
Changing for the Better

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Linda Daly interviews Ian Duncan, Director and Practice Leader with VISION Consulting.

The word “change” can send shivers down the spines of business owners and employees alike. However, when implemented correctly, it can add huge value to a business and boost staff innovation.

With current market conditions demanding that many businesses undergo change, a frightening reality is that change programmes fail to achieve their goals anywhere from 67% to 80% of the time. Understandably, many executives fear it, but they should also delight in the fact that, if successful, change programmes can create very competitive organisations.

Ian Duncan, director and practice leader with Vision Consulting Ireland, says the imperative for change has never been more important.

“Trust is an absolute must if you want to bring your people with you through the change process.”

“The business world as we know it has altered in the past six months. The impetus for change is absolutely pronounced in this economic environment.”

Since organisational change allows companies to be much more responsive to their customers, the most competitive firms are no strangers to the concept.

“They are constantly making adjustments to their organisational structures and downsize aggressively during economic turbulence. These businesses survive through the tough times and keep adjusting their strategy to become agile in terms of changing needs. This means they exist and thrive in rapidly growing economies”.

There are numerous kinds of change programmes that can be implemented in organisations. These range from carving

the change strategy into small pieces to communicating the benefits of the programme to staff constantly. Some will focus on incentives while others seek to disable change registers.

However, according to Duncan, one of the core issues that companies should concentrate on is relationships – those among senior executives, managers, staff and customers. Unless a change

programme focus on helping people to alter their relationships, they will unconsciously resist change, he believes. There must also be buy-in from senior personnel

in the organisation.

Duncan and the team at Vision assist in the implementation of successful change programmes through six domains.

The first step, says Duncan, is to develop a strategic understanding and have a strategic intent of change. The change leader must build a case for it that has value for all functions affected.

“This intent must be articulated in a crystal-clear manner from the top of the organisation. So, if you’re working in a firm that needs to entrench and reduce costs or enter new markets, you have a clarity of purpose around that,” he says.

The simplification of operational processes is a second domain.

Directors must map out the organisation’s current network of commitments and redesign that network.

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“With change, you’re asking people to give up their domain of expertise and start learning new things – that’s a daunting prospect on an individual basis,” says Duncan.

Managers and staff must recognise the commitments they are making and request help from others if needed, which is the third step in the process.

“The only way you can really get to understand the culture of an organisation is by looking at its commitments. Bonds are built between colleagues in organisations in this way. You must understand how people communicate with each other,” advises Duncan.

He believes that in order to effect change, you must find out who the key influencers are in the firm and what implicit commitments are being made. You must then invest time into understanding the culture of the business. By making commitments explicit, staff will become more creative in their work.

Any change within an organisation should be made inspirational, and involve a wow factor. It must propose to make life easier and the company better. Shifting the dynamics of relationships is a very important part of the process. If businesses miss that step, the programme will fall, says Duncan.

Working with people on the ground to raise their ambitions for change is also an important part of the process, he believes. “It’s about building a personal pact with people who need to understand what’s in it for them as well as for the organisation.

“Trust is an absolute must if you want to bring your people with you through the change process. If you’re behaving authentically as a change manager and following through on what you believe is right for the organisation, you start to

build trust. Employees need to see authentic behaviour from all parties; they need to believe in the honesty, integrity and purpose of the organisation and the team driving through and mobilising the change.”

And that change should be delivered in bite-sized pieces, Duncan believes. By setting smaller goals, leaders can inspire teams to act with entrepreneurial enthusiasm. Duncan suggests companies put in deliverables of no more than four to six weeks, and that they celebrate successes as they achieve them.

The final domain in any change process is to put in place a measure system that looks not only at matrix or hard measures but at accessible measures also. Firms should implement an assessment-based process that examines the mood of the organisation as it undergoes change.

“It’s about managing the transitional mood and seeing if there’s a swell of momentum,” says Duncan.

Whatever the programme, flexibility is essential, he adds. Senior management must be willing to adjust their goals as well as the means of achieving them.

The style of leadership required to make change happen is different from the standard management style.

“The leaders in organisations that are responsible for delivering these strategies need to be incredibly empathetic and honest,” says Duncan.

“We’re in a knowledge economy; the traditional barriers and hierarchies associated with organisations broke down long ago. Leaders have to stand up and not only be fantastic strategists and visionaries but also have an empathetic ear.”