

Change Management: 10 Stop and Gos.

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Abstract

The original idea of this article is to help Change Managers stop barging through organizations in an effort to push their staff prematurely into a projected change.

This research study is based on three changes in organisation: The SAP project at Rhodia Silicones (Petrochemicals firm), The Étoile project at Renault Trucks (Automobile firm) and the Progress Project of the Rhône-Alpes region (French regional government). Based on case-study methodology, the study shows in what way piloting change is a specific form of management which requires specific skills.

The position of Change Manager requires rare talents. He is a person who sets up informal networks, who is able to delegate, who empowers his organization. Committed and energetic, he knows how to get things moving, and has to be very effective in overcoming resistance to change.

First, this article enlightens six points to eliminate preconceived ideas about change: Stop believing that individuals have a natural aptitude to adapt; Stop believing that individuals function rationally; Stop believing that organizations are naturally dynamic; Stop believing that anyone can improvise being a Change Manager merely with good intentions; Stop believing that company culture is easy to change. Then, the study gives Managers 4 steps to go for change: Make sure that the position of the Change Manager is legitimate; Make sure that the Change Manager has complete technical control of the project; Make sure that the Change Manager has the charisma to get things moving; Make sure that the organization is ready to go through change.

Key Words: Change leadership – Change Process – Managers Skills – Project leadership – Strategic Management

Introduction

Is it better to stop and face an obstacle before going on, or is it better to try to take it on full speed ahead?

Any Change Manager who has had to steer an organisation through a change in course has had to decide between these two strategies.

If you are managing a project involving change, or have done so in the past, you will be concerned by these following stop and go steps in the change process.

Examples will be given based on a study of three organizations.

We recruited change management agents from very diverse structures in order to identify any existing constants in the leadership of such projects. The Change Managers were interviewed by means of a questionnaire and informal meetings. The three companies interviewed were: Renault Trucks (The Étoile Project, France, a multinational company specialized in the construction of heavy goods vehicles); Rhodia Silicones (The SAP Project, France, an international group specialized in chemicals and involved in sustainable development); Rhône-Alpes Region (The Progress Project, France, local government level).

Accompanying change consists in guiding a system, a person or an organization through a transformation. From a technical point of view, change leadership implies overseeing every step of the process, from the diagnosis, to the setting up of an action plan aimed at finding solutions in terms of evolution and adaptation that will enable the project to succeed. This means being practical and adapting quickly to new situations.

The position of Change Manager requires rare talents¹. He is a person who sets up informal networks, who is able to delegate, who empowers his organization. Committed and energetic, he knows how to get things moving, and has to be very effective in overcoming resistance to change². Does this description fit you?

I – 6 stopping points to eliminate preconceived ideas about change.

Stop 1: Stop believing that individuals have a natural aptitude to adapt.

Have you been confronted with resistance to change which you have wanted to implement? Who hasn't? In the three companies interviewed resistance to change manifests itself in several ways which may be either passive or active. Without delving into any psychological complexities of the agents studied, it is possible to identify two kinds of situations.

First, managers must deal with resistance linked to the fear of being dispossessed of a skill, or of professional identity. This was true for a manager at the Rhône-Alpes Regional Council where certain people in the cultural section who were used to processing cheques found it difficult to adapt to smart cards. The same phenomenon was found at Renault Trucks, in the Human Resources department; the Etoile project transferred the responsibility for certain aspects of the personnel files of every employee from the HR department to local managers, thus giving employees direct access to their own files. As a consequence the HR department lost contact with the employees and therefore were set up to resist change.

Second, managers must face resistance due to fear of losing one's job. This is similar to the case described above, but to a stronger degree because of the fear of unemployment. This context of fear was present at Rhodia Silicones due to numerous lay offs. From this example we were able to conclude the following : resistance to change brings to the fore the feeling of

¹ On leadership, cf. notably, Claude Levy-Leboyer, 2001, p. 195-230; Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, Annie McKee, 2002, p. 16-145.

² On this question cf. notably Christophe Faurie, 2002, p. 15 s.

fear which manifests itself in the presence of any new situation, and creates doubts in the minds of employees : « Will I be good enough?", "Where will I fit in?", «Who will I be in the new organization? ».

