# How well are you positioned to deliver change successfully?

# HRCubed

This paper is intended to share an approach used to clarify where an organisation is in relation to the changes it's proposing to make. It will do this by exploring 6 key questions which have proven to be revealing at showing the context of the change along with the readiness and maturity of the organisation.

Organisations, like people, are idiosyncratic. Terms like 'readiness', or even 'success', are loaded value judgements open to debate and disagreement. When faced with this there is a natural tendency to look for trends and indicators which will enable 'quick and dirty' assessments. The assessor looks for specific examples which have a higher than average likelihood of being indicative of readiness to succeed or otherwise.

Diagnostics and behavioural assessments are commonly used to achieve this, however, here we are exploring a questioning approach, or more precisely asking the right questions, of the right people, at the right time, in the right order.

Clearly questions can be utilised in many ways. Some to expose the individual being questioned. Some to demonstrate how smart the questioner is. Some to show support and offer up rehearsed responses. A surprisingly small number of questions fall into the final category, a genuine enquiry for information or enlightenment. This approach is intended to deliver understanding of your own or your Client organisations and their readiness to actively manage transformations plus the available skills and experience. It is important to say up front that this is not a methodology, or a framework, or a tool kit, or a one size fits all panacea. To be effective it must be practical and useful, however, it will always need to be modified by the context of the organisation and the people asking the questions.

Many frameworks have a questioning or 'discovery' phase during which they establish the context however it can be tempting to fit the answers to the methodology rather than the other way around, leading to some selective listening to the answer. A recent article by Boris Groysberg, Jeremiah Lee, Jesse Price and J. Yo-Jud Cheng[i] repeated the famous quote usually attributed to Peter Drucker, (although probably not his in origin), "Culture eats strategy for breakfast"[ii] . The Context of your organisation is more important and influential on the outcome than the calibre of leadership, brilliance of methodology, or even monetary spend.

Given this overarching factor rather than getting bogged down at the beginning a useful way forward is to start at the end.

## 1. So what are you looking to achieve?

Regardless of whether the intended changes are at the conceptual start, already fully developed, or even mid-flight when it comes to change programmes, understanding the point of the exercise can be very revealing. When senior stakeholders and even change practitioners find themselves unable to articulate a basic one or two line response which can give a clear and concise answer to the 'why are we doing this' question, it should be of deep concern.

The change could be part of a larger less well understood set of strategies or something requiring technical vocabulary which can be a challenge to boil down into a digestible statement, so it would be unwise to think that it's an easy fix. The responses however, often include 'deliver new system/tech/process X into the company by Y date for Z cost. All informative but not what was asked, which of course stimulates the follow up question, 'Why?'

It's not impossible to review the business case and a dedicated ROI document and still come away from the experience without clarity around the purpose of the change. It is important to identify the actual intended outcomes and not become fixated upon the deliverables. The deliverables should be there to enable the outcomes to happen.

It may be useful to follow up this initial question with some specific follow up questions:

Can you easily and clearly articulate the desired outcome(s)?

Can anyone else articulate the desired outcomes(s)?

Does what, and how, you deliver directly link to a business objective?

It may also be that during this process you discover that there are multiple versions of the answers. Flushing out the competing versions of the truth are also a vital part of the process. Depending upon the nature of those versions you may choose to co-opt them into a single over-arching vision particularly if they are not mutually exclusive, however that's not always the case and the final arbiter of which version is 'true' should be if it directly links to those business objectives you have identified. There is always the potential to go a little too far with this line of questioning however once you have tied the change activity into a business imperative and understood what the outcomes are expected to be, the answer to

the "why" question should be much clearer. As a change leader in order to enable change, regardless of what kind of change, a strong understanding about what it's intended to achieve is a necessity.

A final consideration should also be around how accessible you make this articulation. Over complexity confuses and disengages. Referencing specific stakeholder group metrics such as EBITDAR or Shareholder KPI's, or SKU throughput will resonate only with those who are familiar with them and understand their meaning. Over simplicity 'talks down' and suggests hidden detail. Terms such as 'profitability' and 'performance improvement' often fail to connect with the wider workforce because there appears little direct correlation to their own day to day experience.

