

WHY CHANGE EFFORTS FAIL

Abstract

"There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who profit by the new" - Niccolo Machiavelli C15th.

500 years later, Machiavelli's insight seems more relevant than ever. In today's business context, more than 70% of all change efforts fail, and failed change is the #1 reason why leaders get fired. Not surprisingly, a whole 'change management' industry has emerged in the last two decades promising salvation from such overwhelming failure. Unfortunately, this movement is similarly fraught since the very concept of 'change management' is an oxymoron; how do you manage something that is unpredictable, unstable and uncontrollable?

It is our contention that most change efforts are built upon the shaky foundation of five flawed assumptions; that change can be managed, that human beings are objective, that there are 'X' steps to change, that we have a neutral starting point for change, and that change, itself, is the goal.

In a departure from traditional perspectives on 'change management', we propose five enabling assumptions upon which to build change efforts, namely; uncertainty is our friend, change efforts require one part confidence, two parts humility and three parts sense of humour, context before content, trust changes everything, and the goal is the goal (and alignment is the process).

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SECTION 1 - WHY CHANGE EFFORTS FAIL

Flawed Assumption 1: Change can be managed

The first challenge of change failure is historical; many of today's popular change theories were conceived in the 1980s when comparative stability was the norm, and popularised in the 1990s through large scale transactional initiatives including restructuring, reengineering and quality management. The change program had a change manager who led a change team to execute on a change plan through a logical sequence of change steps. The external world remained stable while the change team realised a narrow outcome and restored order to the organisation; or so the theory goes. Fast forward a couple of decades and the very notions of order, stability and predictability are the organisational equivalent of UFOs; so much so that managers around the world readily accept that the only constant in business today is change.

Many leaders have a deep understanding and acceptance of these quantum shifts, yet are struggling to effectively respond in practice. The CFO of Oracle Corporation summed up the situation when he stated in a Wall Street Journal article that; "we are hoping for a revenue recovery in the second half of the year. But I said the same thing six months ago, and I have lost my confidence in my ability to predict the future".

The notion that change can be predicatively managed is rooted in the industrial age metaphor of the 'organisation as machine'. In this paradigm, the organisation can be pulled apart and put back together at will and with no collateral damage, people respond only to the extrinsic motivations of 'carrot and stick', and the leader is responsible for every role; from visionary to cheerleader.

But when leaders take on the role of saviour, the people in their organisations often respond with passive dependence. As the analogy goes, gardeners do not stand over their roses shouting "grow, try harder, you can do it". They select healthy seedlings, tend the soil, and generally create an environment where the flowers can do what comes naturally. The irony is that as leaders, we desire innovation, responsiveness and adaptability to compete in the modern business environment, while we simultaneously foster a culture of dependence, approval and compliance.

Flawed Assumption 2: We are objective

Imagine trying to build a jigsaw puzzle which has no lid and is missing half of the pieces. This metaphor highlights two key challenges facing leaders trying to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of change in the twenty-first century. Firstly, change failure statistics suggest that many of our leaders have not experienced successful change in the last decade. As a result, they do not have a 'lid' or are using a 'lid' that no longer serves them.

Secondly, our backgrounds, education, preferences and beliefs often determine which pieces of the puzzle we pick-up, or even notice. Stereotypically, the CFO may focus disproportionately on the metrics for change, while the Head of Business Development creates the perfect strategy, and the HR Director concentrates on developing the workforce capability required for change.

Our subjectivity, in itself, is not the problem; we all interpret the world through our unique lenses. The bigger issue is that we assume we are objective while we act subjectively. There are now biologists who claim that 80% of the information we notice in the external environment comes from information already in our brain. Consequently, change efforts often fail or are rendered unsustainable because crucial pieces of information and intricate interrelationships are overlooked or ignored by leaders who are blinkered by the human condition.

A third challenge of objectivity is the misalignment between leadership intention and behaviour. At an executive leadership summit, we asked the 500 delegates to close their eyes and raise their hands if they considered themselves to be of high integrity. When the delegates opened their eyes, every hand in the room was in the air. We then asked them to close their eyes again and raise their hands if they agreed that their colleagues shared their same high level of integrity. When they opened their eyes this time, only a third of the hands were raised. The insight reached by the delegates from this simple exercise was that objectivity is impossible since we judge ourselves by our intention, while we judge everybody else by their actions.