Recommendation: identify people who find it difficult to adapt to change, and offer help in the form of a training program, or individual coaching to establish a personal project.

Stop 2 : Stop believing that individuals function rationally.

In fact, no one has the time or the means to find the most rational solution to reach his objectives. He will stop at the solution which, at that moment, is the least unsatisfactory for him³. No better solution will be taken up. We are far from Taylor's "one best way"⁴.

No doubt you have, at some point, had the impression that a game of chess was being played around you without your being included!

During the interview with the Human Resources Manager at the Rhône-Alpes Region, the question of the power-relationship matrix revealed a gap between theoretical knowledge and operational reality. In a real situation you don't have time to design a matrix. For this HR Manager of the Rhône-Alpes council, the likely strategies of the different agents are not necessarily identified in a formal manner; they are evaluated more by intuition.

In the context of change leadership, power games give plenty of leeway to individual strategies. This brings us to a key element in strategic analysis: the zone of uncertainty. Every system includes uncertainties, but none imposes mechanical constraints on the organization⁵. These uncertainties are incorporated into the tactics of the agents, where they diminish or reinforce independence.

Recommendation: know how to decode the possible strategies of agents and accept the uncertainty linked to irrational human behaviour.

Stop 3 : Stop believing that change is automatic and will be understood as such.

Everyone knows that change depends on clear and effective communication. Different managers have different interests, and they will implement strategies that serve their own interests. The organization can thus be considered as a structured whole in which power struggles exist⁶. Most certainly you see this in your organization everyday.

The role of the Change Manager will be to arbitrate and conciliate those involved in implementing the changes. He will also have to keep the overall objective of the project in the fore front. In the Rhône-Alpes Card+ project different departments had different interests and cultures which could have been divisive. In order to pull these departments together in a single effort, the Change Manager had to continually remind everyone of the main objective which was to bring out a product as quickly as possible.⁷

Knowing how to manage change and uncertainty involves power and expertise which in themselves can give the upper hand to those who exercise them. The Change Manager will

³ Philippe Bernoux, p. 132.

⁴ Frederick W. Taylor, 1911.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 149.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Those who dominate will be agents who are able to impose both a certain definition of the problems to resolve (and thus the relevant uncertainties) and to affirm their more or less complete control of these uncertainties; Erhard Friedberg, 1997, p. 260. A book perfectly illustrates the differences in the ability of individuals to adapt to change. The book is *Who moved my cheese*, by Spencer Johnson (in French: *Qui m'a piqué mon fromage*) 2002.

have to take into consideration and manage these factors when pushing for change. Communication at this point is vital in clearing the way for those who may find the change obscure or unsettling. You, as a change manager, will be a flashlight in the dark, or better still, you will lead the way with a bright spot light making it comfortable for everyone to walk onto the new path.

Recommendation: communicate information about the change clearly, and as early as possible.

Stop 4 : Stop believing that organizations are naturally dynamic.

Organizations are like humans, generally they don't like change. It takes a lot of energy to change. You can comfortably hang up your hammock with a status quo. So, how can one get things moving in a new direction without being too upsetting: by becoming a "learning context manager" who will be at times, or at the same time, a coach, a trainer, a boss.

In a learning context the idea of change becomes an obvious objective for all concerned⁸. In such a context, the Change Manager is the key agent in the process. He will inject the energy and the necessary skills into the management of the project. In a dynamic context such as that found in a reorganization process, the Change Manager must be a "learning context" manager.

For example, within the framework of the progress initiative at the Rhône-Alpes Regional Council, a management course was set up for all of the managers so as to create a common management culture and to teach them how to situate themselves as other than experts or the holders of "the Only Way to do it".

In a context of innovation, of reform, of improvement, the manager must convince. To this end, he must build a communication plan that reaches every level⁹, and is an integral part of an overall logic of process planning¹⁰.

