

Change Management

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We live in a time of change and the idea of trying to manage change can seem very daunting when we consider the number, variety and scope of the changes many of us face in our professional lives. But when you think of it, we are all of us very experienced change managers. We either manage or at least cope with change every single day of our lives. We just don't think of it in terms of "change management". We manage change when the train we were intending to catch is cancelled, when we forget to take something out of the freezer for dinner, when we decide spontaneously to head off for a picnic on a particularly nice day.

Clearly, the type and scope of change that we deal with in our professional lives usually varies significantly from that with which we deal in our private lives but it is important to realise that we are quite accustomed to change and that, on the whole, we manage it fairly comfortably. We need to be, and in fact can be, confident in our own minds that we can manage change. This confidence is particularly important because the reason that change is an everyday occurrence is the simple fact that change is inevitable. But another reason to sustain our self-confidence is the fact that the underlying principles of change are the same regardless of the relative size of the change.

Change analysis

One approach, albeit a simplistic one, to both analysing proposed changes and actually managing the implementation of change is based on questions beginning with 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where, and 'why'. When analysing any proposed change, the underlying questions are what, why and who. It is important to determine exactly what is being proposed, why it is being proposed and who will be affected by the change if it is introduced.

The 'what' needs to be defined very clearly so that when the proposal is being considered, everyone involved is quite clear about what is being changed and is actually discussing the same thing. A second (but no less important) consideration is the issue of side-effects. Quite often, a proposed change can involve other changes that were not considered when the original proposal was made. It is essential that, time permitting, you take an overall view and try to spot any flow-ons that may occur if the change is implemented. A proposal may prove to entail undesirable or an unacceptable number of other changes. It is not unusual for the number and the significance of side effects to be a determining factor in deciding whether or not to proceed.

The "why" question must be very seriously considered. In a time when so many changes are occurring and when people find change daunting and unsettling, the last thing we should be doing is introducing unnecessary changes of any magnitude. Before we proceed with a change, we should take great care to weigh up the anticipated benefits against such costs of the change as financial expenditure, training/retraining and confusion or loss of confidence among users.

While any change (especially a procedural change) has to be evaluated and found to be worth the disruption caused by the change process, changes involving computer systems need to be evaluated very carefully. Unless support for your existing release is being withdrawn or there are significant improvements in the functionality of a later release, a software upgrade can prove to be unacceptably expensive in terms of financial cost, retraining of staff (accompanied by a temporary loss of 'productivity') and a renewed learning curve for users. Alternatively, the decision to automate in the first place should only be made in light of a very thorough cost-benefit analysis which includes the human factors as well as the basic financial considerations.

The "who" question can be just as wide-ranging as the "what" question because it, too, is double-sided. Hopefully, the reason a change was proposed in the first place was that it would be of benefit to an individual or a group of people. It is equally important, however, to ask whether or not any one or any group will be disadvantaged if the change is implemented. After due consideration, it may be found that the anticipated benefits of a change are offset by originally unconsidered disadvantages that are discovered when the fuller implications of the change are thought through. Then the question becomes very much a values-based one - is the change worthwhile?

Another "who" question may also need to be asked. That is, who will implement and oversee this change? In some cases, the existing staff may not have the knowledge, expertise or time to fill this role. If this is so, then there may well be additional costs and logistical issues to be considered. Again, the decision to proceed will be based on values-based criteria within the overall context of the institution, its purpose, its style and its population.

Answers to the "where" and "when" questions are often inherent in the proposed change itself or emerge from consideration of the earlier questions. In the case of a significant change, however, timing can be an important issue to be considered. The successful implementation of change can depend on the level of enthusiasm and commitment in those involved in the project. While anticipation can be half the pleasure and a responsible approach takes time, if the planning stages stretch over a period of time, enthusiasm and commitment can wane. Like a sports team, we can run the risk of 'peaking' too early. If the change process is likely to be lengthy, then a staged approach in which enthusiasm and interest in each particular stage can be sustained is preferable.

Culture and communication

The professional literature on organisational change tends to refer to different types of change: planned, unplanned, proactive, reactive, spontaneous, etc. The determining characteristics in most of these categories of change are the degree to which you have a say in deciding to introduce change and the timeframe within which change is to be implemented. These characteristics introduce the single most important factor in managing and responding to change: your understanding of and your place in the culture of your organisation.

Every institution exists for a reason, has a goal and has an internal dynamic that is unique to that institution. If we have a sound understanding of our own institution's purpose, goal and dynamic, then we are in a good position to assess the value and impact of proposed change at "gut level". This "feel" for the institution becomes critical when you are called on to introduce or implement change over a short timeline. The extent to which you make the right decisions will depend to a large extent on your (often subconscious) knowledge of your institution and the people in it.

