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The power to influence: change management

Your ability to influence others is critical if you want to drive any improvement or change project. The application of techniques and processes is not sufficient to change behaviours and business cultures. Reliance on using authority and the power that goes with it is insufficient to create along lasting change. What is required is the skilful use of a repertoire of behavioural techniques to bring about change and improvement in how we do business. Phil Atkinson focuses on the core skills that are necessary to become a catalyst and indeed a master in driving and implementing organisational change.

Staff are trained to develop their technical skills in their core competence; but the execution of their roles and their effectiveness is achieved not by just demonstrating this facility, but also the behaviours and skills that support them.

I was presenting at a conference recently and member of the audience asked me a question. She wanted to know how to prepare the organisational culture for change and in what circumstances she should either introduce or delay the introduction of strategic change. In other words, when is the right time to start that strategic process? My answer was simple: 'Start sooner.'

I believe that everyday we should all be supporting the creation of a readiness for change within our businesses. It does not matter what industry we work in or what sector. A commitment to create a climate of change readiness is essential in any circumstance. Change should be the norm for any business culture. After all, there are always better, more efficient, leaner, innovative and faster ways to move from where we are to a new desired future. No organisation introduces change processes just for the sake of it. Embracing and creating a continuous and challenging culture that promotes improvement that supports recovery, with the power to build robust businesses, should be the norm.

Do you have the capacity and capability in house to drive change?

Those who fail to challenge and build a culture of continuous improvement will in all likelihood be putting their organisation at risk. If we are not creating a readiness for change all the time, then we are probably doing very little on our organisational change agenda. If we are not making strides to do this right now, it means we are probably standing still; and if we are standing still, we are actually going backwards. As I noted above, there is never a better time to build that change culture. It starts with recognising that we have to work on developing internal capability to drive improvement, with external consultants if need be to shake up management thinking. This can be a good thing, but over-reliance on externals is not good for morale or staff esteem.

Change skills and influencing strategies

An over-reliance on external catalysts and a failure to develop line managers skills in the change arena this amounts to a belief that our managers just do not have the capability and capacity to implement change. This reflects on their self-esteem and further promotes the negative attitude amongst top team direct reports and their people that senior management do not think they are good enough and cannot be trusted to introduce change.

Once there is commitment to up-skill the business leaders, managers and team leaders, the real focus has to be on what can we do to give them the power to influence the change process for the better. What do we need to do to develop our people to become the drivers, the change champions and enthusiasts to install improvement? Perhaps surprisingly, managers usually live up to the demands of the task and are highly competent in what they do. Otherwise you would not employ them. But the issue is, do our managers and technical experts have the real expertise to know when change is working and when it needs a drive to sustain the momentum required? Whatever technical specialism supports your organisation, what is critical is that all professional technical staff need the meta-skills of interpersonal and behavioural skills that support their day-to-day tasks.

New skills drive superior performance

The thinking and techniques that took organisations and their management teams to their current level of performance will not be sufficient to take them to the next level of functioning that the modern economy demands. There is a need for technical specialists, such as accountants, IT professionals, project managers, consultants, quality and manufacturing engineers, auditors, governance and risk consultants, to commit to practise to complement their technical skills with behavioural mastery, which includes change leadership, facilitation, using motivation, persuasion, conflict management, influence bargaining and negotiation to promote a climate of change continuous improvement and political manoeuvring and managing turf wars.

Change skills start with working with people, understanding their motivations, engaging with them and influencing them to look at things differently. I think we can all see the importance of this in the context of moving macro corporate change programmes forward, as well as on the micro level with personal development.

Most of us enable change to take place not through the use of authority and being assertive, but by relying on the meta skills of influence and persuasion. It is a shame if we have to rely on our job titles or senior rank. All too often, only a small percentage of any workforce has received training in this soft skills arena, and yet it is an area where rapid learning is experienced, which does have a major impact on personal effectiveness in driving improvement.

I find it amazing that organisations get the balance between technical and soft skills training all wrong. Staff are trained to develop their technical skills in their core competence; but the execution of their roles and their effectiveness is achieved not by just demonstrating this facility, but also the behaviours and skills that support them. Let me illustrate the point.

