

The five "enabling assumptions" of successful change

29 September 2009 8:32am

Most "change" strategies are dated and doomed to fail, but employers can build a foundation for change success with five "enabling assumptions", according to management consultant Peter Fuda.

"More than 70 per cent of all change efforts fail, and failed change is the number one reason why leaders get fired," says The Alignment Partnership founder in his paper, [Why Change Efforts Fail](#).

Most of today's change theories are built on the "flawed assumption" that change can be managed, he says, but "'change management' is an oxymoron".

"The notion that change can be... managed is rooted in the industrial-age metaphor of the 'organisation as machine'," Fuda says.

"In this paradigm, the organisation can be pulled apart and put back together at will and with no collateral damage; people respond only to the extrinsic motivations of 'carrot and stick'; and the leader is responsible for every role - from visionary to cheerleader."

But when leaders adopt this role, he says, employees are "doomed to passive dependence".

"The irony is that as leaders, we desire innovation, responsiveness and adaptability to compete in the modern business environment, while we simultaneously foster a culture of dependence, approval and compliance."

Other "flawed assumptions" thwarting change efforts, he says, include:

- **"we are objective"** - assuming we're objective while acting subjectively. "Change efforts often fail or are rendered unsustainable because crucial pieces of information and intricate interrelationships are overlooked or ignored by leaders who are blinkered by [their] backgrounds, education, preferences and beliefs";
- **"change can be achieved in X number of steps"** - establishing a formula to navigate a "change event" and restore stability. "Stability is a distant memory and change is no longer an event - it is the new constant";
- **"we have a neutral starting point for change"** - assuming that because our intentions are good, employees and other stakeholders will naturally trust and follow us. "But change efforts never take place in a vacuum. There is always an environmental, organisational and personal context to be considered. After endless restructuring, reengineering, downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, many people are scarred, tired, cynical, and focused on self protection"; and
- **"change is the goal"** - speaking about change as an end in itself. "Change is a verb; it is a process by which to achieve goals and aspirations. The stakeholders of our organisations do not want change... but rather the realisation of the statements of mission, vision and values that appear prominently in corporate boardrooms and on company websites."

Change-enabling assumptions

In many organisations "the terms 'change' and 'failure' have become almost synonymous", Fuda says.

"When a leader talks about 'change'... what people typically hear is pain, loss, extra effort, increased risk and greater uncertainty."

Fuda suggests five "enabling assumptions" to counter the "flawed assumptions" which, he says, have underpinned change efforts for the last 20 years.

The enabling assumptions are:

1. **"Uncertainty is our friend"** - accepting turbulence, uncertainty and disorder as natural characteristics of modern business. "In this mindset, time that was once spent developing the perfect project plan is invested in understanding the environmental context and developing the critical relationships required for sustainable change to occur. Leaders are more interested in purposeful forward movement than reporting on the plan [and] they do not let perfect get in the way of better";
2. **"One part confidence, two parts humility, three parts sense of humour"** - approaching and communicating change with a humble disposition. "Even the most successful [change] efforts are far more akin to the world of Maxwell Smart than James Bond. The human capacity to laugh at ourselves and make light of dire circumstances are critical preconditions for successful change. This capacity allows us to retain perspective, let off steam, develop resilience and bounce back from the inevitable set-backs. Self-effacing leaders build trust, 'followership' and encourage authentic dialogue";
3. **"Context before content"** - understanding the strengths and aspirations of the business and stakeholders before articulating a new agenda. "Before launching off on the new crusade... it is critical to understand the injuries people may carry from previous crusades. Capturing the hearts and minds of intelligent, battle-weary people requires meaningful engagement in the issues and challenges affecting them";
4. **"Trust changes everything"** - delivering on promises to build enduring trust. "The fastest way to build trust is to extend more trust than is warranted. In a high-trust environment, leaders will be given the benefit of the doubt and will be able to course-correct and move forward"; and
5. **"The 'goal' is the goal"** - forgetting about change. "Not only is change not the goal, but change is not even the process. The process by which we reach our aspirations is alignment. When a leadership team is clearly in alignment, employees in the organisation have confidence that the goals are reachable. Compared to change, alignment is a strong, positive and unemotional concept."

If you have some HR news to share or would like to suggest a topic for an article, [click here](#) to email the editor.

Related content

- [Commit to a "vibrant" future workers can aspire to](#)
- [Change relationship models or damage your business](#)
- [Effective change management aids engagement](#)
- [Engage key decision makers, then hit the accelerator, says cultural transformation expert](#)