

The four As of engagement

Mike Robinson explains how to gain staff buy-in

Change in business is constant. The past two years of turmoil have probably taught managers more than they've learned in ten years of business as usual. At the heart of this learning will undoubtedly be the difficult lessons of managing staff during periods of intense change.

Private sector trading conditions are slowly improving but significant instability will continue for some time. On the other hand, instability in the public sector is set to intensify greatly as the Tories 'ConDem' £6bn of public spending throughout 2010. The public sector is used to a degree of change but few will be fully prepared for the difficult times to come.

The wrenching change brought by severe budget cuts is, of course, stressful in the boardroom, but further down the ladder it can be much worse. The larger an organisation grows, the more interlinked and complicated its communication 'ecosystem' becomes. For this reason, the organisational grapevine can extend 'Chinese whispers' to the n th degree. A mention of possible staff reductions can easily become much, much worse as news filters from the boardroom to those at the coalface.

For this reason, the stress and worry felt by staff can be intensified greatly, leading to difficulties in any change project.

The need for buy-in

In order to survive periods of change, and succeed after the transition is completed, the most important thing is to achieve staff buy-in, which is easier said than done. A lack of staff engagement is often the single largest reason for failure of change projects. Making sure everyone is 'swimming in the same direction' can be highly beneficial, though, so working towards engaging staff is certainly worthwhile.

The main benefits stem from getting staff involved positively in the design and implementation of change. If they are not engaged in change and instead have it 'thrust upon them', they are much more likely to involve themselves negatively. Staff opposition to change comes in many forms including pressure groups, union involvement and the spreading of unfounded rumours. Social media has also enhanced the likelihood of miscommunication around change projects.

Positive outcomes of change are also important and further enforce the need for effective staff communication and engagement. Depending on the type of change, for example the implementation of a new IT system, getting staff 'on board' can help accelerate the process. If staff understand the way a new system will benefit them and support the need for change, it is much easier to 'hit the ground running'. On the softer side, bought-in staff also promote a generally better-informed and happier company.

Challenges in staff engagement

Though staff buy-in is spoken about by many, surprisingly it is frequently mismanaged or approached from the wrong angle.

At its core, gaining staff interest stems from good internal communication so that people understand what is going on and how it applies to them. Yet, →

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often change managers are more concerned with following process than taking time to understand what people are really thinking and feeling.

For this reason staff buy-in is actually not achieved as frequently or as well as some managers would hope.

This is a problem for the public sector in particular. So well defined are public sector staff consultation processes that they can be seen to be paying lip service to them. When change management is highly process-led, staff can feel

disenfranchised and as if their voice will make no difference. The situation is a bit like voters who are disillusioned with the electoral process. If a staff member believes his voice means nothing, he can shut down and this is clearly not ideal.

When buy-in is required

Almost any significant change in an organisation would be made smoother by gaining staff buy-in and understanding.

Some prime examples include staff reductions/efficiency drives, mergers and acquisitions, implementation of new systems and processes, and changes to job roles and responsibilities. In the public sector, common changes include the merging of departments, efficiency drives, process redesigns and accommodating new legislation and leadership.

It is important to understand that the agents of change should not be the ones determining whether it is significant. The need to obtain the interest and support of staff can only be defined by the staff themselves. Only by taking a consultative approach and engaging with staff can managers understand what matters to them and what role they should play in the change project.

The four As of staff engagement

Leaders approaching a change project should recognise that there are four broad stages that staff may move through during a transition. Defining these stages clearly helps to create a framework for an engagement plan. The main areas can be defined by four As: **Awareness, Acknowledgement, Acceptance and Advocacy.**

Awareness

"I know there is change afoot. I don't know much about it and I'm worried by rumours that may or may not be true."

Awareness is the initial stage in which staff have heard vague rumours of change but little else. With the company grapevine in overdrive, it is probable that rumours, right or wrong, will reach staff long before official communications.

As such, this stage is fraught with worry and hearsay about how staff will be affected.

Acknowledgement

"I have heard the official and grapevine versions of what is about to happen (redundancy, restructure, acquisition etc) and understand the implications, though mainly at an intellectual level."

At the acknowledgement stage, staff have usually heard official communications and some confusion has been cleared up.

At this point, they will mainly understand the implications at an intellectual level but rumours still have a part to play. There is often an inherent conflict between believing information from management and what has been passed on by a colleague.

Staff in this state may still be questioning the need for change and possibly rebelling against it. This is still a difficult stage in the process and most staff will not yet have bought in.

Acceptance

"I now understand the changes and their implications at both an intellectual and emotional level. I am still a bit worried but I'm no longer opposing the change."

When acceptance is reached, staff members understand the implications of change at both an intellectual and an emotional level. This doesn't mean they are fully on board with change but active opposition will largely have dissipated.

Acceptance comes when employers have taken the time to understand emotional impacts and communicate on both levels with staff.

At this stage, there may still be some fear but employees will no longer be railing against change.

Advocacy

"I understand the benefits of change and am helping to promote the new behaviours/practice so that the change is faster and more effective."

As discussed previously, advocacy is really the Holy Grail of change management. Being the final stage, it is fairly difficult to achieve but advocates can be worth their weight in gold.

