



INSPIRING WAVES OF CHANGE

## THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON CHANGE

### INTRODUCTION

There is this widespread view that change is an critical aspect of an organisation's development. There have been calls for organisations to be "leaner, flatter and meaner" to meet the technological, social and economic changes taking place all the time in everyday life. To survive and be successful, we are told, organisations have to be flexible and adaptable. Failure to adapt to the external environment would lead to the inevitable demise of that organisation. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter, the well known Harvard Business School professor said, "The individuals and organisations who will succeed and flourish in the 90's, will also be masters of change: adept at reorienting their own and others activities in untried directions to bring about higher levels of achievement."

On the other hand, it is also accepted that organisational culture can present formidable challenges to those attempting to implement change. Organisational culture is that powerful influence that exists in organisations, and usually resists any change that does not conform to the practices, beliefs and values of that culture. And thus exists this paradox, the need for change to ensure an organisation's survival and the resistance that these changes face from organisational culture. The question is why are these two factors always in conflict? Can they be reconciled and complement each other for the organisation's positive growth? Can change be made part of the culture?

### PROBLEMS WITH CHANGE

Change is inevitable and there is a view that change is the only constant in organisations. It however with it problems. The process of introducing new machinery to enhance effectiveness in a printing company, for example, would seem like a routine change. In this instance management's perception is clear, technology is being brought in to increase efficiency, in line with organisational interests. The employees' perception may however differ. They are the ones who have to learn the new skills, adjust to new routines etc. The problem in this case is not the new machinery, but the personnel who are directly affected. Although they probably subscribed to the idea and were aware that it was for the good of the organisation, they nevertheless found difficulty in adjusting to the demands of these changes. These changes disrupted their work culture and compelled them to change and adapt. It is no surprise therefore that the employees will resist these changes. Here we see a clear demonstration of the strained relationship between the management of change and organisational culture.

### WHY CHANGES FAIL?

The main reason why changes fail is the fact that they do not take the people in that organisation into account. Organisations as we know them are the people in them; if the people do not change, there is no organisational change. Any changes be it task, technology or structural, are therefore effective only to the degree that these changes are associated with changes in the culture and psychology of workers. There is this clear relationship between change and the intangible values, perceptions and beliefs of the employees, or in short, the organisational culture.

People frequently resist change because most changes result in disarray of the environment in which they operate. People will also resist any idea, behaviour, or process that threatens their existing beliefs. They may then exhibit resistance either through indifference or outright opposition. Part of the problem is the fact that people are attracted to predictability and routine in their work environment. There is this emotional need to continue to perpetuate the old processes and the old ways, because by doing things the familiar way, they avoid the fear of change and the unknown. Many changes in organisations therefore fall short of management's requirements and intentions.

Leon Martel, in 'Mastering Change, the Key to Business Success', describes three common traps that keeps organisations from changing:

- Believing that yesterdays' solutions will solve today's problems.
- Assuming present trends will continue.
- Neglecting the opportunities offered by future change.

Culture on the other hand is significant in that it reflects successful practices of the past. These successful practices then become part of the belief and value system of the employees. "Its the way we do things here" concept. Employees become conditioned to the idea that successful methods of the past will continue to be successful in the future. They resist new methods, as it does not conform to their shared values and beliefs. Therefore when instituting changes in any organisation, the following key aspects of organisational culture need to be scrutinised thoroughly.

- The political state and balance of power in the organisation.
- Organisational structure, as this usually perpetuates the existing culture.
- Management and leadership styles (these too will be the product of the culture which will have supported certain styles and screened out others).
- Organisational history. In organisations with long histories, change could be a problem as it has to counter tradition and practices that worked in the past.

Managing change in any organisation will require an appreciation and understanding of these variables, and the fact that they cannot be looked at in isolation. Many organisations ignore cultural change because it appears so difficult to manage. Instead they focus on the more tangible aspects of change i.e. change in procedures, equipment and systems. There has to be a deeper philosophy to the change process, in the sense that the variables are looked at in entirety, and then changes or selective removal takes place. Importantly, there has to be clear and uncompromising commitment from the top leadership in that organisation. Otherwise the changes are doomed to fail from the start.

## **CONCLUSION**

The turbulent relationship between organisational culture and change will carry on in organisations and will provide managers with one of their major challenges. There is no quick fix or canned solution to this conflict. It exists, and the only thing that managers can do is to learn how to manage it. In the future, with globalisation and rapid technological innovations, the pace of change will be even faster and change will be a perpetual phenomenon in all organisations. Rapid change will bring with it increasing problems, particularly to business, where survival and growth depend on flexibility and adaptability. Managers will have to accept this reality of change. On that note, perhaps we should take heed of this quote from Elliot, M. Estes, the former GM President. He said, "If something has been done a particular way for fifteen or twenty years, it is a pretty good sign, in these changing times, that it is being done the wrong way."