

Problems in Managing Change

By Oliver Recklies

Introduction

Effective change management that makes all employees participate is essential in our world of turbulence and of shorter cycles of innovation. Changes may affect every industry and every organizational function.

In every organization, management knows about the external environment and the vision of the organization. This knowledge is the basis for developing appropriate strategies. Although challenging, this is the easier part. Nevertheless, management will only be able to successfully implement a new strategic direction, if they manage to gain the commitment of everyone within the organization. The point is to develop processes that enable all employees to learn about change and that to develop a culture of dialogue between management and workforce.

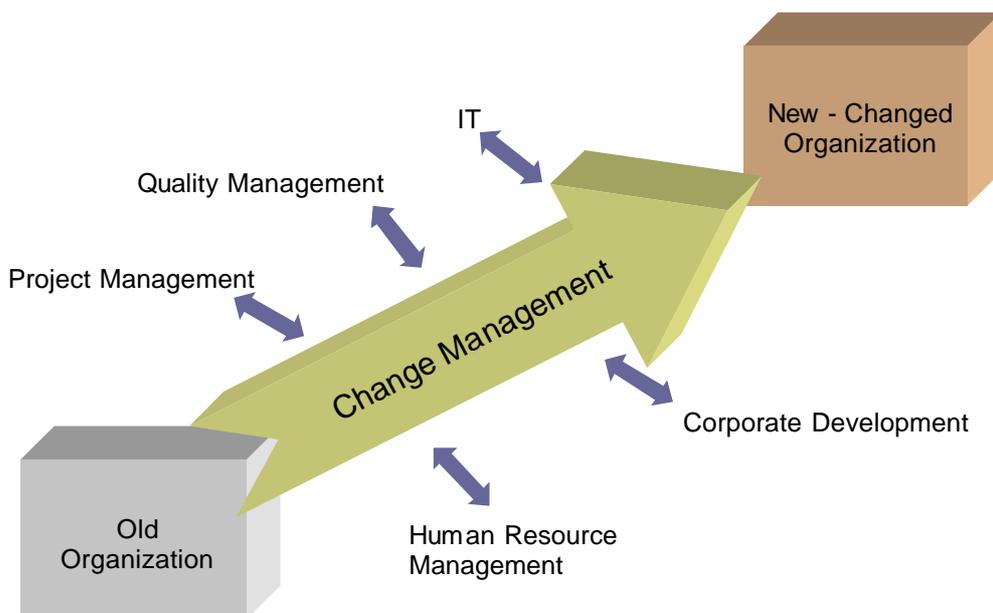
Change management means to make change happen – to flexibly adapt the organization to ongoing external changes.

Challenges in Managing Change

The process of change has impact on the whole organization and on all individuals working there. Change processes influence

- What the organization does
- The way the organization does things
- The way all business units of the organization communicate and share information.

This shows clearly the complexity and scope of change management:



Human resource management has an important role in any change process. Change always needs people: for developing objectives, for identifying the need for change, for developing solutions and for implementing these solutions. Technology can support and influence change, but it can never replace people.

Another challenge of managing change is that there is no chance to 'undo' mistakes once they were made. If you allocate resources in an inefficient way, you still have the option to provide additional resources in order to achieve your objective. If you once failed to make your employees participate in the change process, you will hardly be able to motivate them again.

Barriers in Managing Change

There are many models for systematically managing change processes. So why are there problems in successfully implementing change?

It is a well-known insight that top management support is one of the critical success factors for any change effort. If top management does not buy in – why should anybody else?

Nevertheless, there are some more barriers that could hinder successful change:

Barriers of Perception

- Stereotypes in analysis: We see what we expect to see.
- Difficulties to identify and to analyze the core of the problem / the real cause of the problem.
- Too narrow scope of the problem: Problems are approached with a one-sided view that focuses on particular aspects only.
- Lacking ability to see all sides of the problem.
- Information overload: Difficulties to distinguish between relevant data and available data.
- Misjudgments: People think they take into consideration all data they can get hold on;

however, they actually do not really exploit all information that is available.

Perceptual problems most often occur during analysis of the own situation (internal analysis, identification of internal weaknesses) and during evaluation of options. This may lead to a sub-optimal solution that does not really tackle the causes of the problem. The result is a waste of resources – in terms of financial resources, time and commitment.

Emotional Barriers

- Risk-aversion: Fear to make mistakes or to fail.
- Lack of ability to process incomplete or contradictory information: Solving complex problems is never easy. Incomplete information may lead to an elimination of promising ideas.
- Preference to evaluate existing ideas instead of generating new ideas. Early evaluation of suggestions may sort out creative ideas. Early ideas often base on incomplete information. That makes it easier to reject them. Normally people find it much easier to come up with reasons for rejecting an idea than with reasons for supporting an idea.
- Not taking time for thinking: In many projects, people are not able to lean back and think about a problem because they feel under pressure to deliver results quickly.

These emotional barriers may cause serious problems in change processes since they hinder the generation of new ideas and approaches. Nevertheless, the critical question of any change 'Are we doing the right things?' requires open discussion, new and unconventional approaches. Brainstorming activities may be of help here.

Cultural Barriers

- Taboos: Particular issues may have the character of a taboo in an organization. Hence, they are extremely difficult to analyze and to change.

