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Engaging with stakeholders is critical when leading change

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to illustrate what would happen if we were to ignore relationships when leading change. Many believe that project management, change management, and related fields, are a matter of marshalling stuff: working the right processes and tasks, writing the correct documents, having good governance mechanisms in place, etc. People just distract and get in the way. Some tend to concentrate on these technicalities working their computer tools, rather than leaning towards people. The result is huge waste. Organisational change will always cut across different business functions, boundaries and across silos of working. This is where stakeholder engagement leads to successful outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – It is a surprise to many, but listening is probably the most powerful influencing strategy of all. The key is to ask the person you seek to influence, first for their thoughts, fears, and aspirations. If you can show you are genuinely interested, you begin to break down any barriers to change. This helps focus on the need for change rather than present the solution first. Yes, time is money, but often we can let this get in the way of engaging successfully. Conversations like this do take time. It feels counter-intuitive.

Findings – There is growing evidence that people who make better leaders have a leaning towards action, they are never victims of ''paralysis by analysis''. The self-aware, pro-active manager leading change understands that relationships are central to success and are thinking about their relationships in a real and active way. They think about their mental landscape and on that landscape they see the vital importance of stakeholders and are prepared to spend a far higher proportion of their discretionary time devoted to engaging with other people, quite apart from the structured meetings and emails that we usually describe as ''communicating''.

Originality/value – Most management books are written with the assumption that the business world is rational, but when it comes to change, it appears this is far from the case. We are taught to put a reasonable proposition to people, the business case, the plan, and so on, then expect people to mull it over for a while, then jump into action – reason – analyse – act. But nearly always the actual sequence is – see – feel – act. There is little doubt that people engage with their stakeholders better if there is some kind of emotional connection.

Keywords Project management, Stakeholders, Engagement, Change

Paper type Viewpoint

What if we were to ignore relationships when leading change? We do not need to look. Many have been led to believe that project management, change management, and related fields, are all a matter of marshalling stuff: working the right processes and tasks, writing the correct documents, having good governance mechanisms in place, and so on. People just distract and get in the way. Some tend to concentrate on these technicalities working their computer tools, rather than leaning towards people. The result is huge waste. Research from Sheffield University suggests that waste through post-delivery issues in the IT sector along this amounts to something like £50bn per annum.

In turns out that relationships are the critical factor. Analysing the way high performers use their discretionary time – that is the working time where you choose how you use it – our

> **" We need leaders in a time of change. If there was no change, then perhaps all we would need would be manager and workers. But a project disrupts people's lives and almost always requires people to change behaviours. Stakeholders in change expect purpose, meaning and a picture of the future you are aiming to realise. "**

research showed a marked difference with other managers. The high-performing project managers would habitually spend 40-80 per cent of their discretionary time seeking out key people and engaging them with purposeful conversations. This appeared to help them scale their efforts through others and remove obstacles, whereas the moderate performers spent between 8-12 per cent of their discretionary time in such conversations.

Moreover, it is important to understand the fuller range of stakeholders who will be affected in different ways. We have a saying: ''You can forget important stakeholders, but they won't forget you.''

Stakeholder engagement or stakeholder management

I believe there is a fundamental problem with the more common term: stakeholder management. if a stakeholder is defined as anyone interested in a project or its outcome, then the project manager or leader will be engaging with those over whom they have no direct authority, such as those from other departments or external partners and customers. So how can we claim to ''manage'' them?

Buy-in from senior management is critical. There may be internal partners, like other departments or teams within the organisation, or external partners such as consultants or trainers, who will all need to be fully on board. Those less directly involved with change can still be affected, particularly with respect to resources. For instance, if additional or different resources are needed for them to be effective in the change, these external parties will need to know what is expected of them and given encouragement and support.

Organisational change will always cut across different business functions, boundaries and across silos of working and this is where stakeholder engagement will lead to successful outcomes.

I have another fundamental concern with the concept of managing people. In my view we manage things, not people. We lead, direct or motivate people, but we do not manage them.

From my own experience of leading programmes and projects, from talking with other practitioners and reading the literature on all aspects of human nature, of influencing people, motivation, and shaping change, I have identified seven principles specific to engaging and influencing people. These seven principles serve as compass points in the sometimes chaotic world of change with people of all kinds and serve to be universal, self-validating and empowering.