Similarly, within any institution, there are numerous channels of communication (both formal and informal) via which we can contribute to discussion on proposed or desirable changes and, conversely, learn of proposed changes that we have neither initiated nor previously been consulted about. It is vitally important that we recognise, establish and maintain these communication links. They may consist of formal committees which meet regularly and of which we may or may not be members. They may just as easily consist of a casual network of people through whom your thoughts and reactions can be channelled to those in a better position to make and influence decisions.

Another reason for establishing and maintaining effective communication channels within the organisation is the simple fact that institutional changes can be far more broad-reaching than the initiator realises. While a proposed change may result in bringing about the obvious benefit, it may have other repercussions that were not considered by the initiators of the change. It is only by encouraging discussion of the change among as wide a group of people as possible that the full implications on implementing the change can be foreseen. In the case of spontaneous change, it is, again, your knowledge of and feel for the institution that supplies you with an understanding of what the change may actually bring about.

The 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where' and 'why' questions become easier to answer if we are so inculturated into our organisation that we subconsciously 'understand' it. If we have time to consider and plan a proposed change, then we know who to consult and what issues to ponder. If the change is more spontaneous, then we have a better feel for the organisation and can more easily intuit answers that are likely to be accurate and useful.

Limits to communication

The significance of a proposed change and the extent to which we have to rely on indirect input into the decision making process should determine the limits of our input. There is a fine line between persuading people (through persistence) to champion your cause and pestering them to the extent that they simply cease to listen to you. Where that line is drawn will depend on the relative significance the other person puts on the proposed change, the rationale you present for your case and, of course, the personalities involved.

We should always feel free to oppose change. We would be irresponsible if we didn't oppose a change that we think inappropriate. We should use all the communication means we can to argue against the change. If it becomes apparent, however, that the change is actually going to be implemented in spite of our arguments, then we must accept the fact. There is absolutely no point in continuing to oppose a change after the decision to actually

proceed with it has been made. It is a waste of time, a waste of intellectual and emotional energy and it creates a negative image which can have repercussions not only for how you are perceived within the organisation but how the library service is perceived.

Bitting the bullet

Mention was made earlier of the "when" factor involved in change in terms of committed planning and implementation. Another factor in the when question has to do with people's tolerance for change. Because change is so common in our society and lives today, the prospect of yet another change looming ahead can for some people become oppressive. Unless they are actually involved in planning and implementing (and therefore to some extent controlling) the change, many people prefer to get it over and done with so they can begin to evaluate the effects of the change and get on with the business of adjusting to it. If one is not actively involved, anticipation may not be pleasurable.

At the same time, the person or people planning a change can become so enmeshed in the subtleties involved that they end up procrastinating and 'stalling'. At some point, it becomes necessary to bite the bullet, and proceed. This may result in a messier and less efficient change implementation - it may even mean that some elements of the change are inappropriate. Changes can always be fine-tuned during and even after implementation. Proposed change that never eventuates can lead to a debilitating and paralysing period of having change ever-threatening on the horizon but never actually being realised and faced.

For both the people planning the change and those being affected by it, change is a psychological and emotional experience. People are always the most important and usually the least predictable factor in the change process.

Emotional stages

In 1969, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross published a book called *On death and dying* in which she detailed five emotional stages in the dying process - denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These stages can be used to describe the emotional states people experience as they confront change.

Naturally, the significance of the change will determine the intensity of a person's emotional reaction to it but it is very important to realise that the perceived significance of any particular change may vary greatly from one person to the next and therefore different people will react more or less intensely to exactly the same change.

If we are responsible for proposing and introducing a change, we must be aware that those people effected by the change may be responding to it on an emotional level as well as (or at times instead of) a rational level. A sensitivity to the other's emotional state is crucial in determining what, how and when we communicate with them.

If we are not responsible for the change but are to be affected by it as well, then an added dimension enters - namely that of being aware not only of the other's emotional state but our own as well.

Unfortunately these emotional stages, as defence and coping mechanisms, last for different periods of time and are not necessarily sequential. It is not unusual for people to skip a stage or to slide backwards and forwards between stages. This makes it all the more difficult for us to assess our own and other's emotional state in the face of an imminent change.

Hope

On a more positive and optimistic note, Kubler-Ross found that the one thing that persisted throughout all these stages, even when the person was confronted with the most daunting of all changes, was hope.

While the changes we introduce or have imposed upon us may vary in significance and the range of their effects, the principles underlying any change are the same. In our respective institutions, we are not alone. We are part of a culture, of an organisation made up of people that share a commitment to a common goal and purpose. Any change that occurs must be seen in the context of the institution and its purpose and as a process that not only affects but involves people. Through an understanding of our common purpose, considered and considerate communication and as thorough an analysis as possible, we not only can but do manage change.

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Plan to be there!