

Inside change

What are the practical measures that need to be taken to establish belief in change and to manage it successfully? **William Hooper** reports from inside a service transformation

A large customer of a leading IT service provider experienced a service interruption. Bad enough, but the problem was handled in a manner that gave the company and customer cause for concern. As a result, senior managers on both sides responsible for delivering the service were subject to intense scrutiny. Under pressure, for them it felt highly personal.

While the initial problem and its causes were basically solved, the Service Director determined to fix the service at its very roots. We knew this would take time as more than 1,000 staff are involved in delivery. That change is now largely complete and the results are becoming apparent in terms of what has worked and what has not.

The theory

The programme focused on outcomes. The aim was to align change and programme activity directly to the benefits, rather than worrying too much about the means. This, in turn, encouraged flexibility and creativity in thinking and delivery.

The framework mapped delivery through four phases. The outcome of the first is “leadership committed” – similar to John Kotter’s idea of the “guiding coalition”, expressed in terms of outcomes. At this stage, we were confirming the organisation’s strategy and the programme’s alignment to it. The phase had six constituent outcomes:

- Drivers of change agreed
- Consensus on value
- Impact of change accepted
- Compelling vision established
- Transformation route is known
- The organisation is ready



“Flipped classrooms and free courses will challenge business schools”

It is possible (and practically inevitable) that not all of these elements will be completely in place simultaneously before delivery starts. This is not a rule, but guides the programme team and governance body to indicate that there are risks that need to be managed. In this situation, we started to design a solution to fix the immediate symptoms before the six strategic alignment outcomes had been completed. There was a consciously incurred risk that some rework to restore alignment would be required. This did not arise.

For the improvement of processes, as the aim was integrity of service, the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL) provided a model for good interaction of service management. To complement this, the Lean Six Sigma approach was used to improve processes. The use of such a well-formed and developed theory gave the governance body and other stakeholders confidence that while they might not all be entirely familiar with all the approaches being used, the programme team was and could, as a result, confidently plot a route to delivery.

In practice

Once the direction for the programme had been set and the stakeholders marshalled to support it, the practical task of design, deployment and change started. The audience being addressed in the change was principally operational. They are not natural theoreticians, preferring the ‘Just Do It’ approach of immediate action. The realisation that miracles would not be achieved before breakfast was not easily absorbed.

Changing the view that everything could just be done was achieved by the programme team working with their principal contact to work out the approach and who would need to do what.

This also served to develop the belief within the business's principal contact that the approach had to cover the steps suggested by good change practice and that the tasks were worth the effort and would mitigate risk. This belief enabled her to move her peers away from precipitate action into a more considered response. She then convinced her peers that to do a hurried and superficial change, far from improving the integrity of service, would undermine it.

Through use of the framework, the individual tasks and their interactions were mapped out and delivery scheduled. This initial planning was undertaken with care, which gave justifiable confidence within the programme team and governance. Use of the framework made the difficulties predictable, so the stakeholders could be pre-warned. New discoveries and operational interventions occurred, but the plan was realised to the satisfaction of the stakeholders.

Progress was carefully tracked to the plan which was then adapted in the light of discoveries. Focus was principally on attaining the aims of the programme, with belief in these aims being unshakably held by the programme team and governance body. The means of doing this was then flexible and in many cases was adapted as better approaches were discovered. This was seen as a good outcome during delivery, rather than as a weakness in original planning.

During the course of the change delivery, three recurrent themes were observed: change takes time; change is individual; and everyone is a change person.

The senior staff would originally have preferred that change should be accomplished faster than the plan suggested. It was notable that the members of the governance body themselves went through a process of change, developing and learning to articulate their vision for change and why it was important to realise it. The degree of repetition in setting out the change's aims and goals was marked. The telling reinforces the message for teller and recipient alike. It may be old-hat to the teller, but it is still fresh and new to the hearer. Through storytelling and repetition, stakeholders were able to engage with and support the project. Thus is change promulgated.

Talking to trust

Looking back at the birth of the programme, we had a team that was strongly coherent, trusting and respectful. This gave rational grounds for confidence in going forward. Strong theoretical and architectural skills are essential, and that these can and usually should be brought in, but that ultimately change is an individual experience that must be taken on by every person involved within the organisation.



“Change takes time, change is individual and everyone is a ‘change’ person”

We debated the form and personalities to involve in the governance of the programme long and hard. There were questions such as the level, seniority, time commitment to be expected and the way that the individuals would work together to consider. Ultimately, the most critical factor was to make sure that the chair/sponsor was strongly committed to the success of the programme, was prepared to fund it and manage opposition. The sponsor then selected a group whose counsel she respected in the area of change so that appropriate challenge could be assured. It was also balanced according to interest and perspective. This group adapted as the programme moved on and concerns changed.

