Change: a political
and behavioural process

Philip Atkinson

An essential part of any change initiative is winning hearts and minds.

Many organisations are failing to change at a deep enough level to master the challenges that face them. In order to do so, they need to create and develop their own team of change agents, coaches and facilitators that can instigate change at a very deep level. This will take place only when the people who drive change have a wide range of talents, not just focused on change methodologies but, more importantly, focused on being able to understand the politics of change and to engage and influence key parties and stakeholders. Increasingly, organisations are focused on creating their own change-management capability. This should lead to continuous self-renewal for the organisation, but often falls short because the competencies focused on are solely technical. To be effective, change makers must be both flexible and resilient in operating in a political arena, while understanding the relationships and power of the key players. Deep personal change requires the ability to win hearts and minds, and the ability to engage with others at an emotional level, developing a high degree of mutual trust against a political backdrop.

The political arena

Living in the real world requires us to view organisations as social and political systems, with interest groups competing for scarce resources. Coaches and consultants who fail to take account of the political and cultural dynamics of a business will fail to harness fully the real forces behind moving from the current to a desired state of functioning. Conflict is an incredibly powerful positive force if well managed. Because conflict is, by its nature, a cocktail of mixed emotions, many of those delivering change feel they cannot deal with it. Failure to develop expertise in the political and behavioural component of change may lead change makers to focus on conflict containment instead of handling it up front. There is a strong preference to move away from the need to dominate, control and contain conflict, instead using it as a learning vehicle for improving the culture of the whole business.

Change is complex

We know that the process of managing change is far more complex than current theory suggests. Change has to take account of the people operating in a complex social system; the world of personal egos, emotions, attitudes and motivations drives behaviours and political chicanery. Working on an emotional and behavioural level helps internal coaches, facilitators and change agents to pre-empt resistance to change.

> ### Key learning points
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> ◆ Using change methodologies and organisational politics to engage hearts and minds for change.
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> ◆ The personal impact of organisational change.
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> ◆ Power coalitions: identifying core driving forces for shaping organisational culture.

That is the basis of their authority. To retain power, they must maintain credibility with those who depend on them. In an organisational context, people may hold their positions because of their functional knowledge. Increasingly, expert power in organisations has moved beyond a functional specialism or specific discipline to operate across boundaries and organisational processes. Those who are valued most may have detail in some technical areas, but also have the ability to develop a helicopter view of the context of changes.

Reward power. This is based upon the ability to reward desired behaviour and do so in a legitimate manner, rather than through coercion. Here the importance is in the desirability of the rewards and the degree to which these are achievable and linked to behaviours. There is an expectation of an exchange between those who bestow rewards and those who seek the rewards – such as pay, conditions, status, choice of assignments, flexibility, promotion and so on. This form of power only really exists when those who manage have the power to dispense the rewards.

Referent and charismatic power. This arises from others wishing to refer or aspire to the person in a position of power. Identification with the person and replication of that person's actions may be a guiding force in shaping organisational behaviour. For whatever reason, we gravitate towards specific people who posses certain characteristics and may display desirable traits. Charismatic leadership may be a motivating factor to others who wish to emulate the behaviour of senior people in the organisation. Businesses which rely upon the leadership persona may be using referent power effectively.

Coercion and sanction. The foundation for this is grounded in fear. Certain people in the organisation have the ability to administer punishment, make threats or create difficult circumstances if they wish. Hire and fire, blocking promotion and creating sanctions in organisational contexts are some forms. Although people expect some sanctions to be in place, the degree to which staff consider coercion to be fair or not is not only related to how sanctions are administered, but also to the reason for and the criteria by which they are used.

Issues on the power base. No one form of power will dominate in any business. Be aware of how power bases influence the behaviour of people and the retention and development of staff.

Summary

The study of the organisation from a political and an emotional and behavioural perspective is probably an area which will accelerate the ability to change businesses quickly. Focusing upon the interplay in this political-behavioural model eclipses the traditional model of change as a rational methodology.

Coaches and consultants operating at a strategic level will agree that understanding the political machinations as well as personality and ego issues is central in managing effective change. Few commentators or theorists discuss the importance of assessing power coalitions and personal agendas that comprise the average political landscape of the corporation, yet research suggests this is critical in understanding where change will work easily, and where it will not. This is not to suggest that coaches and consultants involve themselves in political machinations, even to further the cause of having change implemented. However, consultants and coaches should use their political and behavioural knowledge and skills to understand better the complexity of their projects or change initiatives, whether they be focused on leadership, continuous improvement, systems development, team-driven service quality or any other current change topic.

The real issue is that training coaches and consultants to focus on these approaches will give them more control and power to influence and present their case to those who will be the willing audience for change, and to those who will actually incorporate the approaches and implement the ideas into business. The real issue is influencing with integrity. We are all deeply against any form of political leverage to strengthen an unjust position, which is why we have to be adept at working within such an environment. Those who are responsible for driving change need to understand the political hinterland in which they operate and rise to the challenge, because it is considerable.