For this, the manager must bring into play the necessary means to revise his opinions successfully. He must refuse the single mindset. Every level of an organization, of an enterprise or of local government is a seat of micro decisions. The manager must relay information between the different levels in the organization. Thus the importance of close-proximity management, which is a link between decision-making and operational bodies, in the strictest sense of the terms. The Change Manager helps his team to take on the idea that there are visions other than their own. « The learning manager enables all of the agents in the company to consider these alternative dimensions valuable, as he himself shows by embarking on a program of change »¹¹.

Recommendation: identify aspects of the organization which are becoming rusty and oil the wheels by creating and running new projects.

Stop 5 : Stop believing that anyone can improvise being a Change Manager merely with good intentions.

No doubt you have seen situations in which a change project was spontaneously given to a manager on the basis of his availability. In this way managing change is learned "hands on" while managing the implementation of the project. However motivated the improvised Change Manager might be, good intentions may not be enough. The change project leader

⁸ Robert Heller, 1999, p. 15.

⁹ John P. Kotter, p. 13.

¹⁰ Cf. Marcel MINANA, 2002 ; Henri-Pierre Maders, Elizabeth Gauthier, Cyrille Le Gallais, 2000.

¹¹ Agefos pme, p. 78.

must have the necessary skills to be clear and able to remind everyone of the purpose of the project and to insist on the need for the change and its objectives.

Thus, in the Rhône-Alpes Card+ Project, at the Rhône-Alpes Regional Council a great deal of resistance was defused thanks to the intervention of an assistant consultant who is an expert in the field of change management.

Being able to show that the projected change makes sense is capital in a period of mutation. This defuses resistance due to fear.

Recommendation: choose an experienced change manager or plan for training programs to accompany the person chosen to manage the change project.

Stop 6 : Stop believing that company culture is easy to change.

Is company culture important? Of course, you say. Without it a firm does not have a proper identity, one that distinguishes it from the rest. Yet, company culture is difficult to fully define. It depends on what is felt, on symbols, on values. How can one change what constitutes a collective unconsciousness in a firm?

At the Rhône-Alpes Regional Council, political imperatives are the driving force behind change. Indeed, local government depends on central political bodies that are regularly elected. The necessity to adapt is inherent to local government. The progress initiative was implemented by the Rhône-Alpes Regional Council to meet the challenge of this reality by improving its organization. Since the interviews, the elections in March 2004 have brought in a new council, resulting in a profound reorganization.

The company culture of this organization is based on the idea that each political change brings in its wave of reforms! In this organization constant changes were simply too much to ask of the staff and ended up in being factor of resistance to change.

Recommendation: be aware of the signs that underlie your behaviour and that of your colleagues which compose the unspoken company culture. Then consciously decide to get rid of any behaviour that is inappropriate or obsolete.

II – 4 steps to go for change.

Go 1 : Make sure that the position of the Change Manager is legitimate.

Authority and competence makes a leader legitimate. Every manager wants and needs to be perceived as legitimate. This is even more important during a period of change.

Thus, the position of the Change Manager is vital; he must be able to exercise his influence fully.¹² His responsibility will be limited in time, until the end of the project, and transversal, that is to say it will extend to the different levels of involvement in the project.

To confirm this, the Change Manager of Renault Trucks is able to manage several departments and change processes smoothly precisely because the title of "Change Manager" was conferred upon him and respected by everyone.

From a hierarchical point of view, the Change Manager is in a horizontal/transversal management system, he is responsible for the project, and not only benefits from his personal position in the organization chart, but also from his specific legitimacy as Change Manager. He is directly responsible to the Board of Directors, and enjoys a status which is identical to

¹² Christophe Midler.

that of department managers. Without this formal power, Change Managers have little chance of being able to act on the outcome of the project ¹³.

Recommendation: Give the Change Manager a transversal position and authority backed up by a letter which assigns him as leader for the project. The project will function in a horizontal style of management; make sure that the hierarchical protocol does not creep in.

Go 2 : Make sure that the Change Manager has complete technical control of the project.

