

People and Change

‘The change in the early 21st century will be even greater than that of the late 20th century.’

So says Tony Blair. And whatever else they might think of him, most business leaders would accept that he is at least right about this.

In today’s business environment, change is ever present. Whether driven by technology, emerging competitors or simply changing tastes, all organisations have to face up to change. But whereas in the past you ignored change at your peril, now the danger is in treating it as a one-off. The pace of change is such that successful organisations have to move on to the next challenge as soon as they have completed the current one. In fact, quite often before.

If this creates problems for management, think what it means for employees. For them, constant change is more often proof of an organisation that doesn’t know where it is going - a sign of failure and poor leadership.

In fact, successful organisations are increasingly likely to be ‘evolutionary organisations’ - those that see constant change not as a sign of weakness but of a confident and progressive leadership.

So how do you convince your employees that the decision to stop a project and start another isn’t a sign that you have lost the plot, but actually shows that you know where you’re going?

As ever, communication is the answer – at least part of it. Without effective communication, change management can all too easily become crisis management. And instead of far-sighted change makers, the members of the management team are seen as headless chickens.

Essentially change management communication has to deliver the answers to four key questions:

Why can't the organisation stand still?

Where is the organisation going?

How are we going to get there?

What will it be like to work here going forward?

Get this right and you're on your way to handling the communication of a change programme pretty effectively. But how do you do this again and again as changing circumstances 'move the goalposts' and mean that last year's change has to be changed again?

Again the secret is about consistent, open and honest communication. Lead by example, talk to people, keep them informed of progress, tell them when things go wrong. Being honest about failure – and the reasons for it - can be a very powerful way to build trust.

It is also about building the culture of an evolutionary organisation in which people understand the circumstances that create the need for change. So when you start to discuss the next change, they are already on board with the why and just want to hear your views on the how.

Which suggests that organisations need to create a culture of internal learning, not just about the day-job, but about the world around them – about markets, customers and technology.

The more your people understand that world, the more they can contribute to your success and become instruments of change, not just recipients.

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