Winning acceptance and change agility

Philip Atkinson suggests that we must move beyond typical change management methodologies, and focus on engaging with staff and speeding up the implementation of change. This change agility can only be mastered and installed in the corporate culture if we promote strategies to move people through the acceptance cycle, thereby minimising resistance.

This article will help you understand the true dynamics of organisational change and the strategies that can be tailored to deliver the results you want on time and to the prescribed set of solutions. This approach is what we refer to as solution focused[1] and is completely directed to finding solutions that will enable the organisation achieve its desired results.

Speed to market is still a core competitive differentiator, which is why we use our variant of a leadership and change acceleration tool modelled on General Electric's change acceleration process[2] that can enable strategic change to be implemented exceptionally well. Further, the process is focused on speed of implementation, together with robustness, to ensure that the change is well embedded into the culture of the business. This works on any variety of projects, whether introducing lean, quality and improvement, kaizen, productivity improvement, cost reduction or any customer-focused process.

Success in change methodologies

In many organisations, change management is a slow process that is not always well implemented. It is difficult to specify the full or partial success of any project or change programme, but from our own experience in organisational development suggests that 70% of culture change initiatives fail in achieving their objectives.[3] Organisational development and culture change are not the only casualties in terms of installing required complex changes. The success rate

of new entities emanating from merger and acquisition or joint venture activity is also pretty poor. Research indicates that in mergers and acquisitions, as many as 50–70% of these ventures fail to achieve the objectives for which they were originally created. In particular, the major reason why they fail is an inability to create new business culture from the existing organisations.[4]

For instance, when pursuing a discovery review of a past failed initiative with a new client, we may witness that the specific strategies did not create the desired bottom-line results of winning new and retaining existing customers. Further, we find that, with organisational design, the intended consequences of restructuring and re-engineering created more confusion and bureaucracy than they were supposed to replace. In audits and focus groups, we hear that culture change takes years rather than months and never really permeates the fabric of the organisation.

Change and the bad banks

It will be interesting to see how much exceptional change work is driven through the bad banks before they are sold in the marketplace. If ever there is a need to revitalise these organisations to make them lean and trim, with healthy balance sheets and exceptional performance, this is a case for using such a model and set of processes.

Many change implementation strategies need some revitalisation at some time, but all too often we find that the change was less than successful, that the organisation is still suffering from the same problems and demonstrates the same weaknesses in the marketplace, and that the organisation is bordering on terminal decline. Organisations need to develop an attitude and a methodology to master and drive change. A failure to do so will result in poorer performance, declining morale and motivation in its people and disappointment for its customers.

I believe we should be developing strategies and plans to promote the acceptance of change, rather than battling against resistance. We need to create the climate and provide the processes that will enable the changes to be implemented and become business as usual. Be aware, though, that even with foresight, pre-planning and all the drivers expressed cogently behind the need to change, you may encounter some resistance. Welcome this as a healthy response and an opportunity to debate possibilities, and treat resistance as a powerful ally in facilitating the learning process.

Key players in the acceptance and learning process

We focus on the key players and the motivations of those who are witnessing the change at all levels within the organisation. We focus our attention on their motivations, and enable them

Champions 5%*	Early adapters 10%	Late adapters 10%	Doubters 60%	Resisters 15%

*Note: percentages are included by way of example

Key players in the acceptance and learning process
Table 1

to make the transition to full acceptance of their future – see Table 1. The key questions you may want to address are: *Where do these people in the organisation reside?* and *What percentage of staff at these levels fall within each sector?* Unfortunately, we find that the staff can be skewed more to the right of the table rather than the left. It is the role of leaders and line managers in the change process to create the conditions under which progressively we can move all staff from the right to the left.

■ **Champions** Those who fall into the category of champions are those ever willing, high-flying performers who want to develop their career, their experiences and their fulfilment. These are the players who always are picked for new projects. Do you overuse your change champions and with what consequences? Attracting and retaining such people should be a key HR strategy for any business.