Flawed Assumption 3: There are 'X' steps to change

Harvard Professor John Kotter is the reigning guru of change management; his '8 steps' formula is the most recognised change theory of the past 20 years and his books are best sellers which have helped many organisations to navigate the complexities of change

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with considerable success. That said, we have several concerns about the ongoing suitability of this formula in the twenty-first century environment; the '8 steps' may be an idea whose time has passed.

Firstly, when Kotter originally conceived the '8 steps', stability was largely the norm in our organisations. The objective of his formula was to navigate a 'change event' so that stability could effectively be restored by climbing a ladder from one state to the next. More than two decades later, stability is a distant memory and change is no longer an event; it is the new constant. Secondly, at least three of the '8 steps' require further analysis, in the context of the current environment, to assess their ongoing suitability and highlight potential side effects. They are; step 1- create a sense of urgency, step 3 - craft a compelling vision, and step 4 - communicate, communicate, communicate.

In the desire to establish a 'burning platform for change', we are generally very quick to throw out the past. Even underperforming organisations usually possess much strength which can be leveraged toward the new aspirations. In any case, who wants to work in an organisation that is even metaphorically going up in flames? Our doctoral research revealed that while the burning platform often provide the 'spark' for change, it can have several unintended side-effects. Firstly, it can alienate staff by indicating that what they have been doing up to now is of little value. Secondly, it may encourage a passive organisation as people wait to be told what to do by the all knowing leaders at the top; the exact opposite of what is needed for an organisation desiring change. Finally, urgency has a habit of engulfing organisations and successful change is generally not achieved by fearful, anxious, reactive people in a state of perpetual crisis. In our research and practice with organisations that have successfully transformed, we have learnt that sustainable change requires a burning ambition; that is, an aspiration-driven motivation that appeals to the higher purpose of people within the organisation. This sense of purpose is far more energising, and also acts as a form of sustenance when times are tough. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously said, "he who has a why to live can bear almost any how".

While shared aspirations are an important part of the change agenda, Kotter's well known 'compelling vision' concept also requires some elaboration. Firstly, most organisations have noble intentions; they do not aspire to destroy shareholder value, infuriate customers and alienate staff, yet somehow many find themselves doing just that. In our experience, establishing a shared view of the departure point, or actual state, is more important and far more difficult to determine

than a vision of the future. How can we decide the route and transport required to get to London if we have not established whether we are departing from Paris, New York or the jungles of Africa? Failure to rigorously establish the actual state can arise from organisational politics and vested interests, personal bias and subjectivity, a lack of capability, an overly action-oriented culture, or a simple lack of courage. At the other extreme, a failure to establish the actual state may result from leaders exaggerating the organisation's dire circumstances to create the 'urgency' effect. In any case, the result is often a 'snakes and ladders' situation where the organisation takes two steps forward and then three steps back, exhausting and demoralising many in the process.

The close cousin of the 'compelling vision' is the idea that leaders must 'communicate, communicate, communicate'. This idea has two inherent assumptions worth considering; the first is that we need more communication in our organisations at a time when most people are drowning in endless sea of meetings, emails, voicemails and the like. The second assumption is that people need to hear the same message over and over again in order to get aligned. In fact, people generally notice what is important to them. It is our contention that disengagement is not the result of insufficient communication, as much as it is the outcome of meaningless communication.

Flawed Assumption 4: We have a neutral starting point for change

Our leaders often incorrectly assume a neutral starting point for change efforts. We assume that because our intentions are good, people will naturally trust and follow us. A good example is former US President George W. Bush's failure to influence his own political party to support the financial reform package at the height of the Global Financial Crisis. In the lead up to the 2012 election, President Barack Obama's ability to lead change came under question – from both sides of politics - in light of record debt and rising unemployment. Both Presidents suffered plummeting approval ratings as a result.

The statistics are scary. A Harris poll conducted in the United States revealed that only 27% of surveyed people trust the government, 22% trust the media, 12% trust big companies and 8% trust political parties; interestingly, this data has universally regressed from just one generation ago. Recent surveys from Watson Wyatt, The Concourse Group, Mercer and KPMG indicate similar trends in our organisations; only 51% of employees have trust and confidence in senior

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management, 40% of employees trust that their bosses communicate honestly, 36% of employees believe their leaders act with honesty and integrity, and 76% of employees have observed unethical conduct on the job.

Change efforts never take place in a vacuum; there is always an environmental, organisational and personal context to be considered. After endless restructuring, reengineering, downsizing, and mergers and acquisitions, many people are scared, tired, cynical, and focused on self-protection. Enthusiastically pitching another 'compelling vision' to this audience, no matter how well intentioned, is likely to be met with the cynicism it deserves.

