

How to actively engage your people in organisational change





A note to fellow change leaders

“ A key building block when delivering successful organisational change is powerfully engaging your people in the change. When people are engaged in change they are more likely to be motivated to change and committed to the new ways of working – which enables the change to really stick. But how do you create this engagement?

In this short briefing paper we take a closer look at this including:

- considering how engagement creates motivation to change
- identifying the main components of an engagement process
- exploring how you can deliver this process

In each case we also take a look at what the most relevant and respected change research says on each of these key topics alongside our own data and experiences collected from our works with clients.

I hope you find the analysis useful. ”

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Engaging your people in a way that motivates them to change

A fairly standard definition of engagement is the self-motivation that comes from a person's involvement in, support for and satisfaction with something, such that they feel a sense of commitment and are moved to take action or perform in the service of that thing. Engagement processes are expressly designed to develop motivation to commit to a new change situation and performance in new ways. We have rarely seen commitment built without engaging people in some way or another – and without commitment the user adoption and behaviour change we need for change success is difficult to achieve and maintain.

At the heart of any discussion on engagement is the concept of motivation. By way of definition, to be *motivated* is to be moved to actually *do* something. This feeling of wanting to do something is derived from two places:

- 1. Intrinsic motivation** which comes from the interest, satisfaction and enjoyment that one feels that is likely to drive them to action on their own volition
- 2. Extrinsic motivation** which comes from value and usefulness a person places on an external goal – e.g. the reward one would get for doing something.

In the 1970's research from *Lepper, Greene & Nisbett (1973)* on Self Determination Theory evolved from studies comparing intrinsic and extrinsic motives, and from a growing understanding of the dominant role that intrinsic motivation played in an individual's behaviour. Self Determination Theory focuses on the degree to which an individual's behaviour is self-motivated; and with regards to intrinsically motivated actions, probably less visible at work. The concept here is that organisms

increase their options and choice by “*engaging in exploratory, playful and curiosity driven activity that extend and exercise their capabilities*”.

Studies have connected high levels of employee engagement to self-motivation and, in turn, to better organisational performance. UK researcher *Nancy Lockwood*'s work, published in *HR Magazine in 2007* found that employees with the highest level of commitment performed 20% better than their colleagues and were 87% less likely to leave their organisation.

4 key components of powerful engagement processes

In our view, four components of powerful engagement are **learning, involvement, rewards** and **communication**.

Effective communication during change gives people guidelines so they know exactly what is expected of them and how to focus their efforts for maximum success. The problem with communication in isolation is that it is often the only thing that leaders have been known to apply – and over use – when it comes to creating engagement. This over-use springs from a mindset that if you put a case as logically as possible then people, being rational will buy into it and take appropriate actions.

People involved in change become more committed to it because they feel a sense of ownership and control during change. In addition, feeling that there will be sufficient time to learn, and appropriate training during change gives people the confidence that the change is real and critical. This, coupled with rewards for working in the new way soon emphasises that continuing to stick to the status quo is unacceptable.

Let's now consider the four key components in more detail:

Learning

Most changes require new skills and attitudes that people need to learn; and by giving people enough time to learn you reduce change anxieties and allow individuals time to adjust and improve to the point where they no longer feel threatened by change.

Learning Theory (*Hull 1943*) suggests that people are motivated to act by physiological needs which are focused on competency, autonomy and relatedness. Competence refers to a person adopting as their own an extrinsic goal, because they feel they can be successful in achieving it. Research shows that people are more likely to adopt an extrinsic goal if they understand it and have the relevant skills to succeed at it. Support for competence (e.g. offering training, optimal challenge and feedback) facilitates internalisation of new skills.

Involvement

People value what they choose more highly over something given to them without their input. Plus, control matters and involvement can be a very powerful way to give people a sense of control.

