The Change Timeline

I believe that, for any change to be successful, people must take account of the situational and environmental past, present, and future, to the extent that they are relevant to each individual employee, whole teams, and the organization. By taking both the situational and the environmental past, present, and future as separate elements that need to be addressed within the process we can, more effectively, identify the psychological impacts and design interventions that focus on employee needs. The environmental issues could include the wider business market-place, socio-economic influences, changes in government policy/legislation, etc. In contrast, the situational elements are more likely to be concerned with the processes operated by the employee, their perception of the team, and their role within the organization.

This requires that change agents consider the relationship between the past, present, and future, and address all three as part of the integrated change management process. This is depicted in Figure 1 as the 'change time framework', which can be used as an over-arching or meta-model to supplement their existing change management models by introducing the time dimension.

Bridges (1995) recognized the influence of the past and the future within his transition model of change. According to his model, there are three elements in successful change: helping individuals let go of the past, then managing the transition in the 'neutral zone', and finally helping them to start a 'new beginning'.

However, Bridges is more concerned with the management of the transition between the stages in order to implement change successfully than he is with managing the perceptions of the past and creating the future vision in the here and now in order to move through a successful change timeline.

The following sections consider each time period in turn, highlighting the implications for both individuals and change agents.

The Past

How we as individuals handle the past plays a vitally important part in setting the groundwork for the success, or failure, of any future change. We tend to use the past as a benchmark as to how we see the present and the future.

This is nicely encapsulated in one of the sayings we had in the RAF (we had a few!) – "you never leave the same air force you joined". For me this is another version of "you never step in the same river twice" in that things always move on, and as Jimmy Buffet sings "nothing remains quite the same".

It is important that any proposed change be placed in context of past successes, failures, policy decisions, and changes in the market-place (e.g. 'we are where we are today due to the implementation of past initiatives and we are building on them', 'because of mistakes in the past we have to re-structure our organization to compensate', or 'to compete in the new market economy our old philosophy is no longer viable and so we must change how we do things'). This provides a legitimate, cohesive reason for change and lays to rest any incorrect, negative, or outdated perceptions.

As many people will have some investment in the status quo (i.e. a psychological contract), it is only by acknowledging the past that we can allow people to talk about their feelings and experiences regarding previous change, its impact, and its effect. This allows people to mourn their loss (with any change there will be some things which were good or worked well in the past and which will be missed once the change has been effected) and also allows what is known as 'closure', without which it is difficult to successfully move on. That is, we can help individuals draw a line under the past, acknowledge both the good and the bad elements of their past experiences, recognize the need to change and start to build a new future.

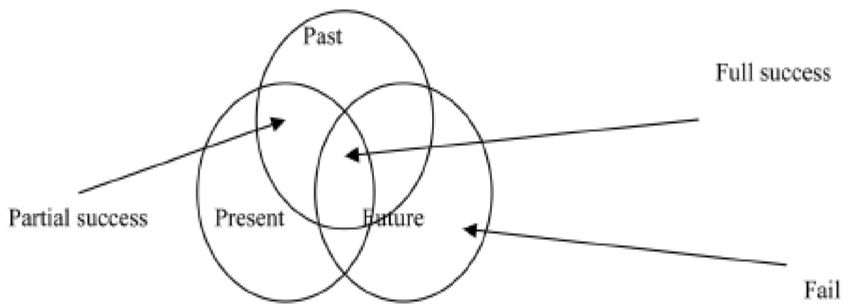

Figure 1: The change time framework

To describe an example from my own consultancy work (Fisher, 2002): after a recent merger and subsequent reorganization within a service provision company, a new manager writing in the internal newsletter discussed how, prior to the merger, the old organization had poor practices and procedures and provided very poor customer service. This was written as a general true statement without any acknowledgement of those areas where there had been examples of good service and best practice.

While the article may have had some truth in it, the overall effect was to alienate employees, raise dissatisfaction, create feelings of resentment, and lower morale. This in turn led to employees finding examples to refute the statements rather than focusing on the changes that were being instigated with a subsequent negative impact on the whole change process (Fisher, 2002).