Much has been written on the competencies required to lead and manage change; the underlying assumption being that there is a magic formula of technical skills that guarantee success. At its core, however, leading change is more like ten percent technical competence and ninety percent emotional intelligence. Put even more simply, the precondition for change is trust. For people to embark upon a journey from a known state, no matter how bad, to a largely unknown state, they must have a deep trust in those leading the change.

As we have already identified, a key challenge with building trust is that we judge ourselves by our intentions and everyone else by their actions; as a result leaders often assume good will that is not there. In addition, today's leaders are under so much pressure to produce short term results that they rarely take the time to create a solid foundation for success. Yet without such a foundation, our change efforts are effectively built upon quicksand.

Flawed Assumption 5: Change is the goal

Stepping back in time a little, the 2008 US Presidential campaign between Barack Obama and John McCain is highly instructive regarding flawed assumption 5 since both ran on a platform of "change". Obama claimed to be "the change we need" while McCain claimed to be a "maverick reformer". The fact that both candidates on the world's largest stage ran on a 'change platform' is symbolic of how much the concept of 'change' is a part of our contemporary lexicon. More recently, the claiming of a change platform by political leaders has spread across the Middle East, North and East Africa; as a desperate attempt to hang on to the last threads of power, or in attempt to replace incumbent regimes. But is change what the people of these nations really want?

Semantically, the definition of 'change' rests on the underlying concept of 'different'; the implication being that we want something different to what we have currently. But different is a weak and unstable word, it lacks strength, a sense of destination, and personal accountability; it is too easy for people to say "something needs to change!" It also lacks any sense of continuity; people will rightfully want to know "what happens after we change?" We speak about change as an end in itself; almost as a noun, when, in fact, change is a verb. It is a process by which to achieve goals and aspirations.

It is our contention, for example, that Americans do not want change as much as they want to realise the American dream and live their unalienable rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as espoused in the Declaration of Independence. Similarly, we contend that the stakeholders of our organisations do not want change either, but rather the realisation of the statements of mission, vision and values that appear prominently in corporate boardrooms and on company websites right around the globe.

To achieve our aspirations in the modern organisational context, we must move on from the concepts of 'change management' and 'change programs' which carry the emotional baggage of a 70% failure rate over the past two decades. In fact, the terms 'change' and 'failure' have become almost synonymous in many organisations. When a leader talks about 'change', or even worse a 'change program', what people typically hear is pain, loss, extra effort, increased risk and greater uncertainty.

SECTION 2 - INCREASING THE PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS

In order to move beyond the five flawed assumptions that inhibit change efforts in the modern era, we present five enabling assumptions that can help you to create a foundation for success.

Enabling Assumption 1: Uncertainty is our friend

In the words of Voltaire, "doubt is not a pleasant condition but certainty is absurd". Change requires the acceptance of turbulence, uncertainty and disorder as natural characteristics of the modern business context. In this mindset, time that was once spent developing the perfect project plan is invested in understanding the environmental

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context and developing the critical relationships required for sustainable change to occur. Leaders are more interested in purposeful forward movement than reporting on the plan; *they do not let perfect get in the way of better*, and their definition of success is to have different challenges to overcome this year than last year.

A useful metaphor to articulate the new paradigm is to compare a rowing regatta to white water rafting. The regatta is conducted upon a calm lake with an even start and an agreed finishing line. The cox sits at the stern of the boat, is the only one facing forward and barks clear and constant instructions to a team of obedient athletes who dutifully deliver their strokes until the regatta is over for another week and everyone retires to the bar.

Fast forward to the current business context and we find ourselves in a kayak with room for only two people and no one to provide close supervision. The water is a ferocious mix of power, energy and unpredictability. The noise is deafening and communication is near impossible; trust in your partner becomes a critical variable. There are dangerous obstacles everywhere and one false move could mean disaster. Making it to the end is only a temporary reprieve because the current soon propels you to the next set of rapids that are waiting around the corner.

When we accept the loss of control and certainty incumbent in the old paradigm, we open ourselves up to the exhilaration and possibilities of the contemporary business context. After all, it is from uncertainty and the unknown that real innovation emerges. At the very least, we develop a realistic set of assumptions and beliefs with which to better lead in the new context.