Technical competence is not enough

We may admire the manufacturing engineers who can solve almost any problem; but should they be challenged to resolve a problem of a socio-behavioural nature, they cannot meet up the challenge, because the development in change skills is undervalued in terms of training in manufacturing techniques.

The impact that change skills can have on performance is enormous, especially if the account manager starts losing customers, the insurance agent loses the contract, the engineer alienates a joint venture partner or the instrument mechanic notices that his clients are migrating to other suppliers and providers.

Collaboration and the new economy

Working collaboratively with staff is central to the new economy. Employment relationships that were once strained and adversarial are now replaced by a holistic culture of working together in partnership. In the UK, the NHS is trying hard in this area, as are a number of other public sector organisations. The private sector now has little choice but develop its people if it wishes to retain the best.

If the average employer committed to developing superior development in mastery of political and behavioural skills with their staff, it could impact its business performance for the better. The average service organisation has below-par sales staff interacting with its customers. In some cases, toxic relationships exist by default. Customer-facing staff really have to understand the psychology of customer retention and acquisition and this is achieved by understanding what makes their customers tick. Developing techniques to move staff towards a win-win is ecological for both parties. Relying on guile or pushiness for short-term gain – resulting in buyer remorse and leaving you with a reduction in clients and a lousy reputation – is not the way. As soon as you start to push the clients and staff into that position you are moving towards win-lose – with you the loser.

Soft skills development

Soft skills can be really hard to acquire for staff who have never valued or practised them. Only recently, I was talking with a risk manager friend about a presentation he had to give to the management team in a large bank. He was clearly uncomfortable about it, realising he needed to practise, so he developed his very own 'death by PowerPoint': too many slides, too many words. It was guaranteed by slide six the whole management team would have switched off. He did not understand the basic psychology of learning, change, influence and persuasion.

My views were sought. My opinion is that PowerPoint is only a software tool to draw the attention of the audience to the presenter. Focus must always be on the presenter not the slide show. PowerPoint should be composed of prompts or illustrations designed to focus the attention of the audience to the next dynamic point delivered by the presenter. Effective PowerPoint reinforces the power of the presenter; it should never distract or bore the audience. As you can guess, the risk manager devoted all his time to the slide show and none to preparing to present through rehearsal. The first time he stood up to present was his very first live rehearsal and it was obvious to all attending! The attention of the top team was lost, and although the content of the presentation was technically robust, its impact on management thinking was lacklustre.

The simple use of repetition and rehearsal is what creates mastery in any skill, and this is no different when talking formally – or otherwise – to people. You would never improve your swimming stroke, driving or golf swing by watching PowerPoint, so how are you going to give people confidence in your business skills if you never get up there and rehearse?

Emotional state of confidence not shared by all

Perhaps one of the most prevalent self-limiting beliefs held by managers about their style is a lack of confidence in developing superior interpersonal relations and when presenting or trying to influence others. Confidence and self-esteem are destinations at which you hope to arrive some time in the future. They are emotional states that can be accessed any time by anyone; you just have to know how, and this can be learned easily. Early on in our change and influence workshops, we deal with the issue of confidence and self-esteem. This holds back many people from being all they can be and stops too many achieving their true potential. It is geared around identify issues and the presence of self-limiting beliefs. I am told we are born into this life with two fears – of falling and of loud noises – yet we go through life gathering more fears and self-limits all the time.

Recent research on belief change[1]

Most of our beliefs have been created by others and what they say to us at an early age. We know, for instance, that most empowering and also limiting beliefs are firmly in place before we reach eight years of age. At that time, we do not have the cognitive ability to judge whether these beliefs are right: that comes later. Our critical cognitive functions develop between ages eight and eleven. So tell me: how can we judge whether a negative belief about the self is accurate if we do not possess the critical processing power to evaluate whether it is fair or not?

We are pretty much programmed by parental authority figures around us, including parents, grandparents, teachers, ministers and other care-givers.

In our workshop sessions, we say belief is a matter of choice once you can be consciously aware of it and question its validity. Someone may say to you: 'You are not good enough', or 'You are like me, I was never good at school.' You cannot challenge these are statements if critical rational ability is not in place.

We think it is a good idea to challenge these negative beliefs at the beginning of the workshop sessions, rather than tacking them on at the end. It is central to development and self-esteem.

