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Change Management – working from resistance to adoption.

by Barry Tuckwood

In a previous article I discussed an approach to the route to successful change, I promised to look at how we react to change. We have all tried to create change or have had change thrust up on us, and there is a clue in how we dealt with the situations ourselves, in working out how to help others deal with change. If a child can say ' I want to do it my way' and you can't produce a valid reason for doing it differently, why would they change? Yet we are often guilty of trying to impose change.

The work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, which has its origins in studies relating to bereavement and counselling for medical conditions, has been extended to demonstrate a fit with the ways in which people respond to significant change. Consider each of these fairly typical statements:

"I have too much to do to bother with changing the way we do things."
"There is nothing wrong with the way we do that here."
"We don't do things that way here."
"We tried that before and it didn't work."
"I know that they do it that way in our competitors, but here it just won't work."
"You'll never get purchasing to use this."
"I've tried it, it's too hard, I'm going back to the old way."

However the person phrases their view, it can be seen as some form of resistance. Their wish to keep things going in the old way is so great that they actually stop doing anything at all. Productivity declines. They are immobilised.

In the second phase they have reverted to the old way, are denying the benefits of change, and may be achieving close to the former targets. But they gradually begin to see possible opportunities for improvement. They become frustrated, perhaps

with their own abilities – they might have a new system already, but do not know how to use it properly; they may see colleagues with enhanced abilities and facilities, and want to move on.


Source: Elisabeth Kübler-Ross
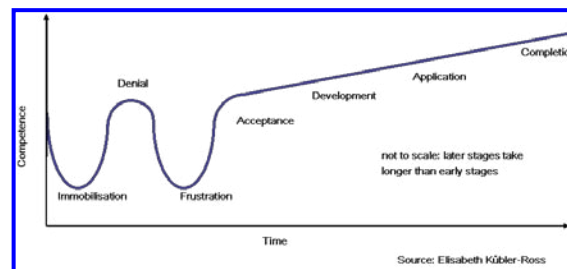
This point is critical: when we actually want to change we can begin to do so. With this acceptance, participation and action for improvement become a practical possibility.

What we need to understand is where people are in this cycle of change, and recognise that there are those who will resist, and there are those who will accept more quickly. If we can engage those who are ready to participate, test, and prove a new arrangement, their influence on everyone else will grow acceptance across the many groups that may need to be involved.

We can liken this to the introduction of any new product. For successful products there is always the same pattern of take-up. There is the original development, often carried out with the support of pilot organisations, customers and suppliers. Early adopters are those who have probably been frustrated about the facilities available, have sought to identify something better, and have bought the early versions of the product. We need only think of the early mobile phones, the size of a brick, to recognise that even those were used by some brave people. With evidence of success,

more and more people also buy the product, until eventually even the late adopters and laggards have done so. If we map these two against each other we can see that formal completion of the change is when the last person is properly engaged – although we might set for ourselves a more realistic and achievable target.
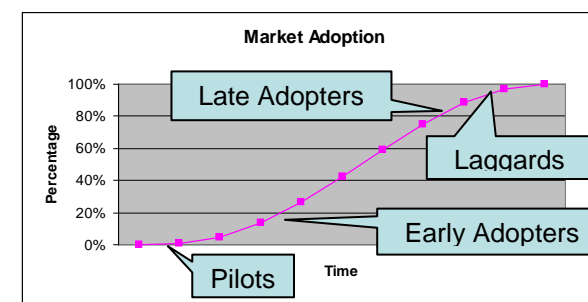
As managers we need to understand the extent to which our organisations are prepared for change, the barriers that exist, and the stages in people's readiness to accept the need for change. While overall completion may depend on the last person who joins in, identifying the best people to bring on board to help champion the cause is a key enabler.

In my next article I plan to discuss the feedback process.

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Useful sources:
www.ogc.gov.uk