

Reducing Resistance to Change

Managing change has always been difficult and will always be fraught with danger because it is so easy to introduce change the wrong way. So the logical question to ask is if there is a perfect way to introduce and manage change.

The answer is no. There is no universal solution which applies to all change programmes. Organisations are different, the reasons for change are different, timescales and budgets are different. Change may affect the entire organisation, a department or just one individual. This makes the search for the perfect way of introducing change quite pointless. Each change programme will have to be implemented on its own merits. But there are things we can do to reduce the level of resistance.

Psychologists and management consultants have put a lot of effort into researching the concept of change and how we manage change. The prevailing theme seems to be that people in general are creatures of habit who are scared of change. Taking that view of ourselves and the people in our organisations into consideration when we have a change programme to manage it is inevitable that we expect resistance and a series of set backs.

In other words, we get what we focus on and if we embark on a change initiative expecting negativity and resistance we will be spending a lot of time and energy on damage limitation detracting us from the actual task at hand.

If instead we change our attitude to people and assume that in the main people are willing, resourceful, co-operative and full of ideas then we are already on the way to a more successful way of introducing change.

The fact remains that change will be painful to some or all at certain points during the process regardless of how carefully we have planned the change, but if we approach change initiatives with a positive mind and attitude that will send a positive and reassuring signal to everyone affected by the forthcoming change.

Communication, Communication, Communication

Change is unsettling because it brings with it an element of uncertainty. And it is the uncertainty which is a major cause of resistance to change. People can relate to facts – good or bad – but uncertainty and contradicting messages breed unease and resistance. Therefore, it is important to communicate with everybody about everything in relation to the upcoming changes in order to reduce the uncertainty.

If an organisation has been through a change initiative which left everybody frustrated and in a negative mood, communication about further changes is likely to be met with suspicion and mistrust. Openness and clarity are must haves in any change process. Whether or not the change is planned or forced upon the organisation. This in itself may be a dramatic and unsettling change from the normal way of doing things.

But what does communication mean? It means informing everyone at every stage of the change programme. It means inviting feedback on information and responding promptly and honestly to any feedback received. Communication is a dialogue between those managing change and those affected by it.

Communication must happen at all levels of the organisation and, if necessary, the outside world must be kept in the loop as change may affect suppliers or customers. And do not be afraid to involve the unions right from the start. Be positive and treat unions as your friends. You will need their support at some stage.

Use any communication channels available and remember that it is impossible to over-communicate change. Some people may get fed up with the message, but even more people including those who would normally support change will get frustrated if there is no communication or just evasive communication.

Involvement, Involvement, Involvement

If people are involved in change and understand the reasons for it they become supportive of the whole idea and the change process. If people are given the opportunity to take responsibility and accountability for certain parts of a change programme their sense of ownership will make them even stronger advocates.

Teams can be set up to problem solve, brain storm or implement individual change projects contributing to the overall change programme.

Once the volunteers have put their hand up, the next task is to encourage others to take part as well. Doing this by force of management is unlikely to yield good results. Instead a careful process of matching strengths and talents with specific tasks could be quite motivational.

Always involve representatives from the areas affected. Turning up for work to notice that your desk or work bench has been moved will cause no end of resentment.

People do not mind change, they just hate being changed.

The 5D Approach to Change Management

A change programme needs to follow a logical process in order to be effective. Without structure it does not matter what and how much you communicate and it does not matter whether people are involved or not. Without a structure and without a plan any change programme will fail.

A simple, yet effective framework for change management is the 5D approach which sets out 5 logical steps to follow. Do each of them well and there is a good chance your change programme will succeed with a minimum of resistance. Remember to communicate and involve people at every state!

Step 1 – Definition

Before doing anything it is important to understand exactly the reasons for and implications of change. What brought it about? Who wants it? How fast must we act? Who will be affected?

Step 2 – Discovery

Do not change anything until you have assessed what you have currently got. Changing something that already works and which does not need to change will cause resistance. So examine the current state and identify what is good about it. By keeping the best you can retain the life and soul of a department or organisation despite changes.

Step 3 – Dream

What would the ideal future look like? Imagine what the ideal future would look like regardless of whether you are changing the layout of a shop floor, introducing a new service or product or relocating the whole company. Remember to sanity check so that you end up with the ideal solution within any given constraints

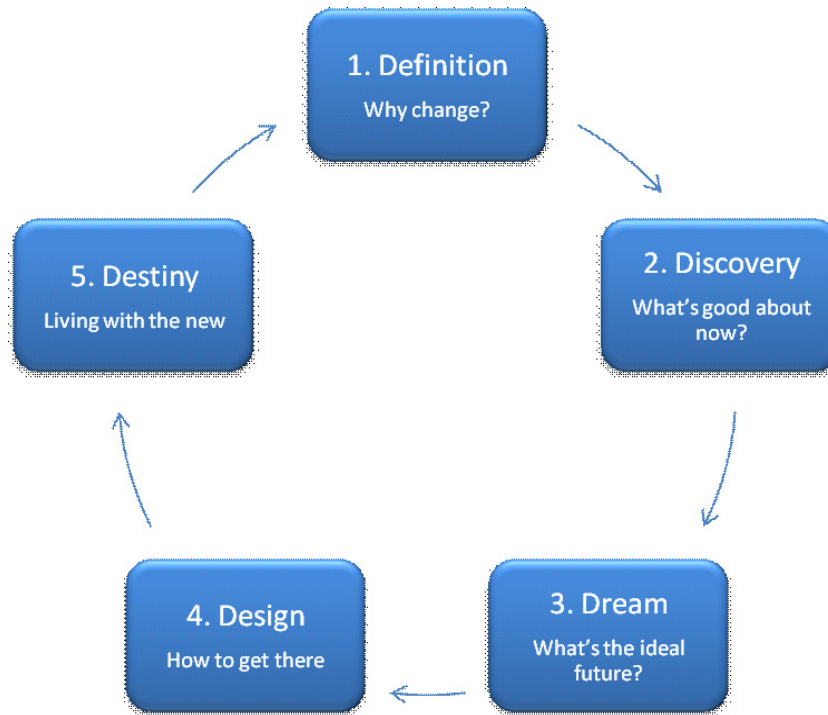
Step 4 – Design

Knowing the end result, it is now time to find a way of getting to this result. The Design step will involve the development of different options and the implementation of the chosen option will need to be planned. This will lead to a project plan for the solution which comes closest to the ideal future. Very rarely do you have unlimited resources to get what you want.

Step 5 – Destiny

It is important not to forget how to deal with the change once it has been implemented. The new situation needs to be sustained and become the current state. The Destiny step is all about finding ways of adjusting, learning and empowering people to work with the newly introduced changes whatever they may be. Never let a change programme stop at the last item of the implementation plan. Resistance will occur if people feel left to their own devices in a new and unknown situation. This could destroy any successes you may have had along the way to step 5.

Fig 1. The 5D Approach



Adapted from Lewis et al 2007

The 5D approach is a framework and needs to be applied on a “horses for courses” basis. The approach is essentially the same whether it is an employee appraisal or the relocation of a factory. The trick is to apply the right mix of structure, rigour and flexibility.

Resistance may come in different guises ranging from the slamming of doors, shouting and crying to deliberate non-cooperation and passive aggression to the surprise letter of resignation.

Keeping everybody informed and involved as well as keeping a finger on the pulse will go a long way towards a low resistance change programme.