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Effective change management training

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Change management training has become a staple item in the learning and development diet. But how can it be made as effective as possible?

Change is rapidly becoming the new status quo. Where a company used to introduce a major change programme every 10 years, it now announces a few months of retrenchment once a decade. According to the Chartered Management Institute, 89% of managers experience some form of organisational change every year.

This state of permanent revolution brings dangers. Jane Turner, associate dean at Newcastle Business School, says: "If change is managed badly, people disengage, and this can severely damage productivity."

So the ability to cope with and manage change has consequently become highly prized among executives.

Successful changes

Companies want to hire people at all levels who have the skills and knowledge needed to manage change, and they increasingly accept that they need to provide training to those who lack those skills and knowledge. Today's organisations are therefore increasingly interested in finding out what training will help their executives manage change most successfully.

Broadly speaking, training needs to happen at three levels.

As Gary Ashton, director of change management consultancy ER Consultants, puts it: "Change will affect people at every level within the organisation. The groups that need to be considered are the business leaders, potential change agents down the line as well as the people on the ground. Each will require a different approach."

New skills

Any new organisational structure will almost certainly require people on the ground to acquire new technical skills. Organisations will presumably be able to provide staff with these essential skills and knowledge. If not, they may need to rethink their overall change strategy.

These are the organisations that make a change for which they have the technical training capabilities, but still find themselves struggling with recalcitrant staff, inefficient processes and confused managers. They need to provide training to the directors who generate and lead the changes, and the managers who implement it.

Petra Wilton, head of public affairs at the Chartered Management Institute, says: "The first step in any change management programme should be to assess the capability of the organisation's leaders to envisage, design and lead change. If there are gaps in the team's ability, then they must be filled by recruitment or training."

"This type of training is at the heart of leadership development training. You can train someone to develop and implement a clear vision. Yet too few organisations take this first stage seriously enough. They begin with a flawed, ill-considered vision and then wonder why it doesn't worked out," she adds.

Once the senior management has decided on the strategy, the baton usually passes to the middle management to implement it. When, in 2005, the Natural History Museum wanted to make the public more aware of it as a scientific research institute as well as a visitor attraction, it established a change management programme in which middle managers were vital.

Leonie Lupton, head of HR, learning and development, says: "In the museum, the middle managers – mostly our curatorial employees – will be implementing the change and having to deal with the emotional responses of their teams, some of whom have been doing their jobs behind the scenes for 30 years."

Project management skills are essential for proper implementation of any complex programme. Any organisation undergoing major change should equip its middle managers with the skills to help them realign systems and relationships according to the schedule and within the allocated budget. Crucially, they need to do this without impairing client relationships, and while keeping employees on board.

It is a tall order, and Lupton explains how the museum is rising to the challenge: "There are three stages to our change management training. In a one-day workshop, we introduced managers to key concepts of change such as Kubler Rosse's Transition Curve. Through a series of team events and workshops using action learning techniques, we are managing change as it happens. This is an ongoing process. There will be much more fall-out once the changes are actually implemented and it's important to offer training and support throughout."

Emotional impact

There seems to be a consensus among most of those involved in change management training that the main area in which companies fail to provide adequate training is in helping managers to understand the emotional impact of change.

To highlight the importance of understanding emotions, Andy Fleet, director at Oakridge Consultancy, points to research on miners in the 1950s: "One group was told what was going to happen, another was consulted and a third was given a great deal of involvement in designing the change. The differences over the coming months in absence, retention and productivity were startling. No prizes for guessing which had the best reaction."

Fleet works with organisations such as AstraZeneca and the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority training managers on how to understand and react to employee behaviour in the wake of change. In 2006, another of his clients, Unilever, implemented a major pan-European change initiative.

He says: "We ran workshops for leaders in which we showed models of typical reactions to change, and role-played likely scenarios. This helped them to manage their teams more effectively during a time of widespread uncertainty."

With so much training to do, it is important to start early. However, **Peter Binns, at Bath Consultancy Group**, warns against moving too early. "Timing, phasing and focus are also critical. A mistake that is often made is talking about the changes too early, before real engagement is possible. This just adds to people's anxiety. Instead, work on very specific issues that are current."

But, while training is critical, it should never be seen as a panacea. Scott McKenzie, senior consultant in change and internal communications at Hill & Knowlton, says: "The most common pitfall is believing that somehow a day's training prepares someone to be a change manager. To be truly effective there has to be an ongoing level of support ranging from line manager coaching to peer networks and practical tools."

Martyn Sloman, adviser at the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, says: "Successful change requires a long-term commitment to an understanding of the psychological contract between employer and employee. Remedial, last minute change management training doesn't work."