Seek first to understand

It is a surprise to many, but listening is probably the most powerful influencing strategy of all. The key is to ask the person you seek to influence, first for their thoughts, fears, and aspirations. If you can show you are genuinely interested, you begin to break down any barriers to change. This helps focus on the need for change rather than present the solution first. Yes, time is money, but often we can let this get in the way of engaging successfully. Conversations like this do take time. It feels counter-intuitive. But what the high performers have discovered is that it saves them time in the long run. Often, merely listening helps

people open and buy into what you are achieving. You both begin to look at the problem together.

Why do not more people do this? Often it comes down to a matter of pride, where change leaders find it difficult to humble themselves to listen to others' complaints or points-of-view and this, I believe, is a key impediment for many of us getting better at people engagement. Other times it is our sheer busyness. Excessive hurriedness leans us towards focusing on stuff, getting more things done rather than cultivating relationships. ''Don't bother me, I'm busy!''

Effective change is always led

Rather than talk about change management, we are really dealing with change leadership. Leaders give people a clear reason why something needs to be done, and if managers adopt a stronger leadership role, then change is more likely to happen smoothly and have a better chance of sustainability.

However, we need to be cautious when defining leadership in this context. Although leadership has to come from the top of an organisation, there is also a tactical leadership which business analysts, project managers and operational managers all need to take up. They all need to step up as leaders, explaining why there is a need for change. Although it is important that the future vision is explained by senior management, it also needs to be unpacked by the direct line manager into the practical implications for the person concerned.

We need leaders in a time of change. If there was no change, then perhaps all we would need would be manager and workers. But a project disrupts people's lives and almost always requires people to change behaviours. Stakeholders in change expect purpose, meaning and a picture of the future you are aiming to realise.

Old habits die hard

The goal of change is to develop new and often better habits, but people's behaviour does not change overnight so old habits are going to take a while to change. In fact, such are the strength of our old habits and such is the effort we need to summon up the energy to develop new ones, that we resist change.

There are a number of change models which provide approaches for challenging, discomforting or ''unfreezing'' old habits, before moving on to positive change. Unless this is done carefully, people revert to the old ways – because it is easier.

Over 60 years ago, Kurt Lewin, an influential behavioural and organisational psychologist, developed a popular change model which has endured to this day (Figure 1).

In this model, Lewin emphasises that change is not a series of individual processes but rather one that flows from one process to the next.

So there is something challenging about habits when we seek to influence people to change the way they do things. But habits are not the enemy. In fact, our goal is to replace them with newer, better habits, returning people to ''unconscious competence'' of an improved kind. Much of the £50bn per annum waste identified by the Sheffield research team persists

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Figure 1 The Kurt Lewin change model
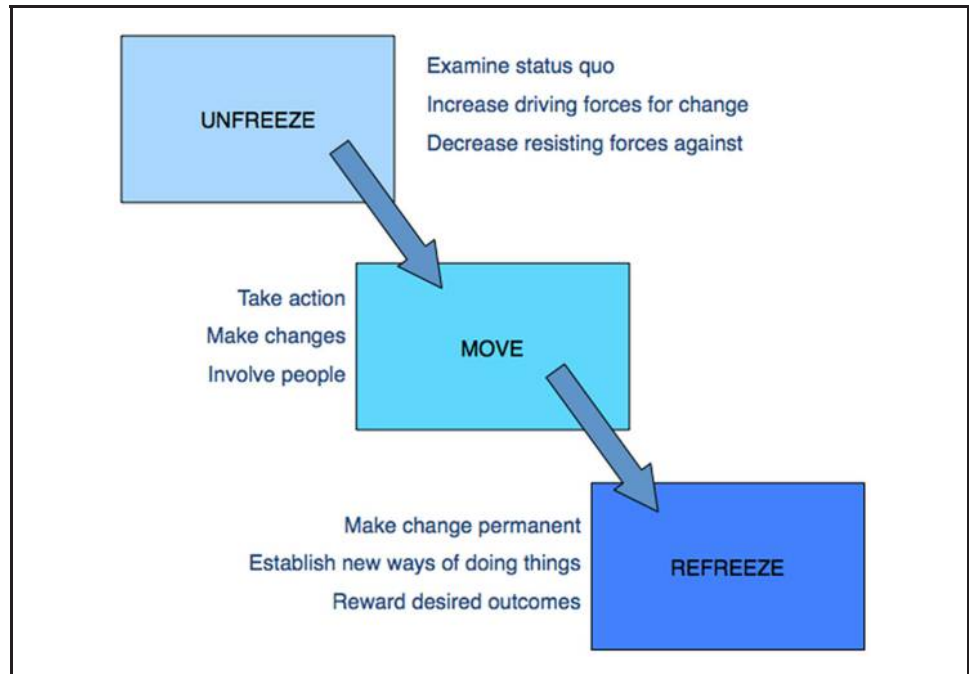
because the change never was embedded. It never became the ''new normal'', the new ''just the way we do things around here'', it never stuck.

