

**WHITE PAPER**

# The Psychology of Successfully Delivering Organisational Change



*Setting direction,  
even before  
the destination is  
fully understood...*

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## A note to fellow change leaders

“ This white paper on the **Psychology of Successfully Delivering Organisational Change** was inspired by some recent work with clients around the role that psychology plays in the change process. Much of the thinking behind all current change implementation strategies is influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by key research findings on the subject – some of it stretching back 60 years – and we thought it might be useful to revisit this and assess its relevancy for organisations now.

So this paper represents a comprehensive and thorough review of not only the academic research on the psychology of delivering effective change in organisations but also selected peer review field work – and our own change data and research with our clients. I'd like to thank my colleagues – **Audra Proctor, Head of Learning, Research and Development at Changefirst** and **Roberta Gardner, Independent Chartered Psychologist** – for their hard work and commitment in conducting the research and preparing the paper.

I hope you find it interesting and practically useful in your organisation. ”

*David Miller*

**Chairman & Founder, Changefirst**

## Introduction

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*Despite the best efforts of change leaders less than 40% of change initiatives actually deliver what they promise*

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Getting organisational change delivered in any organisation requires either the commitment or compliance of the people inside the organisation in question. However, despite the best efforts of senior leaders who have invested a significant amount of time, effort and money on strategies and solutions – the majority of independent research continues to point to **less than 40%** of change initiatives delivering on their promise.

One of the key challenges for change leaders is how to set a course for change – and gain the commitment and support of people inside the organisation – when the sheer pace, scale and complexity of change often mean the end destination is not yet fully understood.

The psychology of organisational change has a key part to play in this process.

At an organisational level people want a two way dialogue with leaders who are credible, transparent and provide visible support for change initiatives. Leaders who create the right climate for sustainable change by putting in place the right kinds of rewards and incentives required – and are mindful of the impact of the organisation's track record of change.

## Introduction

This leadership of change also has to cascade down to a work unit level via managers and supervisors who can build mutual trust and confidence in their people and build psychological safety for them, encouraging them to take a participative role in the process rather than being passive bystanders.

And at an individual level people need to perceive themselves as having a degree of control over the change process and see how their jobs can be both challenging and satisfying in future due to the change. As well as being afforded the time and resources needed to make the change happen while still managing business as usual.

# Why look at the psychology of successfully delivering organisational change?

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*The majority of research going back 30 years from Gartner, Business Intelligence and others including Changefirst points to less than 40% of changes actually being delivered*

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Organisational change, as the name suggests, is the term used to describe the technical, structural and strategic shifts an organisation needs to make to continue to survive, grow and evolve through the different phases of its life-cycle.

It describes the coordinated efforts of a wide range of people at all levels in the organisation, who are collectively working to achieve the same set of outcomes.

As such, organisations generally know what they must do to meet their objectives and why change is important at a particular time. Senior leaders invest a significant amount of time, money and effort on the technical aspects of change. Building strategies, developing high quality change solutions and detailed action plans for their deployment. Yet, the majority of independent research going back thirty years (from sources such as the *Gartner Group* and *Business Intelligence* to name a few) continues to report that less than 40% of change initiatives actually deliver what they promised.

This paper on the **Psychology of Successfully Delivering Organisational Change** takes a closer look at the impact that emotions have on change at organisational, work unit and individual levels. It explores the underlying psyche and essential nature of change inside an organisation, by drawing on a combination of many years of academic research, our own change data and field research from our work with clients.

## Setting direction, even before the destination is fully understood...

The increasing pace, scale and complexity of change means that leaders are often required to set a change course for the organisation even before the destination is fully understood. More often than not, the organisation faces the dual challenge of managing 'business as usual' while, at the same time, looking to transform things for tomorrow.

However, major change of this nature often requires a process of movement through a series of distinctive phases that each requires a concerted effort and the allocation of a considerable amount of time and resources. These phases correspond with *Lewin's (1952)* three-phase change process of *unfreezing, moving and freezing*.

- In the *unfreezing* phase, what people need is to be made to feel sufficiently dissatisfied with the status quo, such that there is actually a sense of urgency (*Kotter, 1995*) to move away from the comfort it brings.
- In the *moving* phase, people's support is actively sought (*Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999*); when people are invited to participate and feel that their ideas and concerns are taken seriously.
- The *freezing* phase is where the 'new ways' of working have become the norm, with a level of comfort and control returned to the individuals involved. This is what *Jaffe, Scott and Tobe (1994)* refers to as the commitment that takes place as organisational members embrace the future.

