

Implementing sustainable change

Benjamin Franklin wrote that the definition of madness was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting change to happen. But this is exactly how many change programmes - in organisations both large and small - can be described.

Change is ingrained into the very fabric of everyday life. Every day is different, every circumstance, no matter how inconsequential is unlike the previous one. Change is something we are all programmed to recognise, to understand and to ultimately accept.

So, why is it that change and change-related initiatives in the workplace are so difficult to implement in an engaging and sustainable manner ?

The most obvious reason is that they are so often forced upon those who will be expected to live with the consequences as a *fait accomplis* - something which those at the top of the organisation have decided in their wisdom is destined to "make things better".

An often-heard expression is 'driving change initiatives through an organisation'. But this is totally at odds with one of the most basic drivers which most people take into work - namely to create an impression and make a difference, to leave some element of their functional and operational DNA on the jobs they are required to do.

Which is why change programmes, no matter how detailed or sophisticated, are always destined to fail, unless and until organisations recognise that sustainable and long-term change only comes from engaging the whole of their workforce in the desired outcome.

You might well ask why any organisation would wish to introduce change initiatives without engaging their whole workforce. But they don't - or rather it is more often the exception than the rule - because most change programmes simply do not consider the input of the workforce.

Why? Because running a business tends not to be a consensual activity. It is mostly hierarchically based; decisions are made and implemented every day without much involvement beyond those making the decisions.

So what is so difficult about sustainable long-term and productive change? It's more often the case that the workforce is aware of it before it is communicated to them and they are mostly excluded from any input into the implementation of change.

But there is another way. Collaborative change programmes are built around the chosen and designated outcome for introducing change. As the name suggests, this is an inclusive, rather than proscriptive, process. A collaborative change programme requires the recruitment and training of teams of change advocates whose sole objective, in addition to their day jobs, is to assess the levels of input into the overall change mechanism, from each of their designated disciplines.

These advocates form a core of representation from the shop floor to the boardroom, providing practical suggestions and working practices that support the 'prime directive' of change.

Senior managers and executives are not involved in this process in any way. Their role is to take each part of the jigsaw and create an image of what the change will look like from the component parts supplied by the floor, whilst ensuring that all stakeholders involved remain focussed on the prime directive of change.

The reason that collaborative change works is because it comes from within. Organisations of 20 people or less have been making it work for generations, and the principles behind it are as valid in large organisations as they are in the small ones.

Everyone who works for any organisation, big or small, is going to be most engaged when they believe that they can directly influence their own organisation. Take that away from them and they will begin the process of disengagement.

Meanwhile, this sort of collaboration requires an organisation to have as much trust and respect in its senior management as its lowliest member of the workforce. It has to demonstrate that it respects that every individual has a contribution to make, other than the day job and it has to be prepared to listen and respond to feedback which it might be very uncomfortable with.

Collaborative change requires the senior operational management to consider the prospect that it alone does not possess all the answers to the prime directive of change. It requires a degree of humility that many will find a step too far. Too many egos and too much empire-building often torpedo the opportunity before it gets started.

But it is sometimes worth reminding them that a senior management team is only a small business of perhaps half a dozen executives; and a middle management operational team a small-sized business of 20 or so. Consequently, there is plenty of scope to turn opportunity into very real and sustainable change programmes which will stand the test of time and form a blueprint for many other organisations to adopt, adapt and follow in the future.