

We've been on a treadmill of change for 25 years now. The never ending reinvention of our businesses is merciless. From new system capabilities, process re-engineering, globalisation, upsizing, downsizing and change for the sake of change.

And we've been really bad at it. So bad that the mere mention of 'change' or 'project' or 'programme' has everyone groaning, shoulders slump and people look resigned at yet another disruption to an otherwise working world.

I understand how they feel. We have dragged entire organisations through our learning curve to deliver change well and many are still struggling to get it right. The problem is that the problem always seems to be changing. We blamed IT, IT blamed the business, we doubted our methods so we designed new methods, trained our teams, we centralised the control of change then we decentralised it back to the business, we thought we needed tighter benefits and risk so we put in heavy handed governance and then when that failed we automated it.

I could go on but I haven't the will.

Having delivered change in 3 global regions for 30 years in every industry sector I've made every mistake possible and tried every solution available. Organisations tell me that 30% of their projects succeed, 30% are okay (ish) and 30% outright fail. They often ask me, 'What are we doing wrong?'

Treadmill of errors

I once presented a paper on '101 Reasons Why Change Fails' and I listed every reason I had ever seen or been told why change failed. It took 10 minutes to compile that list, I actually had more than 101 reasons and we all had a good laugh at just how well change fails.

But there were some core issues within the 101 reasons why we fail:

- Poor Analysis
- Poor Engagement
- Poor Change Skills

In other words, we don't think the problem through from start to end - Problem Analysis to Planning to Solution Design and Implementation.

We don't involve the right people at the right time in the right way to get their input, commitment and ultimately ownership for the change they will make successful.

And we think PPM 'sheep dip' training turns out qualified, experienced, capable and talented change teams and it doesn't.

Road to Redemption

We can't solve these core issues one issue at a time. Improving Project Management or Programme Design or Business Analysis or Change Management skills and methods doesn't solve the whole problem. In fact, it can make it harder by isolating the disciplines so they pull against one another rather than working together.

Every change specialist needs know about all disciplines even if they primarily specialise in one.

The most effective change specialist, regardless of their role, is the one who is multi disciplined, practical, pragmatic, can listen and lead and never ducks a

real problem.

And therein lies the core problem. We have been running about training people in various methods, handing out accreditations and yet we aren't training people in the full span of knowledge and skills they need to do the job well.

The Business End of the Equation

Managing the business through change is actually not that difficult. Oh sure, we all have a story or two of the business that resisted our Programme or Project into extinction but that's the extreme end of the scale.

Mostly the business just want to know what they have to do, by when and the 'why' is an optional question inasmuch as they are often asked to do things that have no apparent purpose.

So, why do we struggle to engage the business, have them own the change and deliver it successfully.

Well, I blame us.

The business are not an angry mob just waiting to thwart our well considered plans and solutions. Okay, so it might feel like that some days but it really isn't true. Usually our change plans are the least of their worries. The operations in any organisation live in the 'here and now' and our future plans for them are too vague and too distanced for the average operations specialist to care about. Mostly their eyes glaze over and they think, 'I'll deal with that if and when it happens'.

And their attitude is well founded because a lot of the time the plans change, the solution changes and nothing happens as we said it would. I wouldn't listen to us either!

Getting it Right

Getting it wrong is easy. In fact, the operations end of business would tell us that's what we're really good at!

I wish I could tell you that getting it right is a formula, a method or a magic wand but it isn't. To be honest, smart people have been doing this for 30 plus years and still failing so clearly this is a complex problem.

We need to be better at what we do but specifically we need to be better at understanding just who is on the other side of the table from us. Change is as much about human nature as it is about the methods and disciplines.

Some days I feel like a pseudo psychologist. Listening, separating fact from drama, reading the real intent and taking away what is useful while leaving a person feeling they were heard is as critical a discipline in the PPM world as any other.

Pseudo Psychology

We have attempted to involve psychologists in business in many ways but a psychologist tends to look at the individual and a person is not just a person in business.

In business people are an untidy composite of who they really are and who they need to be to do their jobs and keep their pay check. In business, it is not simply all about us and how we feel, much of how we feel is tainted by the need to pay our bills.

So, playing Freud and asking how a person feels about their mother isn't going to help us. We need to understand this untidy composite person, their compromised wants, needs and reactions to change. In some ways it's much

easier to move the person to accept, commit and promote a change because we're not asking them to step over some deep psychological issue. In other ways it is more difficult in that we are the cause of their pain so it's easier for them to ignore us and our irritating demands.

Characters

For the purposes of change we can simplify our assessments of the people we are dealing with. Whenever I engage with the business I have learned to quickly assess and categorise who they are, what position they come from and how I need to manage them.

Anyone can do this. We don't need to be psychologists, in fact, it's easier if we aren't. This is by no means an exhaustive list, feel free to add your own:

Character	Attributes
Worrier	Worries about everything, sees only risk
Detailed Thinker	Studies the detail, nit picks everything
Eternal Optimist	Sees no risk, assumes best case scenario
Evangelist	Claims to 'love' change, insanely enthusiastic
Joker	Takes nothing seriously, doesn't care
Cynic	Thinks it will fail, seen it all before
Blocker	Will block every idea, may seem reasonable
Predictor of Gloom	Doesn't believe anything ever works, ever
Red Herring	Throws curve balls at the last minute
Underminer	Undermines discreetly
Controller	Won't play unless their the boss
Angry	Too angry over other issues to listen
Withholder	Won't commit until they know it will succeed

The Bottom Line

Luckily we are dealing with the 'composite' person who is usually driven by their need to pay their bills. How many people say, 'If they didn't pay me I would be here', or 'I work to live not live to work'.