## Setting direction, even before the destination is fully understood...

However, if on the one hand there is no clearly defined future to embrace, and on the other there is a strong feeling of comfort, control and success (limited though it may be) in the current state of the organisation, it is difficult for people to separate their human emotional response to change from the cognitive, organisational change process going on around them.

In fact, many scholars (specifically *Lazarus, 1991; Bartunek, 1993; Damasio, 1994; Frijda, 1996; Huy, 1999; Seo, 1999*) have stressed that organisational behaviour and change are strongly influenced by individual emotions, which are actually needed for perception, decision-making and for people to behave differently in support of change.

*Organisations  
are patterns of  
human interactions  
and organisational  
change starts with  
new behaviours  
and decisions  
by individuals*

# Organisations are made up of people and emotions

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*Analysing the individual psychological aspects in change success or failure is just as important as organisational factors*

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Many studies in organisational change trying to explain why change efforts succeed or fail tend to use the *organisation* as the appropriate unit for analysing the results of a change programme, rather than the *people inside the organisation*.

So, while the vast majority of organisations may report that they are delivering change on time and within budget, the research and our own work with clients reminds us that what's happening with people inside organisations is very different. In fact, *people's individual commitment to change, which is necessary for change success, is actually difficult to build and sustain*.

*Huy (1999)* stresses that people being affected by change can be quite single-minded in their consideration of that change - their primary interest being to determine whether the new situation is to be a threat or a benefit to their own, personal well-being.

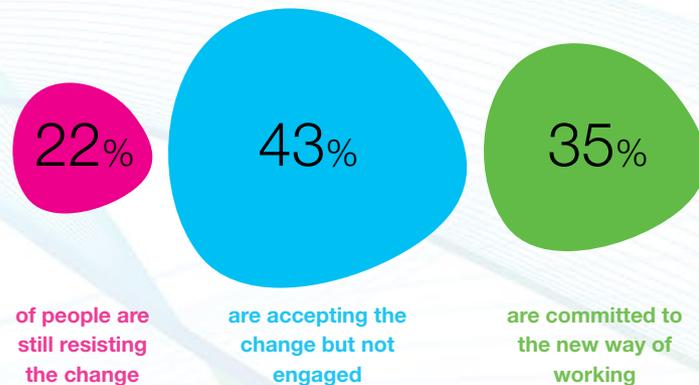
So what are the implications for the organisation?

- If individuals evaluate the potential consequences of change as harmful, they are likely to be non-receptive to it.
- However, if they see change as a manageable challenge they will be better attuned to it emotionally.
- Real success rests in the hands of groups of people who are able to take concrete action in the direction of change because they are emotionally receptive to it.

# Organisations are made up of people and emotions

So there is undoubtedly an emotional element underlying the change process in organisations and those emotions make people react very differently to change as shown in **Figure 1** below.

**Figure 1:** 6-9 months after change implementation\*



\*The data in **Figure 1** is taken from **Changefirst's Change Legacy Assessment database** and considers how individuals are behaving 9 months after a specific change. It is cumulative data collected from 2005 to date from change managers who attended our change training workshops and is a composite of nearly 2,400 participants from over 52 companies in 30 countries around the world.

What is interesting about the data is that it shows that **less than 40% of individuals** are committed to the new way of working.

Each working day, individual employees like the ones in the research above get together in an organisational context to solve problems and achieve their objectives – but all with different levels of commitment to the various organisational change tasks they are involved in.

In other words, organisations are patterns of human interaction and are not entities that exist independently of the people that constitute them.

# Organisations are made up of people and emotions

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*People's readiness to change depends on beliefs about how those close to them in the organisation will respond*

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*Edmonson and Woolley (1999)* stated that organisational change starts with new behaviours and decisions on the part of individuals, who are influenced by “proximal” interpersonal factors as well as by organisational-level factors. In addition, different parts of the organisation can react differently to the change initiatives.

According to *Armenakis et al. (1993)* this is no different from what happens with social change or individual change. And, as *Individual Differences Theory* clarifies, the response of one individual may diverge from that of another because of differing cognitive structures – i.e. specific individuals may react differently to the same message.