Enabling Assumption 2: One part confidence, two parts humility, three parts sense of humour

If you listen carefully to the language and metaphors used by most leaders to describe their journeys, you will inevitably hear talk of heroic battles and glorious missions on the path to overcoming adversity. But there is little talk of stumbling and fumbling or falling over, and the truth about change is that even the most successful efforts are far more akin to the world of Maxwell Smart than James Bond. Yet at the moment of truth, when faced with an audience of hopeful, demanding and expectant stakeholders, leaders tend

to over-hype and over-commit.

Our doctoral research revealed that, paradoxically, any attempt to articulate a sustainable approach to change in the modern business environment requires a blend of confidence, humility and a good sense of humour. In effect, this involves taking off the 'mask' of perfection in favour of a more humble and authentic disposition. De-masking however, presents a significant challenge for business leaders and change agents alike. Leaders are under constant pressure from shareholders, boards and analysts to confidently forecast and deliver results which are bigger, better and faster than last quarter.

Leaders and change agents can be liberated by dropping the mask, accepting that there is no simple program, that change is necessarily unpredictable, and that everyone will need to learn and grow through the process. This acceptance removes the weight of unrealistic expectations and enables everyone to channel the energy previously spent posturing, pretending and politicking into an authentic dialogue about the commitment and disposition required for an effort that will inevitably be harder, longer and riskier than anyone would like.

It is no coincidence that all totalitarian regimes are devoid of humour; it is very hard to oppress people who can see the funnier side of life. The human capacity to laugh at ourselves and make light of dire circumstances are critical preconditions for successful change; this capacity allows us to retain perspective, let off steam, develop resilience and bounce back from the inevitable set-backs. Humour is most potent in change efforts when deployed by leaders at their own expense. Self-effacing leaders build trust, followership and encourage authentic dialogue by exposing the human frailties that everyone in the organisation already knows they possess.

Enabling Assumption 3: Context before content

In the throes of uncertainty and even chaos, it is natural for leaders to articulate a new agenda; envisioning a better future can serve as an immediate panacea to the pain of the present environment. Before launching off on the new crusade, however, it is critical to understand the injuries people may carry from previous crusades and whether anyone is actually interested in going back into battle.

Equally important is to understand the strengths and assets that can serve as foundations for the future organisation. Many leaders, particularly those

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trained in the somewhat risk-focused disciplines of accounting, law or engineering, for example, have an over-developed radar for problems, exceptions and imperfections. While this attribute can be very useful, it should be tempered with a focus on what is going well. In fact, many behavioural researchers concur that for an individual to act on one piece of corrective feedback, they must hear three pieces of positive reinforcement. Interestingly, the ratio is as high as 1:7 in a marriage; which might explain why almost one in two now ends in divorce.

Capturing the hearts and minds of intelligent, battle weary people requires meaningful engagement in the issues and challenges affecting them; no involvement equals no commitment. Ultimately, people will tolerate the conclusions of their leaders but they will only act upon their own conclusions.

Finally, it is important to understand the ultimate aspirations of the organisation in the context of its departure point or actual state. For example, if my New Year's aspiration is to lose 20 pounds by executing a strategy of going to the gym five times a week, and my context is that I have not been near a gym in three years, then I am likely to abandon my aspiration within the first week as I struggle to execute this radically different habit. If, on the other hand, I steadily build up to a rigorous gym routine over a period of several months, then I am far more likely to execute my strategy and reach my ultimate aspiration. The lesson for organisations desiring change is that *trajectory is far more important than outcome*. We must have many ways to win and few ways to fail in the early days of a change effort until our new behaviours become ingrained habits.

Enabling Assumption 4: Trust changes everything

Change efforts in the modern context are typically messy and peppered with mistakes, problems and unmet expectations. In a high-trust environment, leaders will be given the benefit of the doubt and will be able to course correct and move forward. In a low trust environment, the mistakes and problems serve as further evidence for the dire state of the organisation and the incompetence of leaders. One simple mantra for trust is that you cannot communicate your way out of a problem you have behaved yourself into. As evidenced by our earlier example of Presidents Bush and Obama, trust is difficult to build but easy to lose, and once lost, is doubly difficult to regain.

So if all change efforts are messy, and trust is a precondition for change, then the challenge for leaders surely becomes the building of trust. In our

experience, trust is comprised of three key components; credibility (do I believe you can do what you or others say you can?), reliability (do you actually do what you say you will?) and intent (what is your underlying motive and how much do you stand to gain?). Leaders who consistently deliver on their promises, who behave in a way that is honest, open and authentic, and who focus on purpose, contribution and legacy, build enduring trust and dedicated followership.

