

Managing change in an interconnected world

Lessons from experience in different sectors

Many 'traditional' change management lessons don't change...

Whatever the change, leaders still need to communicate:

- Clear vision and benefits for the change;
- A rationale for why this matters now - and why things can't stay as they are any longer
- Robust plans which are aligned and which evolve with feedback from the front line as the programme progresses.

You can't sub-contract the responsibility for delivery - your customers and other stakeholders won't forgive you if you do. And you can't make all the parties happy all of the time.

Different parts of the system will have different priorities, and sometimes these will conflict. A successful change management approach surfaces and handles these conflicts.

...but the boundaries have moved

In today's interconnected world change often needs to be system-wide to achieve the necessary benefits. And the people involved are connected to each other with social media allowing new and immediate communication of information and feelings. This means that designing and leading a change programme is a much more complex task and involves bringing together people from many different organisations.

Even though the business outcomes may be very different for the different parties, the organisational challenges of managing change are frequently system-wide, e.g. a health and social care system, a railway network, the education system, or the supply-chain of a large infrastructure project. But these very different systems often have many similarities and so change leaders can and should learn from the experience of different sectors.

Leaders need to use new communication to access new audiences

When 90% of the people you need to communicate with work for organisations other than your own, leaders need to find new channels of communication - channels that don't respect organisational boundaries and means of communication that people are familiar with in their daily lives. The in-house newsletter or management briefing won't cut it.

Look at the potential of social media platforms - and adopt a broadcast approach. This can feel uncomfortable for leaders who are used to controlling their communication, but, if it works for the White House!! This doesn't mean responding to every tweet or message, let others respond for you and encourage networks of advocates to build real-time reaction to the change.

Many of these system change programmes in health, transport, energy, utilities - also need customers/the public to change their behaviour. So external PR/marketing programmes need to be designed and managed hand in hand with the internal change communication.

And finally - progress isn't linear

When leading successful change across an interconnected system progress can be hard to measure. Some things will apparently take a lot of time to get started as groups need to establish trust and test out each other's commitment before taking big decisions. A bottom-up, incremental approach can help many people across the system to feel confident that local views have been listened to and so reduce implementation risk.

Strategic system change needs to combine many incremental improvements orchestrated by the leader using every change and collaboration tool available - and with patience. One thing that hasn't changed is the time it takes to deliver results!