At this stage, select staff realise the benefits to be gained through change and begin to act as role models for the new behaviours/practice so that the change is faster and more effective.

It is not common in any project to create a large number of advocates. Usually a small number can be created, whose enthusiasm and knowledge percolates through the workforce.

Engaging with staff

In any organisation undergoing change, staff can be categorised in different stages of the buy-in process.

Assuming no prior knowledge of the change project, most will start with awareness. However, it is not a given that staff will progress to acknowledgement, acceptance and advocacy. →



Change in the public sector

Berkshire Consultancy worked with a large government agency charged with providing information to ministers. The agency was well respected by its customers and, internally, most staff believed it was functioning well.

After intense assessment of the organisation, it was found that the three parts of the business operated in disparate ways. The largest office, situated over three floors, also failed to work as an integrated team. While the end product was of a high quality, the way of working meant that any one employee could be highly overworked or left with nothing to do at different times.

A particular member of the team formed a staunch opposition to the project even before the full plans were put in place. The employee was proud of what the organisation produced and was of the opinion that nothing needed to change.

Berkshire Consultancy worked with the various project managers to engage with that employee and other opposition. The first step taken was to develop a dedicated team member group for the staff to sit on. They arranged weekly meetings to discuss opinions on change, develop reports and feed this back in a useful manner to the management team.

The next step was to engage the team in the re-design of the organisation's structure and processes. By engaging them in this task, Berkshire Consultancy could achieve a better end result and help staff fully understand the benefits of change.

As the project progressed, the opposition gradually faded as staff understood how the organisation was being improved. The initial dissenting team member became an advocate of the project and started communicating via papers and emails about the reason for change.

By the end of the project, Berkshire Consultancy was able to redevelop teams and processes so work could be shared easily. Team members worked collaboratively to develop a new workflow system to create transparency as work passed through the organisation. The implementation of new processes also reduced workload massively, allowing the business to reduce headcounts from 100 to 75 people and easily manage existing work.

There are stumbling blocks at each stage and many staff will inevitably 'get stuck' along the way.

Change managers shouldn't obsess about taking every staff member on this journey, but utilise the right tools to move as many as possible as far through as possible.

A common problem occurs when staff become aware, decide the project has no value and then shut down. In this state, they will avoid consultations and meetings, spread bad feeling about the project and even mislead managers about how their roles function, further hindering change.

For the greatest chance of avoiding stumbling blocks and promoting advocacy, change managers should approach the project's early days carefully.



Communication at the start of the project can make or break the way it unfolds. While the plan is being determined, control of documents and communication is vital. It is also important to keep the number of parties involved as small as possible. As the process goes on, information leaks will inevitably occur and create the 'Chinese whisper' effect that must be avoided.

After the project plan is defined, managers should look to roll out internal communications as rapidly and widely as possible. Depending on the type of project, this initial communication can take many forms. In most cases, team and face-to-face briefings are the best ways to convey factual and emotional information, especially when staff/role changes are occurring. These should be backed up with factual information in the form of fact sheets, emails, web-based information and so on.

After the initial project announcements, it is important to follow up with as much useful



communication as possible. The next stage should aim to develop two-way communications and collaboration. Staff surveys, focus groups, appreciative inquiry and other collaboration tools can all be used to involve people in the change. It is important to note that staff will also be using these tools anyway for both positive and negative reasons – it is better to engage in these communications than leave them to their own devices.

Through this collaborative process, staff can advise and feed back on changes being made and managers can start to identify candidates that could become advocates.

Creating a small number of strong advocates is the ultimate aim. These bought-in people can then convey information to other staff and translate boardroom macro-benefits into shop-floor micro-benefits, allaying fears. Advocates understand the project and how it will help the people at the coalface.

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Advocacy candidates are usually quite easy to identify as the communication begins. Potential advocates are generally those with a high degree of understanding or interest or are opinion-formers with bright ideas about the project. They will generally be those that stay behind at meetings, are vociferous about change and generally highly engaged in communications.

It is not uncommon for advocates to start off opposed to projects before they fully understand them. Some opponents will never come round to change but others can become strong advocates.

When candidates are identified, managers can work to further involve them in the formulation and implementation of change.

When possible advocates have been identified, change managers can start to work out the best way for them to be involved. An effective method is bringing together advocates into a group that can assess and advise the change management team. In this way, the group can help make sure change is just right by being the eyes and ears of the board and the voice of the workforce.

Possible advocates can come from any strata of an organisation as long as they are interested and engaged in the project. The benefits of creating advocates will not take long to manifest as the enthusiastic staff engage with, and inform, other employees.

A better way

In many organisations, change management in which staff are concerned still leaves a lot to be desired. Too frequently the factual is considered before the emotional; the hard macro-benefits communicated, but the micro-benefits neglected.

As organisations face another year of certain change, it's never been more vital that staff are bought in to this uncertainty. The extent to which advocates can be created and staff embrace change projects will play a central part in the success or failure of organisations in the future. **TJ**

Mike Robinson

is director of Berkshire Consultancy management consultancy. He can be contacted via www.berkshire.co.uk