

Engaging Senior Managers in Change

In any sector change is ubiquitous. It is the life blood of commerce and fuels economic growth:

He who rejects change is the architect of decay. The only human institution which rejects progress is the cemetery.

~Harold Wilson

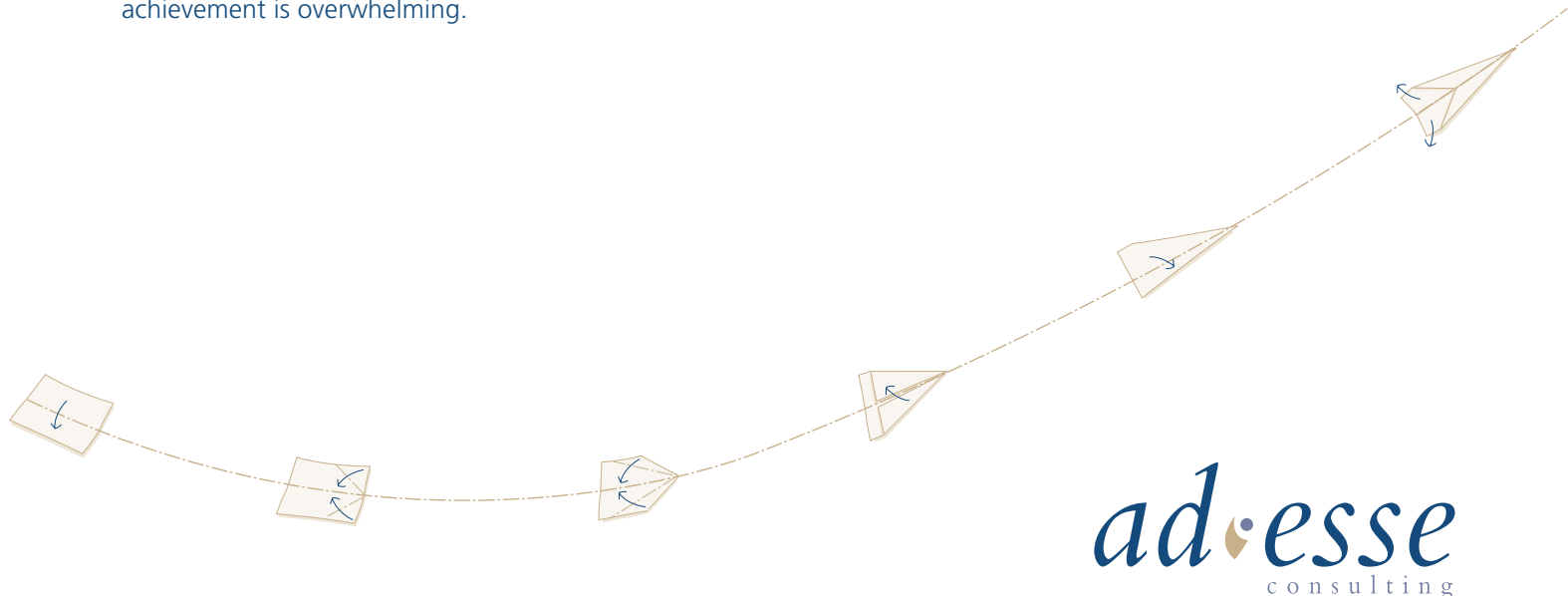
In 2008, Wilson's missive still rings true; with advances in technology bounding on unchecked and the traditional economic superpowers of the west watching over their shoulders as India and China increase their economic momentum, consumers have never had more choice, nor been more demanding of their products and services.

The definitions of "manager" and "managing change" are becoming increasingly blurred, with the role of the traditional manager evolving to accommodate the stewardship of incremental change that the 21st century demands. This slow burn change creeps up on individuals and as such, does not instigate the same knee jerk reactions that quicker, more radical change can sometimes produce.

For this reason, and for the purpose of this article, the "change" under discussion in this paper is radical change. What differentiates radical versus organic change is often subjective, with increased urgency, the scope of the change and the time taken to implement being some of the main considerations. To use an illustrative example of scaling a mountain:

Organic change is the gradual, long winding path that meanders up the gentle north face of a mountain – the ascent is slow but the scenery is pleasant and the effort expelled is moderate.

Radical change is looking up the sheer south face of the mountain, with a sense of trepidation, knowing that you need to get up before the weather turns. Innovation and guile is called for - the climb is hard but the sense of achievement is overwhelming.