Nelarine Cornelius presents a case study of an organisation 'stuck in the past' in which she says:

> "... in spite of the rhetoric of change, the reality of creating a . . . shared view has proved elusive. The views of those on the ground are rarely sought . . . change is at the edges but not at the centre . . . *the talk in the canteen is about the good work that is done and any attempts to change this is just about undermining the* [employee's] *who only want to do their job in the way they know works best*."

(Cornelius, 2003, p. 355, italics added).

Again, Charles Handy, in his autobiography, (2006) states that

> *"I realised , once again, that a nation can't move forward unless it accepts the past and puts it behind it, … this is as true for individuals as it is for countries, and just as difficult."*

So it is imperative in any change programme to address the issue of the past for each individual affected.

The Present

The role of the present is to help lay the building blocks for the future. This is where change agents/managers need to communicate with clarity the situation and the proposed way forward to allow new visions to be created. Regular updates need to be issued covering key elements of the change, how it is going, and what the next steps will be. This is also the time to undertake the information-gathering process covering how the workforce feels and their perception of the changes. This is also where we identify those practical steps that can be taken to ensure the change happens and link them to the vision.

Change agents must communicate the 'how to' as well as the 'what if' scenarios and allow individuals to understand their place in the process. Kotter (1995), in his article on why change fails, identified the creation and communication of a vision as being core elements in the success of any change programme.

It is here that 'visioning' and 'value-planning' exercises should be undertaken, for example, using group seminars to discuss the current situation and way forward.

These will help embed not only the proposed change, but also the method of achieving that change, and every individual should not only recognize the need for change but also their specific role in the process. All areas of the situation should be widely and freely discussed in order to ensure that all participants are clear on the need for change, the first steps they must take to make that change successful and the direction in which they must go. Without full buy-in to the direction and structure of the change programme, individuals will be less committed to making that change happen, with denial and hostility, at best, and obstruction or sabotage, at the worst, being the behaviours shown towards the change.

The vision must be coupled with an action plan; otherwise, if we have a vision without an action plan, any change will be like an 'unobtainable goal' or 'pipedream'. On the other hand, a plan without a vision may be formless, unstructured, and unfocused and appear to be a series of unconnected events. Vision and plan form the basic structure giving us the end goal and how we get there.

As an example, an organization wants to deploy an assessment tool it has developed covering the general area of attitudes towards stress and physical and mental health. The organisation (or owner at least) has a well-formulated vision, and an excellent tool; however, there appears to be no cohesive business plan, no concept of what the market audience is or how to penetrate it. The perception is that of a ‘scattergun’ approach and a reactive sales pitch. Consequently, two years on and the organization is still struggling to make an impact.

The Future

Change agents must be intimately involved in helping create a clear, cohesive, achievable vision of the future and then helping manage its implementation via line management throughout the organization. This vision must be something desirable (exciting and motivational) and something that can be visualized by the people involved. It must be grounded in their reality: people must be able to recognize and see how they can achieve it. The envisaged gains must also out-weigh what will be lost from the past, both at an organizational and an individual level; otherwise change will be difficult to establish and even more difficult to sustain.

From a constructivist psychological perspective, individuals should be given the chance to understand and internalize the vision of the future, explore the formation of new ways of working and thinking, and ‘try them out for size’. As a team, they need to go through a period of understanding their own experiences, relating those experiences to the bigger picture and their own values, and, then, relate them to other people’s experiences and decide what the new structure means to them and their place in (or outside) it. By going through this process individuals will be able to understand the new organizational culture and where they fit within it.

As an example from my consultancy work: when Interchanges set up Harmony as a joint-venture organization providing HR services into ABZ Communications they undertook a series of communication events to keep all impacted-upon employees informed. Prior to the official start of Harmony, all ABZ Communication’s HR employees received a monthly newsletter containing information about the progression of Harmony, its aims, objectives, values, and vision, and this was supported by company-wide briefings. Once Harmony was formally launched, a series of two-day induction events were held covering a cross-section of all employees at each event. The nature of these events was planned to help those transitioning into Harmony to become acculturated and gain buy-in to the new company’s vision. This approach resulted in strong and powerful perceptions of Harmony (Fisher, 2002, 2004).

References

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