

Exponential Consulting White Paper

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Six Myths About Organisational Change

By Stephen Billing

Six myths about organisational change arise from thinking about change that is not congruent with the experience of actually working in organisations.

We have a problem with the way we think about change. The problem is that our managerial thinking about organisations and how they change is not congruent with our experience of actually working in organisations.

Myth 1

In the world of managerialism, a scientific gap analysis will allow managers to create a vision detailing how the future will be for all the people in the organisation, measure the gap between that desired future and current reality, and plan how to close that gap.

Reality 1

In the real world the future unfolds as the interweaving of the intentions of many people involved in the organisation. The gap analysis helps to develop a plan. The plan represents the intentions of those involved in the project. Those intentions interplay with the intentions of others in the organisation. It is useful to have a plan, but the plan will change a lot on the way. It does not map out exactly what will happen, and it does not take into account insights and further thinking that will occur in the future. So you have to pay careful attention to the intentions of others and how the interweaving of these intentions is playing out, a reality that is ignored in the gap analysis approach.

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Myth 2

In the world of managerialism, change happens in stages that the change project team can identify, predict, plan and prepare communications for. People will go through stages such as a grief cycle (e.g. SARAH – Shock, Anger, Resistance, Acceptance, Help). By implication, change happens when managers intend it to happen.

Reality 2

In the real world, change is taking place all the time, whether or not managers will it to. Change occurs in the conversations that take place in the lunch rooms, in the smoking areas, in the corridors and around the water cooler. From the perspective of the change recipients, it does not take place in stages, even if the project is planned in stages. Most project plans ignore what is going on in the lunch rooms, in the smoking areas, in the corridors and around the water cooler. They concentrate on the formal “communications” and ignore the informal communications that are taking place all the time.

Myth 3

In the world of managerialism, you capture hearts and minds with inspirational statements in roadshows and on the intranet, workshop sessions with interesting visuals / posters, and well crafted communications.

Reality 3

People have consciousness and choice. Most current change approaches have gone beyond trying to force people to change, instead seeking to persuade people with compelling arguments. But as you no doubt know from experience, compelling arguments do not persuade everybody. For example, you don't know whether or not people are going to be inspired by your carefully crafted presentation, video or email.

It is my view that effective change practitioners are able to articulate their views about human consciousness and choice so that they have effective ways of dealing with the variable responses people have to the persuasive messages.

Myth 4

In the world of managerialism, communication happens in cascades.

Reality 4

See Reality 2. Cascades ignore the informal channels of communication. Most members of change project teams are completely outside the informal channels of communication taking place in the business they are changing, and many wouldn't even consider it important to go to a morning tea.

Myth 5

In the world of managerialism, you use psychology, rewards and sanctions to change behaviour, neutralise resistance and exult champions, early adopters, change agents and other agreeable individuals.

Reality 5

In the real world, this is manipulation. Adults see through and resent these kinds of behavioural tactics that attempt to use behavioural and social sanctions, but concentrate on the formal and ignore the informal social processes that take place in the 'shadows' – those places where most managers fear to tread.

Myth 6

In the world of managerialism, the present is a point between the past and the future on the timeline that tells us what stages and activities we should be up to now.

Reality 6

In the real world, people take action in the present based on their experience of the past and their expectations for the future. For example, people make decisions about their investments in the present, not knowing what is in the future, but having expectations, for example about what the real estate market or perhaps finance companies will do in the future. Likewise their expectations about what the organisation will do in the future influence how they respond to change initiatives.

Past experience is relevant too – most people in organisations have now experienced change initiatives. I was approached by one person recently who told me that his wife had a high powered job in HR in a big organisation. He had showed her the material we had put out – it was being compared with not only his previous experience but also that of his wife.

Conclusion

Most thinking about change does not match up with the lived experience of working in organisations. It privileges formal channels of communication and does not pay enough attention to the 'shadows,' to the informal communication that takes place in organisations, which is where change initiatives are undermined. No wonder 75% of change initiatives are reputed to fail.

To successfully undertake organisational change, you need to pay attention to informal as well as formal channels of communication. Your people are every day attributing motives to the actions of their managers and the project team, based on the contact they have had with you and the impressions they have formed.

Therefore your change project team needs have an understanding of the micro dynamics of interaction, from which population-wide patterns emerge. The project team are not scientists studying the natural world based on hypotheses determined by physical evidence. They are human beings bound by the constraints of interdependent human relating, attempting to influence other interdependent human beings, also constrained as well as enabled by their interdependence.