So, the essential nature of change inside organisations looks to be operating at three levels:

- the **individual** level
- the **unit or team** level
- and, the **organisational** level

*Vanderheyden and Ven den Broeck (2002 - 2011)* propose that these levels can have a cumulative effect on people's commitment to organisational change, and its ultimate success. For each level, they selected a number of valid and measurable variables (*or factors*), based on a theoretical relationship between that variable and commitment to change.

We take a closer look at these *factors* in the next section.

*Trust in fair  
leadership,  
rewards and  
change legacy  
are all key*

# Organisational level factors contributing to the psychology of change

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*Mutual trust and participation are essential*

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## Trust in fair leadership

Trust in fair leadership or '*Procedural Justice*' as termed by *Kim and Mauborgne (1993)* is defined as the extent to which the top management's decision process is judged to be fair and effective. Work by *Schneider, Brief & Guzzo (1996)* has indicated that the decision process of top management plays an important role in the creation of a climate and culture for sustainable organisational change. Mutual trust and the possibility for people to participate in the change decision process are central in the development of a change-friendly climate.

*Conger (1998)* has also found that leaders who are considered to be trustworthy and fair establish credibility – and this credibility is a prerequisite to successfully introducing organisational change.

In addition, establishing and communicating the need for change and the vision for the way forward is one of the first important steps for top management to follow in implementing change (*Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Galpin, 1996; Judson, 1991; Kotter, 1995*). Organisational members will not take change efforts seriously, if top management does not actively support the change process in their words and actions.

In fact, *Vanderheyden and Ven den Broeck* propose that this perception of two-way communication, consistency of decisions across subsidiary units, transparency of decisions and the possibility to challenge top management views is positively related to emotional involvement and commitment to change.

# Organisational level factors contributing to the psychology of change

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*Incentives and rewards can determine a climate for sustainable change*

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## Incentives and Rewards

Trust in top management's decisions, how incentives and rewards are handled will also determine a climate for sustainable change (Schneider, Brief & Guzzo, 1996). In 1990, Senge spoke of organisations where risk taking was rewarded as stimulating learning and innovation. Two years later, Burke & Litwin provided a model of organisational performance and change where the organisation's reward process was considered the most important subsystem of a corporation's policies and procedures.

Furthermore, Vanderheyden and Ven den Broeck propose that people do what they get rewarded for doing, and reward systems that focus on risk taking and pay-for-performance are positively related to emotional involvement and commitment to change.

## History of change

People's readiness to change is also influenced by the organisational track record of successfully implementing major organisational changes (Schneider, Brief & Guzzo, 1996).

If organisational changes have failed in the past, people will be resistant towards new change initiatives. **Figure 2** overleaf summarises comprehensive data held by the polling organisation Gallup, which suggests that in an *average organisation*, the ratio of engaged to actively disengaged employees is only 1.5 : 1. In stark contrast, *world-class organisations* record an engagement ratio near 8 : 1.

# Organisational level factors contributing to the psychology of change

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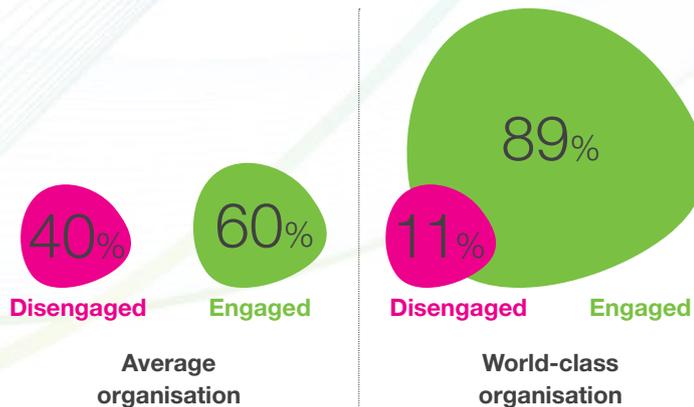
*People's readiness to change is influenced by the organisational track record in change*

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The relevance of this data is that:

- One of the major influencing factors in employee engagement is the degree to which people see their organisations successfully implementing change.
- Being part of changes that constantly fail or are only partially implemented, demotivates people and saps their energy, focus and excitement for new changes.
- The higher the pre-existing level of cynicism about organisational change, the more executives need to confront and discuss previous failures before moving ahead with a new change initiative.