Technical control is both technical know how and the ability to create and work within a network. The Change Manager must be able to decipher actors' strategies. That is to say, he must understand how those concerned by the change project position themselves. Most projects and programs unfold in a context, which include many agents (economic actors, associations, national and local administration, local government, elected representatives, the media, lobby groups, unions, religious leaders, etc.) whose positions with regard to the project weave a complex network of agreements and disagreements. As a result of this complexity, the Change Manager may find himself disconcerted by the attitude of such or such an agent, or by the appearance of an unexpected alliance of a number of agents against the project. Analysis of the strategies of these agents will make it possible to understand the position of each one so as to evaluate the relationships of power and influence involved. To spot potential conflicts and alliances will enable the Change Manager to outline tactics likely to reduce opposition to the project.

Thus, for the three organizations studied (Renault Trucks, Rhodia Silicones, Rhône-Alpes Region), in their answers to the questionnaire, a certain number of HR professionals confirmed the importance of taking into account the strategies of agents in change leadership, and the need to identify, if it can be expressed thus, the powers in the arena. Understanding the likely strategies of the various agents is capital in negotiations with the unions.

In the case of Rhône-Alpes, the projected change was to set up a management staff which would be motivated by specific bonuses as part of their remuneration package. This meant eliminating pre-existing privileges for certain managers and hierarchical positions. It is obvious that this Change Manager (The Human Resource Manager) had to work with negotiation as a tool as well as communication in order to instigate change.

Involving the whole project team in the elaboration of a unified strategy leads to a structured exchange of information between the actors: through this method, the members of the project team can share all of the information they have at their disposal concerning their " partners " in the project, and construct a common view of the role each one will be playing.

Recommendation: be demanding, notably with regard to the capacity to "network", the ability to listen and to manage complexity by working as a team.

Go 3 : Make sure that the Change Manager has the charisma to get things moving.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

It is important for the Change Manager to know how to give a contagious impetus to the project. It is a leadership of resonance with which a group of followers will vibrate in unison with the optimism and enthusiastic energy of the leader¹⁴.

This resonance is amplified and prolonged by the emotional impact of the leadership style. The more individuals act in unison, the more dynamic are their interactions¹⁵. What will weld the team together and involve them more deeply in the project are the emotions they feel¹⁶. But enthusiasm, even persuasion¹⁷ is not enough, the leader must be able to communicate and develop the creativity of the team.

In the three organizations studied, the change managers were chosen according to their abilities to bring together the entire staff and to get them working as a single team.

Recommendation: consider change leadership to be a skill in its own right.

Go 4 : Make sure that the organization is ready to go through change.

What does it mean to be ready to change? Is there a right time for change? If this were the case, one could bet that most organizations or individuals would never change!

The objectives of the organization¹⁸ and the objectives of the agents are not necessarily compatible, forgetting the latter may trigger strong resistance. Indeed, not taking account the specific objectives of the agents concerned will lead to reactions destined to maintain the status quo.

At the Rhône-Alpes Regional Council: the project to set up a new job description schedule included the downgrading of a function that had benefited, for historical reasons, from a particular status in the organization. As a result, those concerned felt demoted. Therefore, this particular aspect of change was not put into place so as to reduce the resistance to change at other levels.

In such circumstances, motivating staff in periods of change requires the manager to double his efforts, notably by being particularly clear on the objectives sought, while being attentive to individual interests. The diplomacy of the manager here is essential¹⁹.

Recommendation: gauge the temperature of your organization. Not all changes are pleasant experiences; find the form of change which best suits the context in which you find your organization. Be ready to accompany the change throughout the entire length of project. Never underestimate the power of inertia! Be ready to judge what needs to stay so that the projected change can happen.

Conclusion

To be sure, these "stop n go" tips may seem obvious to some, however, the obvious is too often overlooked as certain Change Managers barge through the organization in an effort to already "be there" in the projected change. Keeping in mind these tips may help Change Managers slow down just enough to stop and check with his team that all "systems are go".

¹⁴ Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, Annie McKee, 2002, p. 38. For a systemic view, cf. Giorgio Nardone and Paul Watzlawick, 1993.

¹⁵ Christophe Mideler.

¹⁶ Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, Annie McKee.

¹⁷ David A. Garvin and Michael A. Roberto, p. 104-112.

¹⁸ On the theme of organization, cf. notably, Henry Mintzberg, 1982; Gareth Morgan, 1989.

¹⁹ Raymond Vaillancourt, June 2004.

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