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There is only
one certainty: change is inevitable

The norm is not to welcome change with open arms. We tend to gravitate to our own comfort zone – that area where we can be sure that our performance can stretch to the expectations of self or others. When we stretch beyond our zone of comfort, we may become very unsure of ourselves and whether we can meet the new demands and standards.

A realistic approach for change is required

Every business has a unique history, culture and background, founded by people with different personal value systems and beliefs, and each operating in very different markets. Because every organisation operates in a special political and economic context and is different from every other, the approach to change that will facilitate the ease of improvement for each business will also differ radically. What works for a City institution in London, England, will not work for a manufacturer of agricultural products in Wisconsin, USA. Some of the principles may be similar, but the methodology – when applied – will involve assumptions about the culture, the politics and the context of the business which will have major impact on the success of the change. Those responsible for delivering change need the political acumen, resilience and psychological skill to know when to employ the right strategy for the occasion and how to deal with conflicts.

Managing conflict

The study of conflict resolution is critical as conflict is endemic in organisations. Organisations – peopled as they are by individuals and teams with varying motivations and loyalties – suggest not only competing interests for resources, but also for attention, status and power, and control of the organisation. Most businesses have developed a combative or competitive stance with conscious or other than conscious drives for control of resources, people and the culture itself. The presence of conflict indicates that there are differences of opinion, approach and priorities that have to be resolved. Declared disagreement therefore is the first step to positive resolution.

It is clear that conflict is a natural by-product of competing interests – healthy competition or otherwise – yet, mostly, conflict is ignored. Conflict is perceived as a negative force, but it can be the most creative force in any business, provided that it is managed. Many organisations are

Change and the 'me' factor

Change, by its very nature, is emotional. Most of us purposely focus towards achieving emotional equilibrium, especially in our work. However, if we have to move out of our comfort zone, we experience disquiet and a loss of equilibrium. We seek to control our lives, and when control in any area appears to be denied us, we start to contemplate the personal implications of any change. Notably, we probably ask ourselves questions:

■ How will this change impact upon me?
■ Will it give me more control over my work, my aspirations and my life, or take it away from me?
■ If I have less control of the circumstances, are there

potential threats to me, my identity, role, future and continuation in the organisation? How severe might those threats be?

Note the nature of these questions. The focus is 'me' oriented', and suggests that the thought processes are less, rather than more, empowering. The answers to the questions will tend to limit actions, rather than expanding them. In the absence of an ability to manage these emotions or feelings of others, those driving the change may be compelled to ignore their presence and impact, and focus more on that with which they are more comfortable – resulting in people being overmanaged, ignored and marginalised.

Case study – conflict containment

Working with an insurance company, we were focusing upon developing a coherent customer-focus strategy across the whole business.

During initial research, we were appalled to come across such bitter conflict and feuds between support functions that it was surprising that the company retained any customers at all. Several support functions clearly went out of their way to create petty problems for other sections. The whole customer-management process, from initiating customer interest to closure of sale, was fraught with wars, battles and resentments between winners and losers. The whole negative blame culture was reinforced through stories of heroes, legends and villains

that had been played out years before most of the current staff had worked for the company.

Consequently, this organisation had developed very different cultures which were functioning outside the parameters of strategic intent. An alignment was required which started with a swift cultural intervention. It was not painless. By performing this much needed surgery, the culture changed overnight. It was important to get conflict out into the open and to use it as a powerful tool for building a new culture. It started with the top team addressing small cross-functional sessions in the business, talking simply about win-win rela-tionships and how imperative they were for the future.

so stifled by unhealthy conflict-containment strategies between managers, teams, functions, processes and specific locations and geographies that they expend more energy on containing, protecting and defending their interests than they devote to improving their businesses.

Key to any change initiative is the ability to assess where the

organisation stands currently, politically and emotionally, relative to its desired goal. Failure to assess the current state of health of the organisation means that those that have to facilitate progress fail to have a true bearing on the readiness of the organisation to change. Without conducting this analysis, any resource or time spent implementing change can be completely wasted.

Politics and reading the power coalitions

To read the culture better, it may be wise to explore beneath the surface and identify the core driving forces that shape the culture:

■ Where are the power coalitions in the organisation?
■ With whom does power to influence decision-making, and the power to decide resource allocation, reside?
■ What processes exist to support these two areas and who controls

them? You may want to assess where the key decisions are taken.
■ Who, more than others, has the ear of the top team?
■ Who supports whom?

The key to this is obviously understanding how key players work together. Sometimes, the process leading to a particular power coalition is based upon rational business reasoning, but frequently it is based purely on the personality of top players or those aligned with them.

Knowing how to deal with, to influence and persuade such people is central to managing change. Those who occupy the role of internal coach, consultant or catalyst would do well to study psychology and examine the major typologies of personality development.

Power and how it is exercised

What is the source of control or power in the organisation?

Legitimate or position power. This form of power originates in the fact that power is legitimate to those who work in this organisation. They have internalised the values and fundamentally agree with them. People feel there is an obligation on their behalf, fulfilling a psychological contract with the organisation of give and take operating in the same value system. There is a shared belief that people in senior management positions have got there through playing the game, the rules of which are shared by the majority of people who work in the business.

Expert power – knowledge and information. Experts possess knowledge and information.