The programme team benefited from the quality of debate within the governance group. This developed a clear and close understanding of both what needed to be done, and why this was so. The team carefully prepared for governance meetings, bringing a structured summary of progress and plans for what was to happen next, from which carefully prepared questions arose. The questions were demanding and clearly influenced the direction of the programme. Thus meetings were active occasions for the governance members with clear value in steering the programme. This helped to maintain interest and attendance. Completing the agenda on time was repeatedly a challenge.

Change takes time

The programme team had all in previous programmes witnessed the negative consequences of hurried change. In change programmes, there is relentless pressure to complete delivery faster. It is difficult to resist; we were not immune to this. There is a delicate balance between taking too long and not allowing enough time for the change to be considered and embedded.

Much of the programme's success came from carefully matching and measuring the rate of activities to the pace the organisation could tolerate. At critical times, the pace was consciously slowed to allow key individuals to resolve matters in their minds and to manage risks. This built trust, respect and cooperation. There was a number of six-to-eight-week cycles which maintained momentum and energy, provided a sense of progression, measurable outcomes and achievement, but did not overwhelm the programme team or the receiving organisation. The programme was brought in on schedule with the powerful support of the engaged staff.

Trust and respect between the programme manager, the key contact and the sponsor provided a platform for confidential dialogue. Substantial time was invested in strategic stakeholder management and the personal development of key individuals. This built the >

capacity for change that sustained the programme after I, as a consultant, left it.

The key business contact had one-to-one coaching in the theory of change management and the transformation framework well in advance of mobilising the change programme. Coaching was designed to support the delivery of components of the six outcomes mentioned above, all essential for completing the tasks in hand at the time. Consequently, she was well prepared for her later role as chief change agent. The investment of time developed both her belief in the programme and her skills to manage change. The same principle was applied to a number of key stakeholders of the programme. Each was taken on a personal journey; each required their own time.

Outcomes

The first implementation to the incident management process resulted in a 37 per cent reduction in average incident duration. The service hours were extended to 24/7 and service cost was contained within previous levels. The incidence of incidents breaching target resolution times was reduced from 12 per cent to 4 per cent, well below the Service Level Agreement. Customer confidence was restored.

The second implementation was to a print production unit. This has been certified by an independent bench-marker to be “best in class”, having previously suffered security incidents. The change to introduce process controls supported by automated measurement and technology has given the customer confidence in the performance of the unit.

The skills to sustain change and continue improvement have been transferred to operations staff who have continued after the departure of supporting consultants.

The means of delivery evolved from the originally proposed path. The overall direction was sound and the pace of change, the supporting coalition and imperatives are consistent with the way we started, and stronger. The programme team noted that the governance board matured as it made sense of the original path, took it on and made it truly its own. They then required resources from the programme team to support their own promulgation of the change and messages, in addition to direct delivery to the areas addressed daily by the programme team.

The team also consciously changed some significant elements of the change approach in the light of experience. The first phase used a textbook approach, later modified in the light of local culture, history and personality. Aspects that simply did not work as hoped were quietly dropped in favour of others. We prefer to call this adaptation rather than bad planning. Either way, it works.



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OUTCOMES OF CHANGE

Drivers of change agreed

The drivers of change answer the question, “Why must we do this?” The condition for success is that the sponsor and governance body share a view of what the reason is, and find it to be compelling. Often this reason is simply not strong enough. In the case of this programme, the change imperative started with an inarticulate, “There has to be a better way!” This progressed through investigation and the construction of a solution proposal that took the Operations Director and her influential advisors through stages of acceptance until the point of compulsion was reached. The memories of pain experienced were still fresh. The compulsion was both logical and emotional. Ultimately, decisions are taken by individuals, and embarking on a programme of change requires long-term commitment that will be sustained only if there is the drive and benefit to make the inevitable short-term difficulties worthwhile.

Consensus on value

The value answers the questions “What will we get out of it?” and “What is the contribution of this to the organisation’s aims?” In successful programmes, the value flows most to those who bear the risk and the cost. In this programme, considerable early effort was put into identifying the stakeholders, their interests and attitudes. This allowed not only the effective design of a programme that delivered the maximum benefit to the influential, but also the identification of risks to the programme’s funding and support. An early decision was to pitch the governance such that the director who stood to gain the most, who had fire and passionate drive for the benefits to be delivered and who was ready to bear the cost, sponsored it. Going higher and wider would have diluted this and undermined support. Interest in progress and achievement is individual, and has to be strong and sustained if the programme is to keep going. This was agreed by her immediate boss.