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WHAT DO WE NEED TO ENABLE RADICAL CHANGE?

There must be key drivers present in any organisation before radical change is embarked upon. Four of the key drivers are discussed below:

- **Pressure for radical change**
 - o This pressure can come from different areas, either internal or market driven. The message is the same, “We HAVE to change, or we fail”;
- **Capacity for Change**
 - o The capacity starts with people within the organisation – Do we have the agents for change? Do we have the time operational capacity for radical change?;
- **A clear shared vision**
 - o Coming from the top and cascading down the organisation, this is a key element in engagement and is discussed in further detail below; and
- **Actionable first steps**
 - o Every great journey..... To get the radical change off the ground an actionable and achievable first step needs to be in place to start momentum.

These key drivers are only as strong as their composite parts - if any one of these are not present the radical change will not happen.

WHY DOES IT HURT?

If you want to make enemies, try to change something.

~Woodrow Wilson

In the upper and middle echelons of organisations, you find big personalities, fiefdoms that are fiercely fortified and a status quo that is guarded rigorously. As a result radical change elicits differing reactions. To those who will be impacted most at senior level by radical change, the process can often be viewed at best as a chance to shine and at worst with indifference and suspicion. Changing the working structure of someone who is comfortable brings fear of the unknown. The resistance to change is going to be omnipresent until those involved can go from that fear to understanding and acceptance of what happens next. Similar questions often crop up:

- Why are we doing this?
- Where do I fit in during the change?
- What will happen to me afterwards?

As a senior manager running a department or team, the following questions will persist:

- How can I run operations with the upheaval this change will bring?
- What about my performance targets?
- What are the benefits of this change for me and my team?

All of these questions should be answerable if the output from the four steps outlined above, is available, with the clear vision being paramount. What the answers contain, however, may not always be satisfactory to the individuals impacted!

This is why it hurts. Change brings questions, the answers to which can reassure, bring anxiety, anger, confusion, uncertainty and more often than not cause further questions. With all the emotions that change brings, engagement is the key to ensuring the pain felt can be managed, so as not to adversely impact the ongoing goals of the organisation adversely.

BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

Once the four steps are in place the change may begin in earnest. The barriers to engagement however, could already be deeply entrenched in senior management for multiple reasons. Below are 5 reasons why we encounter barriers to engagement, alongside some practical approaches to overcoming them:

Time pressures

“Sorry, I simply don’t have the time to get involved” - How often has this been cited as a reason for disengagement? Senior management are busy people, whose diaries fill up quickly. Getting into a position to engage face to face can often be hard.

Engage

Get in early. When change is in the air, early identification of senior stakeholders and booking face-to-face time is key. The change sponsor needs to be of suitable seniority to open doors and diaries if support is needed.

Operational pressures

Getting engaged in radical change will more often than not impact day to day operations. Senior management will try and minimise this, or may stop the root cause i.e. disengage from the change programme at hand.

Engage

Senior managers are judged on the performance of their teams, so are rightfully watchful of performance targets and outcomes. Working with the managers to try and identify the pressure points the change will expose, and planning to divert resource accordingly, needs to be included in any project plan. In any time of transition, traditional “business as usual” performance targets need to be used but any dip in performance should always be anticipated and mitigated – and should be transparent all the way down the line.

Previous change failing

“Not this again, we tried this before and it didn’t work” Change fatigue is not uncommon, especially when previous programmes have been unsuccessful, or perceived that way.

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On the face of it, this can be a valid argument from the perspective of management. Documenting “Lessons Learnt” at the end of any project is often overlooked, or if it isn’t, all too often what is recorded is filed away never to be seen again. Revisiting these lessons learnt is the best place to start, and identifying concerns of key stakeholders on a one to one basis is the best way of not only engaging the senior managers but also identifying legitimate problems.

Change initiated elsewhere

Although radical change needs to be driven from above, the agents of the change can often come from other departments within an organisation. Politics will often come into play, and engaging in a change project seemingly initiated from a peer or rival can be blocked if there is a clash of personality, politics, or promotional aspirations may be impacted.

Engage

The clear shared vision is the weapon of choice here, for what is a delicate and oft hidden subject. The subtleties of office politics should never be underestimated as a barrier to engagement.