■ **Early adapters** These people are quick to take on new ideas when they see the key players eager to participate and engage in the change. Thoughtful development in project management skills will increase the intensity and number of champions. Imagine if the company in Table 1 were able to develop its people through change leadership to occupy the extreme left-hand box; what do you imagine that would do for your business and your results?

■ **Late adapters** They need to witness change actually working in practice and once they get their proof they commit to the process. They have seen the evidence and the doubters' views are countered.

■ **Doubters** They make up far more of the population in many businesses and organisations. I think this is natural, because many of us will have witnessed change programmes that failed to deliver with such regularity that cynicism creeps into the culture, and the rumour mill and grapevine is humming with bad news. In reality, projects have not always delivered the expectations of all and on time and with the intensity anticipated, reinforcing the doubters' belief that it is another fad that will not work. I believe it imperative that we should focus our energy on the doubters to win them over and facilitate them into late adapters.

■ **Resisters** The last category is composed passive and active resisters. My experience is that passive resistance is more prevalent, so you have to look for it. In times of change and

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uncertainty like today, resisters can be covert, keep their views to themselves and do not buy in psychologically and emotionally to the projects. You may have many staff attending a change project who are making all the right approving noises, but underneath this positive exterior, other forces, motivations, doubts and anxieties are at work. Now, just suppose that we quickly win the hearts and minds of the doubters, so that they emulate the behaviour of early or late adapters; what impact would that have on corporate performance?

Acceptance can be the norm

Think of promoting acceptance rather than handling resistance. When we think of resistance, we may think of a force acting against us with a less than a positive intent. Acceptance is a pulling force that focuses on the positive and active, rather than the negative and punitive approaches. By creating a climate of engagement, building the processes and communicating honestly, we can develop the conditions to enable organisations to welcome change. We do this through our variant of change acceleration.

The good thing about any resistance is that it is a precursor to enabling you to formulate your communications strategy to handle any possible objections about your changes and how it is to be implemented. By predicting how people will resist, you can take preventative action and formulate a solution focus that address any potential conflicts, fears or anxieties.

Communication

You may have a number of key staff groups and stakeholders who need to know how the change may impact them. It is clear that you will have to build a series of engagement tools to promote a climate to learn, and encourage engagement in the process. Leaders have the responsibility and should focus on building the capability so that commitment at all levels is demonstrable and clear. There needs to be clarity of intent, passion and energy in delivery with reinforcement and alignment across the organisation.

As you have multiple stakeholder groups with different needs, issues and anxieties you also need to tailor your communications strategy to match their real needs. The objectives, content and processes for delivering this strategy should be as diverse as the needs of those receiving the message. Action requires equal measure of creativity and logical thinking. Even though we think we have sent a clear and focused communication, depending on where others are sited in terms of acceptance, the message received can be deleted, distorted or even generalised, and any good intent and specific issues can be missed. Checking for understanding is critical in any process and as yet we have still to find a business that over-communicates to their people.

Inclusion and influence through line management

Effective change comes about by including others in decisions that impact on their future. Developing engagement strategies that work is far more effective in promoting and supporting the conditions where participation is the norm and change will be accepted. I like the idea that line managers and the top team actually lead the process of change by being the initial change champions, modelling the process and the path.

Again, just suppose you had the internal capability to drive change in your organisation; how much easier would the whole process be? How much progress could be made quickly? How long would it be before your approaches led to improvement and security for staff in these times of recovery?

If provided with the right support and development, line managers would be equipped to rely on change processes, engagement and influencing strategies and techniques to help others, learners and participants, to reframe things to see beyond what can be achieved. The role of the leader as line manager and coach is to open up opportunities and possibilities for those undertaking the change, attending workshops and being exposed to new behaviours and cultures.

Issues on personal and organisational change

Put to one side the complexity of organisational change. Focus on personal change and how you deal with it as an individual. Remember the resistance we can encounter when we try to change something about ourselves, whether changing lifestyle habits, changing our career or direction, moving jobs, or starting or ending a relationship. Review the relative success of New Year resolutions as an indication of how each of us does not always welcome change.