- More focus than imagination: Children are more creative than adults are. A potential reason is that our culture attaches great importance to targeted thinking. Thus, we virtually unlearn how to be imaginative and creative with our ideas.
- Problem solving is seen as a serious matter: There is no place for humor in the process of problem solving; hence, there will not be much freedom for creativity.
- Reasons and intuition: It is generally accepted in business life that critical reasoning, objective analysis, logic, figures and facts are good things. Intuition and fun are seen as sub-optimal. In our personal life, however we are used to base many important decisions on our intuition and our feelings – for instance choice of friends and partners.
- Tradition and change: It is a challenging task to overcome traditions. This is especially true when employees do not see the relation between their traditions and an existing problem. On the other hand, traditions can be the basis for personal commitment in change processes.

These cultural barriers hinder the development and evaluation of solutions for problems in the organization. Moreover, they limit options for new approaches in change processes.

Environmental Barriers¹

- Lack of support: Many people perceive changes as a threat for their personal status. Changes move the whole organization as well as every single employee out of their 'comfort zone'. Therefore, there will always be some people who try to stop or ignore the process.
- Lack of ability to accept criticism: Those who create new ideas may set up new barriers when they ignore justifiable criticism. The ability to accept criticism is a

major precondition for establishing trust and for gaining support.

- Managers who always know the answer: Some managers are successful because they have good ideas and are able to implement them. But only those, who listen to their employees, will be able to use their creativity as well.

Such environmental barriers have effects on all phases of change. They can create a feeling of togetherness and mutual support as well as of egoism and competition.

Cognitive Barriers

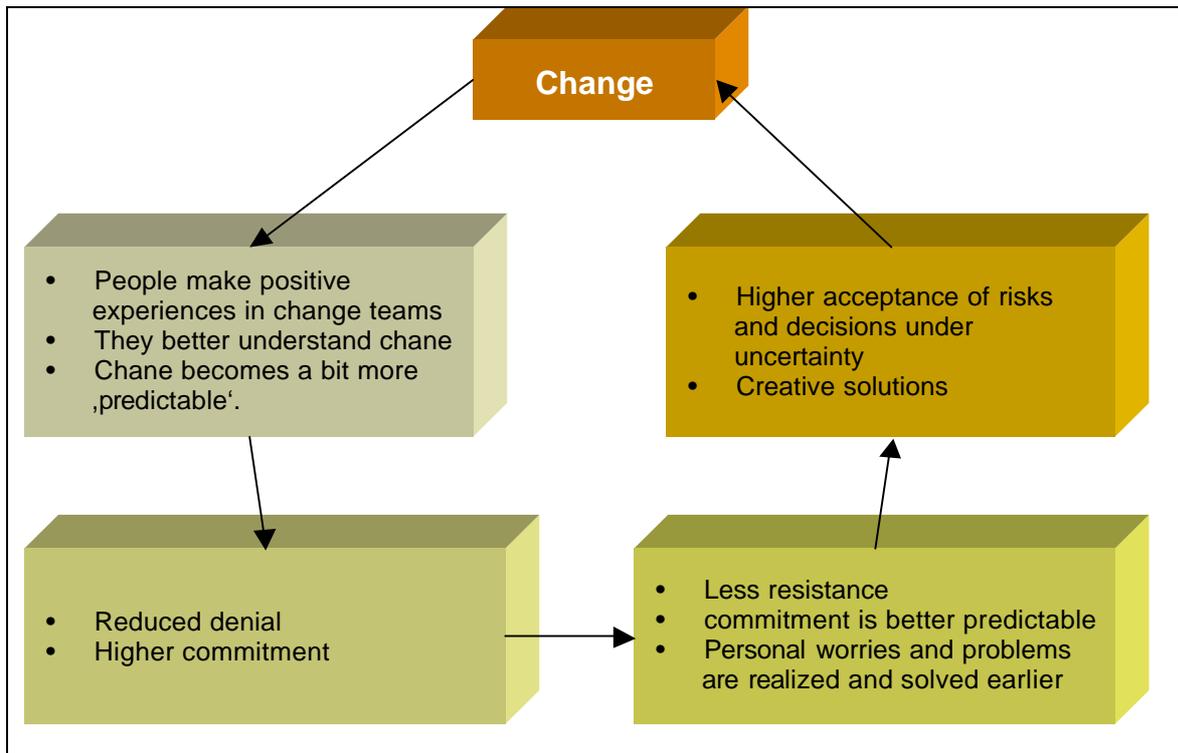
- Use of wrong terminology: The use of language and terminology that is appropriate for the receivers of the message can support creativity and motivation.
- Sticking to strategies: There are many strategies for problem solving and for managing change. However, they are often applied wrongly – too rigid or not rigid enough.
- Lack of complete and correct information: This is a major problem that cannot really be solved. The probably best solution is a balanced mix of information and creative ideas.

Like environmental barriers, cognitive barriers can influence all phases of change projects.

Approaches for Solutions

The implementation of any change process has effects on the employees in an organization. Hence, there is a feedback from the change process to the people involved. Their experiences with a particular change project will have impact on further actions and their acceptance of further changes.

¹ Here, the term *environmental* means in the environment of the change team rather than in the external environment of the organization.



The following tips may improve acceptance of change in an organization:

- Be open-minded for new ideas. Do not sort out options and ideas until a final decision has to be taken.
- Protect new ideas from criticism.
- Listen to suggestions and appreciate good ideas.
- Eliminate the „We have always done it that way“-culture. Move your employees and the whole organization out of the comfort zone.
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- Learn from mistakes in the past.
- Focus on the good aspects of a new idea rather than on potential problems.
- Share risks.
- Build upon ideas.
- Do not make your judgment on ideas and suggestions too early.
- And again: let your employees participate in *all* phases of the change process. Build commitment.