consider who it is communicating.

If the leaders are relying on managers to cascade the communication to the organisation, it further reinforces the lack of visible leadership, leaving managers to communicate to their teams, without a clear understanding of why the change is happening, and the insights that led to the decision.

No-one wants to work in an environment of mistrust, yet the uncertainty of change, combined with leaders who you cannot relate to, making decisions that you cannot understand, and often with little communication, means you have exactly that, an environment of mistrust.

Is it any wonder then that 33% of managers don't support change? This might sound like every change programme is doomed from the onset, but this is not the case, as leaders can take comfort from the research into trust by [Paul Zak](#).

Taking time to build genuine relationships with employees, for them to understand that the leaders making these decisions appreciate the challenges they face, that they are close to what's happening on the front-line, and have a shared vision to make the organisation great (rather than seeking individual gains), can have a huge impact on improving trust in the workplace.

Engaging with employees, sharing the challenges the organisation is facing, being transparent with the data that has been analysed, and seeking input and feedback are critical precursors to any change programme. The old adage that two heads (or many heads) are better than one really does apply.

When change is then implemented, far from being resisted, there's a strong possibility that it could be embraced, as it doesn't then feel imposed, but a change decided by the organisation as a collective, to make the organisation better for all.

About the author

Amrit Sandhar is the founder of The Engagement Coach.