Clear communication of the aims, direction and origins of the change will get you so far, and knowing the personalities and allegiances of the people involved will help to dictate the way the message is delivered and written

Too far from the front line

Non operational senior management are sometimes in danger of becoming disengaged from the nuts and bolts of the shop floor activity. Getting engagement in change from non operational managers can be difficult if they see their role as distant from the processes being directly impacted. Even operational senior management will not see themselves as being directly involved in the processes the people they manage deliver.

Engage

Effectively communicating what is required of non-ops managers and why they are involved in a seemingly distant process is the starting point, whilst getting them involved is the follow up. For the ops managers, getting them practically involved is the key, engaging them personally in the diagnostic stage of the change will pique the interest and make real a previously one dimensional proposition.

OVERCOME AND ENGAGE

To overcome these specific barriers and ensure senior managers are engaging in radical change is often the key to success. Experience shows that those at the top buy into change from a strategic level, where performance is king and radical change is seen as part and parcel of an organisations development, paving the way for engagement. Continuing from the other end, those on the front line will engage more successfully if their views are sought, clear communications as to why the change is occurring are executed and trust in management is in place. The middle managers involved in the day to day running of the process will need to be involved as much (and sometimes more than,) as the front line for their engagement, but are close enough to the operations to see the potential in the value of the change, if real value is present.

The senior managers that lie above the team leaders, who have less day to day involvement in operations are often harder to engage as a result.

There are some general practices which help engage senior managers in change which in our experience garner support and interest:

Make them the hero - Facilitate them to drive the change

Involvement in any successful area of business is an attractive proposition, leading the way in successfully changing an area, or introducing a successful new area is more attractive still. Senior managers are by definition highly able, motivated and ambitious. Driving the change through them will be an attractive proposition once they can see the value. There is more than one way to do this, but a close association is often the best way, as the practicality of hands on involvement is not always possible or required in the long term.

Selling the change - Show them the potential value

Once the clear vision is in place, it is vital this is shared with strategically important senior management to engage them. Showing the potential value needs to be done with due diligence, with as much evidence to support the desired outcomes as possible. Taking senior management with you on this process will help them to understand where you are trying to get to and the positive effects it will have on the business. It is important that they see themselves in this future vision and playing a key part.

Painting the alternative scenario

Showing the harsh realities of the future without change can have a profound effect – This is what happens if we don't do it. In competitive markets this can be done by highlighting declining market share and the repercussions that will have, or the pressures continued inefficient practices will have on the functions they manage.

If they are not buying into a future vision that they are included in, painting their picture with less or no involvement is another way to get their attention.

Involvement from day one

Getting in on the ground level helps greatly in engaging stakeholders at all levels. Being involved in a “hands on” capacity gives a greater sense of ownership in the direction the change is taking. This is especially true of senior managers who have been identified as being potential blockers - there is no greater advocate of change than a converted critic.

Disengagement is often a by product of poor communication and perceived marginalisation - involvement is a key tool in overcoming this. Doing it too late can be as damaging as not doing it at all. This is easier to facilitate with those closer to the actual area of change. Those in areas that will have the change thrust upon them after an initial trial or too removed geographically to be physically involved should still be part of a wider communication loop, to help with a smoother transition further down the line.

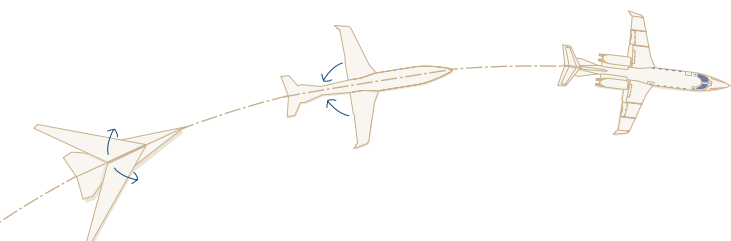
Experience shows that engaging with senior managers is of vital importance to the success of any change programme. How we ensure engagement depends greatly on the personalities involved, the level of the impact the change will have and how receptive they will be. Clear and robust goals, communicated in an appropriate and timely manner are of the utmost importance in getting senior stakeholders on board. Putting oneself in their shoes is a good approach and asking:

- How would I feel about this?
- What would I want to know? and
- What would motivate me to engage fully?

Being in a position to answer those questions will require a lot of fact finding regarding not only the project at hand but also the senior managers that will be involved. Investing in the fact finding and relationship management stage, if done correctly, at the beginning of any change programme will reap benefits throughout the life of your project.

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

~Charles Darwin



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