At a more practical level, one of the fastest ways to build trust is to extend more trust than is warranted. Much like a bank account, this means making continual and significant deposits so that when the inevitable problems occur, the resultant withdrawals do not put the account into deficit. This approach can be humbling for many leaders; particularly those who have been raised on a diet of command and control where subordinates are expected to win their trust.

While the building of trust in the contemporary context can seem daunting, the rewards are exponential. Stephen Covey summarises the benefits in his simple formula for the economics of trust; low trust equals low speed and high cost, high trust equals high speed and low cost. To verify this formula for yourself, compare two commercial partnerships you are engaged in; one which you would consider high trust versus one that you would categorise as low trust. Now imagine the commercial implications for your organisation if all of your relationships were like the partnership you categorised as high trust!

Enabling Assumption 5: The 'goal' is the goal (and 'alignment' is the process)

The simplest way to increase the odds of a successful change effort is to stop talking about 'change' itself. Change is not the goal; *the goal is the goal*. We are yet to encounter an organisation that aspires to destroy shareholder value, disappoint customers and alienate employees. All organisations share aspirations that revolve around the universal principles of financial performance, customer satisfaction, employee commitment, product and service excellence, and sustainability. When stakeholders in an organisation talk about change, what they are saying is that the organisation is not delivering on its articulated aspirations. Not only is change not the goal, but change is not even the process. As we have seen in flawed assumption 5, the concept of 'change' carries significant baggage, has limited continuity, and encourages low accountability.

The process by which we reach our aspirations is alignment.

“Trust is difficult to build but easy to lose, and once lost, is doubly difficult to regain.”



Semantically, the definition of 'alignment' rests on the underlying concepts of adjustment, adaptation and cooperation. When a leadership team is clearly in alignment, employees in the organisation have confidence that the goals are reachable. Compared to change, alignment is a strong, positive and unemotional concept. Alignment is respectful of the past, it presumes the basic ingredients for success are already present, it allows for clear accountability, and provides a continuous reference point for improvement. In short, alignment is the business of business and the focus of great leaders who are continually looking for levers that they can pull to reach their aspirations in a constantly changing and uncertain world.

For TAP's approach to organisational alignment, please refer to the white paper titled: ORGANISATIONAL TRANSFORMATION: CREATING ALIGNMENT FROM THE OUTSIDE-IN

"Happiness is when
what you think,
what you say, and
what you do are in
harmony."

- Gandhi



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"Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd"

- Voltaire

"When all is said and done, more is said than done"

- Lou Holtz

"Problems cannot be solved by the same kind of thinking that created them"

- Einstein

"Every person takes the limits of their own field of vision for the limits of the world"

- Arthur Schopenhauer

"Most things are difficult before they are easy"

- Anonymous

"Vision is not enough; it must be combined with venture. It is not enough to stare up the steps; we must step up the stairs"

- Vaclav Havel

"It's what you learn after you know it all that makes the difference"

- Coach John Wooden

"Everyone thinks of changing the world but no one thinks of changing themselves"

- Leo Tolstoy

"You can achieve anything in life, as long as you don't mind who takes the credit"

- Harry S Truman

"I don't look to jump over 7 foot bars, I look around for 1 foot bars that I can step over"

- Warren Buffett

"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler"

- Einstein

"Imagination is more important than knowledge"

- Einstein

"If you discover that you're riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount"

- Wisdom of the Dakota Indians

"Don't look where you fell, but where you slipped"

- African Proverb

"You can't soar with eagles when you are surrounded by turkeys"

- Anonymous

"Consistency requires you to be as ignorant today as you were a year ago"

- Bernard Berenson

"There is usually an inverse proportion between how much something is on your mind and how much it's getting done"

- David Allen

"All truth goes through 3 steps: First it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Finally, it is accepted as self-evident "

- Arthur Schopenhauer

"I always wanted to be somebody. I should have been more specific "

- Lily Tomlin

"It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change "

- Charles Darwin

"Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not bend out of shape "

- Michael McGriffy

"If the only tool we have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail"

- Abraham Maslow

"Change your thoughts and you change your world"

- Norman Vincent Peale

"Be the change you want to see in the world"

- Mahatma Gandhi

"Kites rise highest against the wind; not with it"

- Winston Churchill

"The fear of making mistakes is the root of all bureaucracy and the enemy of evolution"

- Ingvar Kamprad

"It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory."

W. Edwards Deming

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