



HR AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

HR needs to find that calm, authoritative voice to keep the process gently rolling along

Motivation Matters Limited



Incredible change

It is unbelievable that anyone, who has been working anywhere in the last fifty years, has escaped a succession of organisation change interventions. The rapid growth of international competition, the impact of IT and the rise of demanding mass consumerism have all fed this beast.

To see just one example of how the world has changed, you need only watch a few movies from the 1970s. Many of the plots rely on the key character being unable to make a phone call. Today mobile phone usage is almost universal in the UK. Some lucky people have saved their lives by calling for help when stuck in rising water, injured by a fall or in trouble at sea. To people living in the first half of the twentieth century today's mobile phones would be impressively close to magic!

Chief Executives alternate between periods of reducing costs, building profitability and worrying about how their organisation will cope with an uncertain future of ever quickening change. Many of us are in that worrying stage now. This series of change management articles is therefore timely.

While I cannot claim a half century of change management I could go to a quarter. I have been involved in three major change programmes in that time, in different business sectors. In only one of these did I have formal HR authority, working in partnership with HR in the others. My experience has illuminated the roles HR can, indeed needs, to play in successful change interventions.

The essence

Change management is exciting if you are doing it but scary if imposed on you. It is scary because today you know you can do your job whereas, after the change, you do not know if you will be capable of fulfilling your job role. This is the essence of people's resistance to change.

Key Role

A key role in reducing resistance to change is making people believe they will be looked after in the process. This boils down to the relationship between the employer and the employee. The key role is Human Relationship management. Establish it before the change intervention begins for best success. "Human Relationships" is the real meaning of strategic HR.





The stages

Successful change interventions go through a number of stages. I have identified nine.

1. HR should be involved in the initial discussions on the change objectives and processes. The change has to have a coherent, communicable vision. HR should buy in to this, as they will be out there selling the vision along with the change agents. These discussions are at top level, involving the senior management team and the change agent(s).
2. HR must be a visible supporter of the change process. When the upcoming change is announced, HR should be there on the platform. It is important to show that the change is taking place with HR's knowledge, while not wishing to lose HR's ability to act as honest broker.
3. HR will need to provide reassurance to both the employees and the management. The "storming" process of breaking loose from today's constraints is a very stressful time for all concerned. Employees suffer the "can I do my job tomorrow" fear while the management and change agent worry that things are out of control, not as expected or going too slow or fast. This is the time when HR needs to provide a longitudinal view, a strategic view, of where the organisation is, where it is going and what can be expected along the way. HR needs to have a wide view of organisational change, including change in other organisations, to speak with authority: a gentle, calming authority. Perhaps there are unexpected outcomes during the "storming" process. Someone, and HR is in the right place, needs to view these outcomes dispassionately and make recommendations or decisions. The change agent in the "storming" phase may adopt a "push on regardless" approach as the reasons why things cannot be changed pile up in front of her. Do not underestimate the personal and professional stresses of change management. It takes a very accomplished change agent to detect a valid criticism from the mass communication of why things must stay as they are. She needs all the help she can get to keep an even-handed approach. HR needs to be that gentle, calming authoritative voice.
4. As the change process moves into the "forming" phase the outline of the future processes becomes obvious. The change agent may need to talk at, if not to, somebody. She may need to talk through issues with a neutral person. Obviously managers and managed are not suitable, which leaves HR in the chair. HR may need to be a sounding board for the change agent to explore alternatives.





5. This “forming” phase will steadily make apparent the future work processes to everyone. People will be concerned at their loss of ability to do their job. HR, within the organisational strategic plan, must provide this reassurance. Tea and sympathy are useful tools, while the exact details of new processes and work practices take shape.
6. The time will come when the new working practices are confirmed through contractual and other legal changes. HR sits squarely in this area and may have to negotiate with the change agent to achieve a better outcome, one more acceptable to the legal reality.
7. The new working practice will have an actual, rather than the planned, effect on Human Relations. The effect must be in keeping with the organisation’s strategic goal. HR must ensure that people’s performance does not suffer through loss of motivation.
8. The time comes in any change intervention when the decision is made to solidify the gains so far – the “norming” process. The change agent may want to pursue the change to the end, no doubt with good reason. HR can provide that calm, authoritative voice that asks if the last few percent of improvement are worth weeks of upset and lost performance. Of course, it may be worth it! HR can play the role of arbiter, using their access to the senior management team to good effect.
9. Finally, there must be a sweeping up stage when new processes are bedded down, written up and agreed. There may be last-ditch resistance to overcome as seemingly agreeing people show their true beliefs! HR’s tools, appraisals, questionnaires and walking the floor, are needed to cement the changes. Once again HR should be there selling the vision and making sure the benefits of the changes are communicated to everyone in the organisation. HR needs to ensure as many people as possible believe the change was worthwhile and beneficial. After all the next change intervention is just around the corner!





Not neat!

The nine stages described above do not occur in nice neat packages. Most of the stages happen at the same time. Different people will be at different stages and some, you know the sort, will even go backwards! The change agent may be overloaded, as she struggles to cope with the mass of information that needs to be processed. Senior management may take the view that it just needs to be done.

HR needs to find that calm, authoritative voice to keep the process gently rolling along.

The HR role in change management is taking care of the Human Relationships.

But isn't that the most important part of the job all the time?

MOTIVATION MATTERS LIMITED

VISION

Inspiring good management, and thus achievement, within organizations will improve employee attitudes, engagement and job satisfaction to create stronger companies with more productive people.

More productive companies build competitive advantage creating a sustainable business with safe growth, healthy profits, secure well paid jobs and contribute to the well-being of the UK.

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