

Moving with the Goalposts

One of the most overused phrases of the last decade or two must be ‘the goalposts keep moving’.

The phrase usually implies a criticism. Someone keeps changing their mind. The budget shrinks. People who are supposed to be helping are given different priorities. The chief executive leaves. One way or the other there is no consistency. As a result success feels elusive, despite all your best efforts and your challenge keeps growing.

Sound familiar?

Well get used to it.

To quote the Prime Minister, ‘The world is on the move again: the change in the early 21st century is even greater than that of the late 20th century.’

Organisations that don’t change will fail, and so will organisations that manage change as a one-off.

Anyone serious about change has to accept that it is a continual process. The goalposts will move before you ever reach them - for a whole host of very good reasons.

For the business community in the east of England change is being driven by a variety of factors: the growth agenda, globalisation, regulatory developments and, probably above all, societal change, not just in the market, but also in the workplace.

The fact is that change is happening at such a pace that by the time you complete a project designed to meet today’s challenge, tomorrow’s will already be upon you. So an organisation that wants to succeed will take pride in looking ahead, adapting to changing environments, so it can still focus on the goalposts no matter where they’ve moved to.

The key to enabling successful change is creation of an environment in which it can be embraced as part of ‘the way we do things around here’. In other words, to create evolutionary organisations and within them teams and individuals that can adapt to and handle change and accept ambiguity.

And that is a tough challenge.

Part of the solution is to accept the challenge. Don't expect the goalposts to stay rooted to the spot. Accept that they will move and make plans accordingly.

This may involve dividing any change programme into bite-sized chunks of practical short term deliverables aligned to a general vision for the future, rather than embracing tightly defined long-term objectives. Certainly it will mean being sure that your programme will deliver genuine business benefits before the next wave of change hits.

Or, more ambitiously, it may involve building a business model that is all about change and adaptation, where there is no specific programme, just a business strategy that embraces and encourages continual change and creativity.

It will certainly involve strong and ongoing investment in environmental analysis, keeping in touch with your customers, your markets and your people.

And most of all it will require some serious investment in creating the right internal culture, so that your people embrace change as readily as you – and so that you can be sure that each wave is delivered on time, while it is still relevant.

How will you know when you have got there?

Perhaps when people don't complain when the goalposts move but worry when they don't.

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