

The Challenge of Change

Behavioural scientist, Robin Stuart-Kotze wrote “Companies change the way they operate when the people in them change the way they behave”. On the surface that might make the task of corporate change seem an awful lot harder; instead of changing this single, impersonal entity, we have to change people with all the potential difference and resistance that implies. However, by and large you can’t change people, you can only change the environment around them and then people change themselves. Fortunately, altering the environment to make this happen can be quick and relatively mechanical.

As Stuart-Kotze’s comment implies, change in this context is not specific to any one organisation; it has a universality about it that is above sector or process. As such it cannot be about changing things. It is about the ability to change rather than any physical act of change. In that context, it has two dimensions which everything else flows from

1. The ability of the individual to always respond to any issue in an immediate and appropriate way.
2. The collective ability to move quickly and in unison whenever necessary.

Getting the business to the point where it can be steered as if every element of it was connected to a joystick is the challenge. It has to be tackled in layers and the process has to start with the managers. They are the mechanism that connects the strategy and its achievement. When they change, it makes change in the rest of the company simpler, quicker and more certain.

For many organisations, the immediacy of that joystick response might seem a long way off; decisions can be slow and uncertain, implementing any strategic shift can take a lot of time and effort, and every manager can be heavily and continuously involved in fire fighting. There is not enough time to be different. However, in most cases, the fundamental mechanics of management are sound, the problem is the extent to which they are implemented. This manifests itself in a number of ways

- Operational objectives at the front line of management are not always clear or properly synchronised with the overall corporate objectives.
- The evidence based approach is limited. This in turn limits the operational awareness and causes an over reliance on anecdotal evidence
- Internal, operational communication is flawed and there is an exposure to bias or personal agendas.
- The management structure becomes somewhat compromised with a subsequent dilution of accountability and responsibility.

This is not necessarily fatal but it is clutter and fog that obscures reality and undermines the ability to respond. It also encourages the fire fighting habit and fosters “dropdown” management where managers continuously manage at a level below their role and below their capability.

The two key mechanical improvements that can address these issues are operational planning and operational information.

- Fully deployed operational planning means going far enough to ensure that every manager understands what they need to do and has a viable strategy in place. This need not be complicated. It means that, as the core objectives ripple down through the management structure, each manager proposes how they will achieve their objectives before they accept their targets and pass them on down. This does a number of things; it clarifies whether or not they understand what they are being asked to do, it gives Manager A an opportunity to assess Manager B's approach at the outset, and it bench tests the overall objectives. It also defines the roles and responsibilities more clearly in terms of tasks and determines the information and measurement required in a much more precise way.
- Fact based feedback should provide all the information each manager needs to achieve their objectives. This should not only provide a continuous and independent stream of operational facts, it should also be structured to provide a radar for problems and issues and should be used to prompt where action or intervention are required.

Every organisation plans and feeds back to a greater or lesser degree but there is a tipping point that only a relatively small number reach. When applied to the proper extent, planning and feedback become game changers; they allow managers and management click together like Lego. They provide the mechanism and the anchor through which the individual and collective change can be achieved. The big advantage is that the change agents are part of the day-to-day fabric of the business so that achieving the difference can be a gradual, but quick transition. It allows the change be rippled down from the top in a logical, progressive way.

- The availability of facts changes the nature of meetings and it speeds up and improves decision making. Managers increasingly think in terms of impact.
- When problems are pushed to the surface at the earliest possible point, and their true nature is clearly identified, the focus shifts from discovery to resolution. Failure to address issues becomes clearly evident.
- The combination of task defined roles, and relevant operational facts, fosters accountability and responsibility. It supports a safer, higher level of autonomy so that the management structure moves closer to an almost federal model. This is an important component of the collective agility.
- The need for individual support shows up in a clear and unambiguous fashion. When the requirement for training, coaching or other such interventions is clear to all involved, the benefit of the intervention will be faster, greater, and more directly related to the underlying problem,
- When a manager becomes confident that they can always have access to the facts they need, that they, and all those around them, understand what they need to do, their approach changes. When they have the confidence that the feedback structure will prompt them when they miss the need for action or intervention, the change is accelerated. They don't need to fire fight to the same extent; they can directly address and resolve the underlying problems rather than just manage their impact.

Things like this are formative; they change the individual manager and also change the management as an entity in its own right. It becomes real "on the job" learning. The approach is top down and the focus for any individual manager is on their tasks or objectives. At the same time, the process is

building and reinforcing generic management skills. These include an evidence based approach, problem solving, objectivity, autonomy, accountability and responsibility, real delegation and so on.

The process follows a number of simple rules that makes change quicker and more likely to stick.

- At all times it works out from the current reality, there is no quantum leap involved. The difference isn't what you do, it's the extent to which you do it.
- The process is part of the daily habit at all stages.
- Change can be quick, shallow, and incremental with continuous gain targets.
- Both recognition and consequence, essential components of autonomy, become a logical and natural part of the equation.

Wiktionary has one definition of osmosis as "picking up knowledge accidentally without actually seeking that particular knowledge". That's a good way to learn. If the mechanics of management are appropriately structured, managers can learn and develop by doing their job. Change becomes much less of a challenge.