Can we easily change our eating habits, put on our running shoes to take the first few steps to health or even to commit to a new relationship or job? Consider how easy you personally find change. It is not always so easy to deal with the dynamics of personal change, because it requires us to drop a familiar way of behaving and taking on a new set of behaviours or habits. Gaining the pleasure of changing to be, do or have something else is countered by the pain of leaving behind our old self.

The associated pain of rejecting old habits that may have given us enormous satisfaction in the past may not be compensated for by the pleasure of changing to new habits. Some people just find it too uncomfortable, which is why New Year health and fitness resolutions and commitments to working out decline in the early months of spring. Referencing personal examples of experiencing difficulty in managing personal change is a very powerful process in helping understand why others, in the context of organisational change, find the transition so difficult.

Accelerated change process (ACP)

ACP is composed of five parallel processes that are synchronised to ensure that systemic learning from each of the processes is incorporated into the overall project or change management plan:

- Leading the process – through the change team
- Communicating the desire and willingness to change
- Align all constituencies
- Shaping an implementation plan
- Continuous review and continuous improvement

Each process has set deliverables that are shaped and tailored to the organisations specific needs. Feedback in each activity regularly provides data on what is working exceptionally well and what may be underperforming. Having this knowledge at our fingertips allows us to work with line managers to assess any preventative or corrective actions to ensure we meet the project deadlines.

This supports our working towards establishing a positive acceptance culture, rather than the narrow approach of removing hindrances. ACP is a distillation of a lasting and sustainable process for change, the methodology that delivers the key processes and activities set within a sequence of carefully timed events to produce deliverable and implementable results.

Because the five processes are carefully crafted to ensure that the change team is synchronised, the results of the project can be actualised very quickly. This approach requires people at all levels to commit to performance issues and monitor metrics that they develop themselves. The processes and events are closely led and facilitated. Because the initiative has such a high profile, energy expended by all members of the teams is focused initially on working on a short-term fix in order to put a preventative, error-free solution in place before a long-term solution can be formulated. Some prefer to ignore the short term and focus on a sustainable improvement. It depends on the circumstances and degree of urgency and risk.

What is often neglected is the composition of the change team. To me, the change team should be composed of key stakeholders of the change and those that are affected by it. Normally, I would consider the leadership team to be central in the process, assisted by a change facilitator or agent. The team should also include any project sponsor who has to oversee the change and a variety of line managers and experts who can input the process. The change facilitator or agent has to ensure that all constituencies or stakeholders progress and demonstrate commitment to the project and that there are detailed processes that track the five parallel processes.

Time is not always on our side, but commitment is. Doing something, no matter what, to fix things in the real world demonstrates a strong desire for action. Taking action with a firm, committed drive to prevent persistent problems arising again has to be the best way. Using the talents of the people who work the process is central. People who *do* the work, rather than those who *manage* it, probably have more than 80% of the solutions.

Cross-functional teams

A great deal of progress can be made in many businesses, especially in the service or support functions, but often silo thinking blinds people to the real benefits of working together across boundaries. Without cross-functional teams driving close co-operative action plans between functions, synergy will never arise. Projects can range from customer service and manufacturing problems to post-acquisition integration, cross-functional working on R&D, customer service delivery, sales, marketing, quality improvement and HR issues. The methodology is mostly used in environments that need a rapid improvement to deliver tangible results, often where there is a deviation from the planned performance that desperately needs to be corrected.

This methodology can drive any change. The key requirement is the commitment of the project sponsors, who are senior in the business, to open gates and devote resource to those core people who work the process. The approach can be applied to any organisational problem.

Results in action

Those who commit to drive a solution to a corporate or business problem meet with the facilitator to focus upon agreeing resource to achieve results. People who are critical

as 'knowledge resource' in resolving the issues are quickly identified to become part of the team to drive and, more importantly, implement results of the process.