Confidence is a big issue in business performance: case examples

We designed workshops on interpersonal influence and presentation skills for groups of internal auditors within a UK telecom giant. The reasoning behind this was a realisation that, although the auditors were highly skilled in their technical areas of budgetary control, risk assessment, process improvement, finance and computer audit, they did not have the capacity to create a great enough change in their clients within the business.

Sabotaging improvement

Instances of line managers deliberately confusing and deflecting the enquiries of their internal audit function led to a very poor acceptance rate of findings and reports, and even poorer installation of the required controls. We designed and installed an interpersonal skills programme to address these issues, and within three years, all 240 staff and others had attended and learned how to use the strategies and methodologies daily in their audit work.

The results achieved were significant, and the confidence and assertive nature of the internal audit division was significantly enhanced. This was later extended to other parts of the company's business, including inventory control and purchasing.

We have designed and run similar programmes in America, Canada and Europe for engineering companies. We worked with many hundreds of manufacturing engineers over a seven-year period to improve their change management skills to ensure they had complementary skills to deal with challenging operations and plant managers all over the world. Working with financial services companies, it is relatively easy to take their accounts, IT, audit, and risk and governance internal consultants and project managers up the same learning curve and complement their skill base.

Soft skills and conflict management

The study of conflict resolution is critical because conflict is endemic in organisations. Within organisations, individuals and teams with varying motives and loyalties compete not only for resources, but also for attention, status, power and control of the organisation. Many organisations 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 conflict is mostly ignored. It is perceived as a negative force and yet it can be the most creative force in any business, provided that it is managed. Some organisations are 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 to improving their businesses.

As in the example above, it is imperative to immerse the business in change strategies and influence tactics that work. Resolving conflict requires a new mindset. Interaction, practice and rehearsal are fundamental to any process for interpersonal improvement. We combine this with specially designed role play and exercises focused entirely on real business in the organisation. Every activity must reflect reality and the challenges and issues that they face everyday that will challenge their role and effectiveness in the future. Those designing the materials and process must be a blend of operational managers from the business and an empathetic behavioural consultant with the credibility to deliver.

Leadership and interpersonal persuasion

Without leadership there is no change. The best in persuasive techniques, negotiation, conflict management, influence strategies and psychometrics is central to this process. It is a cycle of learn, rehearse, practise, reflect. Those who drive change probably project much more of a creative transformational style than their less visible transactional types who prefer to focus on short-term managerial and administrative style. We believe that those who are transformational in nature probably are quite independent, will challenge the status quo and look for new ways of working. Make no mistake: independent people can be difficult to manage; but given the choice, would you want the future of your business reliant on thoroughbred race-horses or donkeys, the high-profile performer or the lacklustre counterpart?

Personal traits are definitely instrumental in shaping change projects. A slow-moving mechanical style that focuses on analysing and measuring everything never achieves a great deal; and even if it does, it does so in spite of failing to provide a lead to the team. The versatile, high-achieving, inspiring individual who focuses on team development will always come out the winner. You may ask yourself how many managers in your organisation reflect these desirable characteristics.

Case study: financial services and 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. Several clearly went out of their way to create petty problems for other sections. There was no customer-facing alignment. The whole customer management process, from initiating customer contact to closure of sale, was fraught with wars, sabotage and resentments with winners and losers. The apparent negative, blame culture was reinforced through stories of heroes, legends and villains that had been played out years before most current staff had worked in the company.

Consequently, this organisation had developed very different cultures, which were functioning outside the parameters of strategic intent. An alignment was required, starting with a swift cultural intervention. It was not painless, but by performing this much needed surgery the culture changed overnight. It was important to get conflict out into the open and use it as a powerful tool for building a new culture. It started with the top team addressing small, cross-function sessions in the business, talking simply about win-win relationships and how imperative this was for the future. Then a commitment to develop their own change catalysts armed with a repertoire of change skills turned things about. This is what a focus on training in soft skills can deliver.

We utilise personality profiles to examine the variety of styles that can be successful in bringing about change. Our particular model is based on the active transformational style of manager who spends a great deal of time challenging the way things are done. There is always a better way or a cheaper way or simply another way to reduce cycle times and unnecessary inspection and micro management. Transformers have something about their personality that inspire and enthuse people to greater achievements.