These statements are reassuring inasmuch as it means they will only push so far to thwart any change. It means they can be moved into a more positive and supportive position.

To some extent we are reliant on this detachment because we don't want to change them as people, we just need them to deliver our change successfully.

Managing Ourselves First

We can't manage anyone else until we can manage ourselves. There is a tendency in all of us to avoid conflict or difficult situations. As change specialists we have to step over our natural desire to run away from people who are causing us grief or making our life difficult.

Every character we deal with is a problem we must win over to support and successfully deliver the change we have promised to make. We must compensate for their weaknesses by being steadier, calmer, more communicative, positive, confident and assured.

It's a big ask. Most of the time we are not entirely confident ourselves and we

have our own genuine worries about the change. Under pressure our inclination can be to avoid or to simply say, 'Just do it', but that usually results in a fractured relationship with a lot of finger pointing and blame. That never gets good results.

No, unfortunately we need to be the 'grown up' and stay focussed on the 'end game'.

Managing the Characters

Fortunately all Characters respond to the same management tactics. Once we have ourselves under management managing them is pretty straight forward:

- Always be willing to meet with them.
- Stay in contact through phone, email and in person.
- Do not enter into email wars.
- Give them every opportunity to contact you.
- Always be calm, logical, pleasant and assertive.
- Question to understand.
- Clearly explain reality and reasoning.
- Agree to validate any of their concerns.
- Keep good notes.

These characters can take up a lot of your time but often, once won over, can be your greatest supporters. Most characters do not have an entrenched position, after all this is just their day job, and can be surprisingly committed once they believe someone is listening.

Creating Ownership

What we really want is for the business to take responsibility to not just implement the change but for making the change a success. They are the only people who can make it a success. We want them to take ownership as early as possible and we do this by:

- Making them responsible for specific actions.
- Asking them what they can/will do for the change.
- Encouraging them when they do take responsibility.
- Being receptive to their ideas and their concerns.
- Actively encouraging their involvement in meetings and decisions.
- Letting them take control of aspects of the change.
- Getting the business to lead the business
- Never ignoring issues.
- Helping the business manage the Characters.
- Being persistent about the change without being a pest.

It all sounds a bit trite but this is about working with the business not imposing our will on them. That means we become as involved with them as they are with us.

Entrenched thinking

Of course we also have the problem of 'entrenched thinking'. We all have entrenched thinking, patterns of thinking that are so firmly entrenched we don't

even know we have them.

These days many organisations just assume change will be difficult, probably fail and the benefits will never be tested much less realised. We almost have an en masse entrenched thinking pattern about changing organisations. Failure and perception of failure has become so commonplace that we no longer doubt we will fail to some extent.

Breaking through entrenched thinking is about identifying the 'assumed truth' and then challenging it based on reality. Fortunately most entrenched thinking has a flawed premise of previous experience that is not really relevant.

But beware of your own entrenched thinking first. Programme and Project teams are prone to developing their own entrenched position and can become deaf to their own flawed thinking.

Typical Comments

Some typical comments we can hear are:

- This didn't work last time.
- We haven't got the time.
- This only solves part of my problem.
- There are too many changes happening at once.
- This doesn't help me much.
- I don't trust IT.
- You are the umpteenth person to analyse us.
- Nothing ever really changes.
- The project is pointless/wrong.
- We'll do it because we have to.

Some of these comments are by cranky Characters, some are entrenched thinking and some are valid. We have to work our way through this sea of negativity to find the valid feedback, break the entrenched thinking and manage the resistance.

Feedback vs Resistance

Once again, managing you is essential. This sort of commentary is common and frustrating.

Interestingly a lot of these types of comments are not resistance. Resistance usually comes in the form of avoidance, disinterest or deep cynicism. At least tough comments are out in the open and we can speak to each rather than behind the scenes commentary or disinterest that undermines what we are trying to achieve.

I prefer to deal with a tough comment than silence.

And some of the comments are really more about Change Fatigue than any resistance to your specific change. To be fair, many changes have been handled poorly and we are testing people's patience.

But the easiest way to separate feedback and resistance is to listen. Most people want to be helpful, succeed in life, be part of a team and be heard and respected. Quite often once they have aired their resistance they talk themselves into commitment.

Not for the Faint Hearted

I often tell people that managing change successfully is not for the faint hearted. We're part of a somewhat discredited discipline and our en masse track record is dismal. The business are fed up with us and despite large investment we don't seem to have our own skills and capabilities in order.

And yet somehow we still have to front up to the business and the Stakeholders and assure them we can make it happen.

And the truth is we can and we will but we still have more to learn.

About Miragroup

Miragroup are a small team of Programme and Change Management specialists. Our highly experienced and senior team have experience working with Government and Commercial organisations in UK/Europe, North America and Pacific Asia.

We have been in business since 1995 and based in the UK since 2000 providing a range of services to assist organisations to both deliver change and improve their internal skills.

With our deep specialist skills we are able to adapt our capabilities to serve any clients requirements and offer a wide range of services including:

- Programme Management
- Project Management
- Change Management
- Solution Design
- Specialist Resourcing
- Methods Design
- Training & Up Skilling

Our methods have been developed and tested in organisations globally and also applied in a wide range of Programmes and Projects across all industry sectors.

Most recently Miragroup have developed a series of capability workshops for Programmes, Projects, Business Analysis, Change Management and Project Management. These workshops are used by the Civil Service and Commercial organisations and form part of the Cranfield University MSc.

For more information about Miragroup please link to their methods based website, www.miragroup.co.uk.