**Figure 2: Ratio of engaged to disengaged employees\***



*Relationships  
between  
subordinates  
and immediate  
supervisors  
and managers  
are crucial*

# Work unit level factors contributing to the psychology of change

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*If subordinates believe that managers cannot be counted upon to provide help, then employees will find it very difficult to cope with changes productively*

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## Psychological safety

Psychological safety is defined by *Edmondson & Woolley (1999)* as the individual's perception that one's work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, and that those close to them will not reject or embarrass those who make mistakes or speak up about difficult issues.

Trust in top management and reward systems that stimulate risk taking behaviour at the organisational level, must be complemented with mutual trust and confidence in the subsidiary work units. The research stressed that, although peers' attitudes directly affect psychological safety, relationships between subordinates and immediate supervisors and managers are crucial. If subordinates believe that managers cannot be counted upon to provide help, then employees will find it very difficult to cope with changes productively.

As such *Kotter (1995)* stressed that successful major changes need a powerful 'guiding coalition'. This 'powerful coalition' goes beyond the support of top management. Groups that lack strong line leadership never achieve the power that is required (*Kotter, 1995*). Moreover, line managers have to translate the general goals of organisational change efforts into specific departmental objectives that their people can identify with (*Kanter et al., 1992*).

Organisational transformation also often implies a change in the tasks of line managers, their personal leadership style and their social relations with subordinates. The leadership style of line managers during the change process remains an important element to be monitored during the change process. Their active support, their ability to confront the new challenges and their ability to support subordinates adequately are all crucial elements of this line leadership.

## Work unit level factors contributing to the psychology of change

In fact, *Vanderheyden* and *Ven den Broeck* proposed that psychological safety, and the support for line managers, is positively related to people's emotional involvement and commitment to change.

### Participation at work

Participation in general has always been considered a positive impact on attitudes to work and motivation (*Leana et al., 1990*). However, 10 years later in their study of organisational readiness for change, *Eby et al.* found good support for participation at work to be positively related to readiness to change. In other words, employees who perceive their work environment as highly participative are more likely to involve themselves in decisions relevant to a pending change effort.

Lack of participation and involvement is a major cause of disappointing results with organisational renewal (*McNabb & Sepic, 1995*). In their research about cynicism of organisational change, *Reichers et al. (1997)* also indicated “*employees must believe that their opinions have been heard and given careful respect and consideration*”, for them to see themselves as active agents and believe they have control over their environment and their personal successes.

# Individual level factors influencing the psychology of change

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*Perception of control is perceived as one of the most influential personal characteristics affecting innovative and change behaviour*

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## Perception of control

Perception of control, or a locus of control, is defined by *Rotter (1966)*, and his colleagues as, “*the perception by the individual of his or her ability to exercise control over the environment*”. Those with an internal locus of control see themselves as active agents and believe they have direct influence over their environment and their personal successes. Those with an external locus of control see themselves as relatively passive agents and believe that the change events in their lives are controlled by external forces and powerful others.

Several studies from *Boone, et al., (1996)*; *Brockhaus, (1980)*; *Van de Ven, et al., (1984)* have analysed the relationship between personal characteristics and entrepreneurship. In all of these studies, locus of control is perceived as one of the most influential personal characteristics affecting innovative and change behaviour. As such, *Vanderheyden and Ven den Broeck* proposed that internal locus of control is positively related to emotional involvement and commitment to change.

# Individual level factors influencing the psychology of change

## Job satisfaction

*Vanderheyden* and *Ven den Broeck* propose that people with a high job satisfaction are more motivated to support organisational changes, independent of the way in which these changes are introduced and implemented. Their trawl of the research, particularly from *Judge, et al., (1999)*; *Schweiger & DeNisi, (1991)*; *Wanberg, (2000)*, found that employees who find their jobs challenging and satisfying will have a positive attitude towards new changes.

# Individual level factors influencing the psychology of change

## Time and resource

Time plays a central role in at least two ways in the change process.

*Firstly*, implementation of change goes through different phases. Several models have described the different phases (*Judson, 1991; Kotter, 1995; Galpin, 1996; Armenakis, 1999; Isabella, 1990; Jaffe, Scott and Tobe, 1994*). These phases take time. Common to all the implementation models is the message that efforts to bypass these phases seldom yield a satisfactory result (*Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999: 303*).

