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Change is dead... long live inspiration

Jim Lawless explains how, when it comes to encouraging changes in people's behaviour and attitude, thinking in terms of 'change management' is a fatal flaw and a leading reason for failure.

Change in business is inevitable, but one thing business leaders could actually benefit from changing is, in fact, 'change management'.

Change fails for a number of reasons, but it is rare that it fails because we were unable to implement systems changes; so people, whether through being 'laggards' or by causing 'resistance', are usually cited as the cause.

But this is a massive over-simplification. When you need to deal with process, business structure, and so on, change management is exactly what you need. But we make a huge mistake assuming that change management can create a change of behaviour in our people. Where change management is all about process, change leadership is driven by inspiration. So how do we inspire our people to change?

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When we implement a change management process, we tell people what we are going to do, when we will do it and how it will happen. All useful, but it will mean next to nothing if we fail to tell – and sell - the 'why'. Why in terms of both the business and the individual.

Cynics and sceptics are certainly barriers to change; sceptics may be sceptical with good reason – they may have seen a number of change initiatives try and fail, so winning them round means engaging them in the process.

The cynics' corrosive attitude may have been bred from too much failed change management and not enough successful change leadership but there are simple rules that, if followed, can remove or circumnavigate almost all resistance:

1) Paint a vivid picture

Change leaders need to create and communicate a powerful picture of the better place the business will reach after the change. Of course, this picture is reflected in targets and KPIs and these are vital for change management, but hardly inspiring for change leadership.

People will want to see your eyes and hear your passion. Change leaders need to present that picture on a human basis, so they need to be highly visible, engaging with the people around them, in person, to explain:

- How will this change make our and our customers' lives better?
- How will it generate more money?
- How will it support the business for the next 10 years?
- How have companies who've already been through this change improved?

2) Show people the roadmap

It may be company policy to show people only what they 'need to know', but during a change process you need to sell to people's intellectual side. Considering the roadmap 'none of their business', or worse, thinking 'I don't want them to know our plans because we'll look foolish if they don't happen', is dangerous – the more they understand, the better.

If you can give your people a clear idea of how and why this time and cash is being invested, you can allay fears. This will make them feel more included, show how they can participate and provide the intellectual proof that change will happen.

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Remember, it's far better to have your people see you miss a milestone and understand why it happened than leave them with no understanding why they should get involved. This is food for the cynic.

3) Build confidence

Often, when change is resisted, it's because people have a lack of faith – either in the company to follow through with its goals, or in themselves to be able to make the leap into the unknown.

It doesn't take much to understand their worries as they are likely to be the same as your own. Every worry you have about the new path will be mirrored by your people. So you can take steps to allay concerns.

- Look for examples of successful change to demonstrate reasons for your choice
- Look back at previous company changes; why did they work? How can you demonstrate it can work again?
- Celebrate success; not only results, but willingness. This way, even if the first steps towards change are a little shaky, your people can still be considered heroes for making that change

4) Demonstrate commitment; dovetail change leadership with change management

Change management is important – it's just not the way to manage your people. So there still needs to be synergy between inspiring the passion and really changing the process or people will be disillusioned and that inspiration will ring false.

And if that happens, people will hopefully complain to you, but you had better be ready to listen because they will only complain once. After that, they will still complain, but it will be during lunch and after work when you are well out of earshot, more fuel to the cynics.

5) Learn to sing – and start singing your song

The more you repeat your message, the more people will understand and believe it. You need to sing the same song until you're sick of it – because your people still won't be. Don't rely on your internal comms team to communicate your message, don't introduce other priorities - be visible; show your commitment to the process;

- Mirror your intent with what's in your diary – with what you do. People need to see you be part of the change process, not just as someone who instructs it
- Think about what you say. One negative comment (and this can even include a raised eyebrow) can kill your people's faith in the project
- Answer questions; the more evasive you are, the less faith people will have in you and in the change

This is a clear leadership task and it's vital that you set aside regular time to make this happen; don't get distracted by the Q3 results and forget to reinforce this song as your signature tune. Repetition is key. As Kotter points out: "remarkably, smart people undercommunicate or poorly communicate all the time without recognising their error".

And here's a tip for nervous singers. The best inspirational speakers use the first three of these steps every time they step up to inspire a group. Almost every great leader from Winston Churchill to Martin Luther King has followed a version of these first three steps.

And once you've committed to the first three, the rest will be much easier to follow and then you'll be on the road to inspiring your people to follow you through change leadership rather than resist your change management.

*Jim Lawless is a sought-after conference speaker. He has just launched the ZooBites initiative, which aims to revolutionise the world of corporate training. For more information, please visit **www.zoobites.com***