In 1975 a famous study led by *Ellen Langer* demonstrated the importance of self-selected involvement. Researchers sold \$1 lottery tickets to a selection of participants. In one group the tickets were handed to the participants randomly while people in the other group were allowed to choose their own. A few days later, *Langer* returned to the subjects and asked to buy back the tickets. The ticket holders who had been given a random ticket were willing to sell their ticket, on average, for \$2. Those who had chosen their own ticket, on the other hand, wanted an average of \$9 for their \$1 ticket. *Langer* attributed this to the illusion of control caused by “*an expectancy of a personal success probability inappropriately higher than the objective probability would warrant*”.

Vanderheyden & Ven den Broeck (2002 – 2011) reviewed the process literature in search of the variables most likely to be related to change commitment. On the basis of this review they identified four variables; support of top management, line leadership, time and participation.

Lack of participation 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)* indicated that employees must believe that their opinions have been heard and given careful respect and consideration. More substantive forms of participation in the change process (i.e. shared decision-making) tend to be associated with higher commitment.

Communication

The primary purpose of communication in change is to create clarity – ensuring that everyone at least understands what is to be achieved. Well planned communication can help people feel positive about the change and lessen the impact of resistance. However, the reverse is also true as poorly planned or executed communication will cause or heighten resistance.

In order to participate in change, employees must have access to the necessary information. *Kotter (1995)* stressed the importance of credible and timely information to capture the hearts and minds of employees. He advocates that Change Agents must prevent employees getting their information through the grape vine, and as supported by *Reichers et al.(1997)*, lack of information and rumours make it easier to conclude that a change effort is failing, and actually decreases the commitment of employees to a change process.

Research has also found that for leaders to be seen as effective at disseminating formal, quality information is itself an important variable during planned change efforts. *Fidler & Johnson (1984)* maintain that employees' ultimate acceptance of an innovation "*often rests on the extent to which communication can act to reduce uncertainty by ameliorating such factors as risk and complexity*"; and communication about change from organisational leaders can:

- decrease uncertainty and increase understanding about the change (*Armenakis et al., 1993; Lewis & Seibold, 1996; Washington & Hacker, 2005; Allen et al., 2007*)

- help reduce anxiety about change (*Miller & Monge, 1986; Smeltzer, 1991; Washington & Hacker, 2005*)
- decrease negative feelings about the change effort, including cynical expectations that the initiative will fail (*Washington & Hacker, 2005*)
- lower resistance while increasing participants' willingness to implement the planned change (*Washington & Hacker, 2005; Lewis, 2006*)

Rewards

Most change initiatives require extra efforts from people to establish new goals and different ways of working. Therefore, we should reward behaviour change, milestone achievement, active involvement in change and the willingness to pilot new approaches to work. We also need to send a strong message that old ways of working and resisting change will not be rewarded.

The essential nature of change inside organisations looks to be operating at three levels:

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

And for each level *Vanderheyden & Ven den Broeck (2002-2011)* selected a number of valid and measurable variables (or factors), based on a theoretical relationship between that variable and commitment to change. One of the organisational level factors is rewards. How incentives and rewards are handled will 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. Bringing this all together, *Vanderheyden & Ven den Broeck* proposed 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.

Keeping people engaged throughout change

You need a variety of methods to engage people with the ability to draw on different engagement processes at different parts of the change – e.g. rewards can be wasteful if given too early in the change process; learning needs to be offered to people when they are ready to learn and can benefit from the investment.

There are some interesting relationships between the different variables identified as eliciting, sustaining or enhancing people's motivation to act during change.

Ryan & Deci's Cognitive Evaluation Theory (1985) propose that rewards, communication and learning help feelings of competence. However, feelings of competence will not enhance people's intrinsic motivation to act unless they are accompanied by a feeling of autonomy which would typically come from involvement or participation. So, people need to feel increased competence and self-determination (increased autonomy) if their intrinsic motivation to act is to be sustained.

Conclusion

Engaging people in change creates the self-motivation needed for people to begin to work in new ways. In this article, we looked at four key processes that can be used to develop engagement – learning, involvement, rewards and communication. Each of these processes is most effective at differing stages of the change – and when the individual is ready for them. Using a variety of the processes keeps people engaged throughout the change, which builds commitment and leads to successful change delivery.

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