The pain of change

Recognising and seeking ways to minimise the pain of change, or of the current situation, are likely to provide leaders with a successful outcome. Embracing the early signs of denial, anger and resentment (the unfreezing) will help leaders to guide stakeholders through a crafted change strategy, effective implementation plan and into the process of accepting and internalising change.

Leaning to people and action

There is growing evidence that people who make better leaders have a leaning towards action, they are never victims of ''paralysis by analysis''. These people also display a distinct bias towards developing and maintaining relationships. The self-aware, pro-active manager leading change understands that relationships are central to success and are thinking about their relationships in a real and active way. They think about their mental landscape and on that landscape they see the vital importance of stakeholders and are prepared to spend a far higher proportion of their discretionary time devoted to engaging with other people, quite apart from the structured meetings and e-mails that we usually describe as ''communicating''. They simply spend more time moving towards, and talking with, people.

Integrity is powerfully persuasive

The pay-off of walking with integrity is huge and long-term. You may find yourself in new contexts, where your stakeholders are used to being treated with duplicity and deceit and it may take while, and some courage, before people start to believe and trust you. A reputation for integrity, however, will reap rewards when faced with adversity. A quality closely allied to integrity is trust and Guy Kawasaki, Silicon Valley author, speaker, and former chief evangelist of Apple, provides a helpful l checklist on trustworthiness:

1. Trust others first. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Risks are more than outweighed by the benefits to you.

2. Under-promise and over-deliver.

3. Deliver bad news early.

4. Have an abundant mindset, rather than a scarcity mindset (where everything is a zero-sum game).

5. Tell people what you do not know.

6. Figure out what you do not know, and then find out and provide the answer.

7. Disclose your interests. If you have a conflict of interest, tell people.

The power of emotional connection

Most management books are written with the assumption that the business world is rational, but when it comes to change, it appears this is far from the case. We are taught to put a reasonable proposition to people, the business case, the plan, and so on, then expect people to mull it over for a while, then jump into action – reason – analyse – act. But nearly always the actual sequence is – see – feel – act.

We are perhaps not the rational human beings we thought we were, no matter how sophisticated the lives we lead. There is little doubt that people engage with their stakeholders better if there is some kind of emotional connection. We can draw a parallel with public speaking, where we would all much rather listen to someone who presents with genuine passion rather than read from notes or give a dull power point presentation.

Marketing professionals understand this. As an experiment, analyse several TV commercials. Are the advertisements about the specifications and features of the products and services they are selling? Or are they more to do with the exciting emotions or conveying the kind of person we would be if we used their products?

When people go to work they are inclined to behave quite differently than outside work, they bring a professional persona with them. But this does not mean that leaders have to be devoid of emotion. Employees need to be led by people who are not afraid to reveal their more sensitive human side, who are trustworthy and can be counted on to keep their word.

Integrity is powerfully persuasive

Trust is a rare but crucial commodity. If we can demonstrate integrity, especially in moments where it is difficult, then those we are seeking to influence will trust us.

High performers under-promise and over-deliver, they deliver on their promises, and often model the change they are seeking to lead, being the first to adopt the new ways.

About the author

Patrick Mayfield is the author of Practical People Engagement, published in October 2013, written to provide change leaders with a rich reference of practices and techniques on how to influence and lead people to new solutions. He set up and led the first private sector PRINCE – based Project Office at BT Yellow Pages. He was a key member of the team that delivered the first edition of PRINCE2© in 1996. He went on to found pearcemayfield in 2001, where he is now chairman. He has been writing a blog, ''Learning Leader'', since 2004. Also he was a co-author of the *Managing Successful Programmes* 2007 edition. He is a member of the Association of Project Management. Patrick Mayfield can be contacted at: Patrick.Mayfield@Pearcemayfield.com

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