Impact of change is accepted

Unless the people allocating resources are prepared to pay the price, nothing gets done. There is always a price. You can choose to pay now or later, you can invest in change or suffer the gnawing disappointment of promise unfulfilled but you cannot avoid the cost. This was rapidly and intuitively accepted by the director with minimal discussion. The real and extensive work to hone the programme followed.

Compelling vision of the future

Having established the essential components of value sought, the vision, scope and priorities for delivery followed. The direction was set by the programme sponsor, taking the counsel of the governance body. This body then refined and

evangelised the vision. We used the qualities of a good vision as a test of the statements under development. Convinced of the compelling reason to change, the consensus on value was used to win the arguments that inevitably followed challenge on whether this was the best course of action. Such challenges continue throughout a programme and are welcomed by the programme team, which should retain a healthy paranoia in the need continually to deliver benefit to justify ongoing existence. The team maintained a track and regular updates to the sponsor and governance body of value delivered, and she used this in discussion with her peers.

The vision of the future tests whether the sponsor and the wider organisation understand and like the picture of the future that is being proposed. The vision needs to be vivid and compelling. It also needs to be shared, agreed and owned by all members if the coalition is to be maintained. Leadership of change is seen when the picture is taken by the sponsor and governance body, repeated and relayed to many people many times at many levels in the organisation. The understanding is passed, as is the passion, belief and drive. If this is aligned with the value, the message spreads. This does not start quickly and needs to be nurtured through selling the change.

The sponsor responds strongly to pictures (being happier with these than the written word). She picks them up quickly, relaying the story in her own words to the organisation's senior leadership team and others she seeks to influence. The pictures used changed over time, picking up on themes and moods of the moment. The fundamental story remains the same. Images of flight were used, as a major meeting was to be held at an airfield conference centre.

In such a way, the leaders of the programme used images to engage the hearts and minds of the stakeholders in developing understanding and commitment to the change. The vision of the future has to be attractive and achievable; the picture of the present relevant, familiar and not demeaning.

Transformation route is known

The transformation route tests whether the group knows how the vision is to be attained. This should include the intermediate phases, their outcomes and benefits. Those responsible for delivery will see that they can win, they can see the way forward, and have reasonable grounds for believing that the programme will deliver the expected benefits.

A wise governance group, while proceeding hopefully, will build in checks and balances. They set out hopefully on a defined path, proceed a reasonable distance, then check that the path is still a good one and that the costs and benefits are in line with original expectations.

The first step proposed addressing a small but important part of the service delivery as its first phase, that of incident management (fixing failed services). This was chosen for its immediate



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association with the crisis that had stimulated the creation of the programme. It was previously seen as being a poorly performing area, and was described by one of the stakeholders as the “burning platform”. We explicitly chose to address this as a testing ground for the approaches that were proposed for the whole organisation later on. The original proposal contained a definition of the approach to be taken for later phases, without defining the detail of what would be done when within them. Having defined and tested the approach on the first area, we proceeded to adopt the same approach elsewhere in the order dictated by priorities and events at the time.

The organisation is ready

This tests whether the organisation is ready to undertake the change proposed, leadership and resources are available and mobilised and committed, appropriate governance is in place. We observed complex interpersonal relationships and changes in these between the programme team, the sponsor and the lead representative of the business. The programme did not get started before all of us had reached a consensus that the great journey that we were proposing to undertake together had to be undertaken. This was both an emotional and an intellectual decision.

The process of decision was an interesting experience to be in the middle of. It was less a Damascene conversion than a gathering movement to a tipping point. It started with many unknowns, which were either resolved satisfactorily or parked in future phases. The path to transformation was tested by us with many stakeholders at many levels of the organisation. The route and people addressed were determined following stakeholder analysis, using techniques developed in the field of sales and account planning. It was a covertly political exercise that was used to hone both the quality of the path planned and to build a supportive coalition.

This stakeholder analysis was undertaken by all of us proposing the programme, at many levels of the organisation. When trouble was encountered, we took counsel (eg from the sponsor) on how best to overcome it. If we started with a level of personal trust between us and confidence in the path we proposed to take together, it was far stronger at the end. The consummation came when business circumstances and the strength of the solution coincided with our being satisfied that we had the right people in place to make the programme succeed. We are convinced that this test is a vital one that is often missed, to the detriment of the proposed change programme. ■

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