What is it like to receive your behaviour?

In our development workshops we focus on mirror gazing, encouraging individual participants to ask themselves what it is like to take a good look in the mirror: 'what is it like to receive my behaviour on a good day and also on a bad day?' We encourage them to reflect on this and examine how their unconscious and conscious behaviour impacts on the effectiveness of others, especially direct reports and peers. Just by focusing on how we interact with others, we can get a grasp of the conscious and unconscious triggers and behaviour we send out. Then we can identify whether we are moving further towards developing a real team around us, or just winning acceptance and conformity because of our authority.

We are watching you: the boss-watcher

Everyone is a boss-watcher. If you are in a position of authority, people will be looking for your verbal and non-verbal cues and triggers, so it might be a good idea to understand what sort of behaviour you send out to the world. We all have good days and bad days, but it is better to deliberately invest in new behaviours and motivate your team to act. Through extensive learning and development, you can generate big and long-lasting results that can seriously improve company performance.

In our workshops we use a variety of models for reflecting on our styles and how we impact others. I prefer a Jungian profile not dissimilar to Myers Briggs. We use them interchangeably and from the various types we distil these down to four pure types: regulator, visionary, facilitator and analyst.[2] By understanding how to deal with them, you are much more confident and can practise new behaviours. Managers have a much better grasp of things if they can focus on broad types, rather than trying to follow every nuance of specific types. Our development is focused on how people move through different personality stances, depending on the prevailing challenges and pressures during their day. We argue strongly that no one type is perfect or ideal, but being able to be flexible and adapt to the circumstances is the key to influencing others. With practice, you can swiftly identify the objections that others have to your proposals in advance of them being raised.

Typical content of workshops

- Self disclosure
- Accessing your personal authenticity and developing a win-win attitude at all times
- Assessing your preferred process of influence and setting a yes-yes frame
- Shaping rapport with others in the change team
- Understanding how to drive the acceptance of change
- Utilising selling benefits and features to a win-win advantage for improvement
- Utilising seven assertive techniques to make your point
- Practising listening skills on a variety of levels
- Facilitating the soft skills of power and influence
- Developing a confident negotiating style
- Giving bad news effectively
- Bringing things back from the edge – the de-escalation of conflict
- Using solution-based questioning to create win-win solutions
- Utilising Jungian analysis of personality to build rapport and diminish conflict
- Handling personality objections
- Identifying motivational drivers in others
- Using the four quadrant personality tool
- Analysing conscious and unconscious behaviour
- Developing your self confidence and self esteem

Concluding thoughts

If you knew you could not fail in installing influence, persuasion and change skills into your culture, what would you do?

Change does not happen by accident. It requires concerted effort and superior skills to ensure that momentum is maintained. Enterprises can devote resource to methodologies to bring about change, but real changes start to take place when organisations develop their internal capability to drive improvement. This comes about by seriously tackling the soft skill shortage and the unwillingness to lead and challenge the way things are done. You would be surprised how little effort this takes, if the process is well defined and the right tools and change agents are in place. The average organisation has few real change champions. Just imagine if you had the capability to increase the numbers who not only had the abilities to drive and implement change, but also the will to make it happen? If you knew you could not fail, what could you achieve?

Organisations require more of their technical experts to consolidate their technical and functional mastery, and build an arsenal of tools and techniques around them to lead to significant behavioural change and organisational improvement for the new business models, in all sectors.

Attention needs to be focused on designing the process around the current and future challenges, and be tailored specifically to the organisation. Progress should be mapped, and the change coached through an intensive post-workshop process that ensures behaviours are installed and hard-wired for use in leading and mastering the process of change. The time is ripe for any organisation to develop its line managers and technical experts into a formidable force.

About the author

Philip Atkinson is a consultant specialising in strategic, behavioural and cultural change. He is a member of various training consortia and has recently focused on creating innovative business simulations through Learning Strategies Ltd. He consults in the UK, Europe and US, has written seven business books and published many articles. He is a speaker at conferences and runs workshop sessions.

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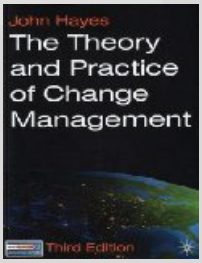

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