The format can take many forms. For instance, core stakeholders are brought together for three days to apply the methodology to their problem in workshop format. The workshop involves all constituents focusing entirely upon actions and implementation issues. The final half-day of the three days is invested in focusing upon implementation plans and presenting these to the top teams of the business, together with detailed action plans. This ensures practical solutions and constant communication between the cross-functional teams and those back in the business. The plan will then be monitored over a six-week period and installation completed.

Six weeks is not long enough to work on large strategic projects, but projects can be broken down into measurable tangible stages and progress and can be demonstrated. If projects last more than six weeks, people lose interest, so it is critical that change is sustained and improved over this short period. If a solution takes too much longer, then the problem was probably not defined closely enough and was therefore too big to defeat with a six-week burst of energy. Of course, IT and BPR processes would not fit in this category.

The five-stage parallel process works well because it is a high-energy, high-profile event driven over a six-week time span. An investment of concentrated time is required to really work the problem. Selection of high-energy contributors is essential – that it, champions and early and late adapters.

Because of the six-week time span, many issues can be driven at the same time due to the development of multiple teams. As more issues are clarified and loops closed, more and more people are trained in the process.

Drivers of the process

It is best to work with the managerial and supervisory group first to test for commitment. A diagonal slice of the organisation can then be committed to the training process. Critical mass for implementation can take place with a surprisingly small number of trained people. Sponsors must commit some of their time to make the process work, because their involvement makes things even better.

Developing your own line managers as facilitators can start at any stage and ensures that you have the internal capability for driving any change. You do not have to be reliant on super-confident line managers. The enthusiasm of those undertaking the process helps accelerate events and, realistically, this can be very low in some organisations. We know that some people will attend who may not be usual team drivers. It is critical to develop their skills and competence to manage change.

Many organisations cannot cope with the pace of change, when it comes thicker and faster than ever before. Companies need methodologies that will work and are easy to understand, rather than having to analyse and detail everything chronologically. They need action and people who are committed to act to drive positively for radical performance in the business.

The ACP process trains your people to drive change so that the tools and approaches they use will become the norm for accelerating solutions to long-term problems. Change is not to be feared, but grasped as an opportunity to grow the business. Whilst others are talking themselves into recession and negativity, release the potential of your people to develop a stronger and resilient business in an uncertain climate. The competitive edge of any business is measured by how fast the right actions are implemented. The purpose of this process is to do just that, and provide certainty and rapid improvement at a strategic level.

Summary

Change can be relatively easy to master, given the acknowledgement of positively and actively developing acceptance rather than addressing an almost negative strategy of handling resistance. I am not guaranteeing instant success by adhering to this approach, but ACP will ensure that speedy and exceptional improvement is soon experienced on the bottom line and in the views of all core stakeholders.

By committing to this two-fold approach – focus on acceptance and use of the ACP – we can be introducing change programmes at an even faster and more precise rate than we do currently. We build the culture that allows change to be seen as natural, positive and engaging. By addressing these issues in advance of rolling out a change initiative, the leadership team, the line manager as change maker will be in a much stronger position to be able to win active support for the change.

Focusing on building policies and processes to support people accept change that is manifested in behaviour will be exceptionally helpful in improving the performance of change initiatives. If we were to devote and invest time and resources to actively leading and enabling the conditions under which change can be implemented, most organisations would benefit substantially and more like 90%+ of change initiatives would deliver By focusing on change as learning new ways of behaving and encouraging others to expand their learning to taking thoughtful risks, change initiatives would flourish and change would be valued and welcomed.

About the author

Philip Atkinson is Director of Learning Strategies Ltd, specialising in strategic, behavioural cultural change and organisation design. He consults in the UK, Europe and US, has written books and articles on change and learning, and speaks at conferences and at workshop sessions. His most recent book: *How to become a Change Master: Real World Strategies for Achieving Change*, was published by Spiro Press in 2005.

Tel: 0131 346 1276. Web site: www.philipatkinson.com

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