*Secondly*, major change efforts demand hard work, permanent attention and perseverance. When organisational members are faced with too many changes at the same time, they cannot allocate their time properly to all of the changes and continue their daily tasks at the same time. There is not enough time to test the recommendations (*Galpin, 1996*) and to explore new behaviours (*Jaffe et al., 1994*). In the end, the change project fails and employees become cynical towards the announcements of new change projects (*Wanous, Reichers & Austin, 2000*). As such, *Vanderheyden* and *Ven den Broeck* proposed that time is positively related to emotional involvement and commitment to change.

*The extent to which individuals have a perception of control is positively related to their emotional involvement and commitment to change*

# Conclusion

## So what is the underlying importance of Psychology in Successfully Delivering Organisational Change?

Our key findings from this extensive review of the research are as follows:

- Whenever we want to get anything done in an organisation it requires either the commitment, or compliance, of people inside the organisation. However, despite senior leaders investing a significant amount of time, money and effort on the technical aspects of change – building strategies, developing high quality change solutions and detailed deployment plans – the majority of independent research going back 30 years continues to report that less than 40% of change initiatives actually deliver what they promised.
- The increasing pace, scale and complexity of change means that leaders are often required to set a change course for the organisation and manage the organisation through change even before the final destination is fully understood. This process involves creating a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo and highlighting the need to move away from the comfort it brings. However, the absence of a clearly defined future to embrace means that individuals find it difficult to change their behaviour to support the change.
- Change leaders need to work with people at different levels in the organisation to build their individual commitment to change which is necessary for change success – but difficult to build and sustain. There is undoubtedly an individual element underlying the change process in organisations and people react to it differently based on

## Conclusion

### So what is the underlying importance of Psychology in Successfully Delivering Organisational Change?

how they perceive the potential consequences of change and how their work colleagues will react – and this can differ markedly in separate parts of an organisation and between organisations with different levels of business performance.

- Our research clearly points to the fact that essential nature of the psychology of change inside organisations looks to be operating at three levels:

#### **The organisational level**

- In order to see a change initiative as something positive, and to gain their emotional involvement, people want a two way dialogue about change with effective and fair change leaders who are credible, transparent and provide support for the change in words and actions.
- How these leaders handle incentives and rewards will be a key factor in creating a climate for sustainable change in the organisation.
- People's readiness to change is also heavily influenced by the organisations track record of successfully implementing organisational change – or lack of it.

## Conclusion

### So what is the underlying importance of Psychology in Successfully Delivering Organisational Change?

#### **The work unit level**

- To create psychological safety, leadership of change needs to cascade beyond top management and be visible in the behaviour of line managers and supervisors in order to build mutual trust and confidence.
- People also want to be able to participate in the change process, with those who perceive their work environment as highly participative, more likely to involve themselves in the change effort.

#### **The individual unit level**

- Their perception of their level of control of the change process will influence whether individuals see themselves as active or passive agents of change within the organisation.
- They need to see clearly how they can be successful in the future, and how their jobs will be both challenging and satisfying in order to be motivated to support organisational change.
- Finally, people need to know that they will be afforded the time and resources to make a strong connection to the change – and also to manage their existing workload.

## A parting thought

Charles Fishman in his Fast Company 1997 article summarised the challenge well...

“ *If you read the academic literature, too often change comes across as a remarkably bloodless activity: establish a vision, find a mentor, design the program and paint by the numbers.*

*We interrupt this program to deliver a dose of reality: it doesn't work that way.*

*In the real world of change, leaders desert you, your staunchest allies cut and run, opposition comes from places you least expect, and your fiercest opponent can turn out to be your most vital supporter. In other words, when emotions are running high and the stakes are even higher, people act like people!* ”

**Source:** Charles Fishman, Fast Company 1997

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## About Changefirst

Founded in 1995, we help people and organisations implement change successfully. By using our own proven methodology, People-Centred Implementation (PCI®), we help organisations and project and change managers be successful in change by focusing on the effective engagement of people. Our change management experts have trained over 12,000 people in over 35 countries. Changefirst's clients include The Linde Group, Novartis, Initial Rentokil and Virgin Media. Changefirst is a registered education provider of PMI (the Project Management Institute). Our solutions are also designed to integrate with industry standard approaches including Six Sigma and PRINCE2.

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