## 2. What sort of impact do you expect this to have on your organisation?



Following up a set of challenging context questions with something a little more direct is a useful way of reassuring as well as enabling the people in the process to show their thinking to date. However as with most of the questions here it will also be revealing.

This question has a tendency to be swept away based on the individual's perception of their organisation. A CIO with a technology based implementation may well respond with 'minimal' as a conversation stopping statement. It may be that in the original business case 'minimal' disruption was stated as a way of reassuring senior execs with their hands on the purse strings. Another response is akin to denial. 'We won't know until we get there.'

Both of these responses are not uncommon however they suggest that little or no real analysis work has been done on who is going to be impacted or indeed what those impacts might be. For a number of reasons impact has a negative connotation and programme leaders like to group it with risk and not talk about it unless they absolutely have to. It is fair to note that denial is a leadership decision too. In those cases it is useful to follow up with questions that enable impacts to be seen in a different way. Moving the conversation around to talking about the impacts that the programme wants to make. Performance improvement, or cost reduction or a host of behavioural changes.

Will the proposed changes impact equally upon everyone?

Will we need to decommission existing processes or tools?

How will we know if the changes we deliver will lead to the intended outcome?

It should also be recognised that impact, as well as being negative or positive, can also vary depending upon point of view. A single event or planned change can therefore have multiple impacts so it is important to understand the organisational context and know whether the impact needs mitigating or promoting, or both.

When it comes to impact negative needs mitigating and positive needs promoting but you cannot do either unless you understand who is being impacted, how and when.

### 3. How engaged do you feel the organisation is with this programme?



We would normally associate engagement with understanding. The assumption being that in order to engage with a programme and the changes that follow, the organisation needs to understand those changes and this is the commencement of engagement. Engagement however does not necessarily always mean positive outcomes, indeed negative engagement with a programme can be extremely difficult to manage.

Often in answer to this initial question there is a base assumption about the organisation's engagement being good. There's often no real evidence for this 'feeling' or 'opinion' but success or failure of the entire project could well rest upon this. Big engagement events sometimes heavily funded at the start of a programme are viewed by some leaders as having banked credits with the organisation. The illusion being that engagement is like a fuel tank and once full can be relied upon to run along nicely until the next engagement event.

Although rare, it is not impossible to find organisations that have become so engaged in an event or a moment that the wider business suffers through neglect. Entire budgets spent on a launch event which nobody attends, or feedback channels which remain unused. You might see this reflected back to the organisation as a positive: low engagement = low levels of concern.

In some cases the drivers against engagement are actually driven by the programme itself.
It appears to be human nature to seek to simplify the complex initially and then complicate the simple overtime. This tendency seems to appear frequently in the way communications are prepared and published. Initially there is a tendency to make large scale events-based messages with big sweeping statements. Then slowly as the weeks and months pass the jargon and shorthand of 'project speak' drifts into the communications, they become opaque and eventually impenetrable to those not in the project.

It is, therefore, important to understand where in that cycle you are when you ask this question. In organisations that have been running a strong engagement process and are early on in the cycle there may indeed be engagement and potentially enthusiasm. Sometimes leaders remember this phase and when asked a question about engagement immediately assume that it's a finishing line, a check box achieved.

Another popular assumption is that engagement directly relates to communications. The more communications produced the more engagement is generated. This is sometimes translated into the philosophy of 'communicate, communicate, communicate' often put forward as the surest method to 'drive home' the messages which will encourage and ensure organisations exhibit the 'right' behaviours and engage with the programme. While this approach may drown out dissent there is little evidence that one-way broadcast communications are effective at enabling real engagement.

The Leadership philosophy of achieving engagement rests on the belief that individuals are strongly influenced by leadership behaviours. It becomes vital that leaders are seen to publicly endorse and engage with the changes. The inference is that it's the 'being seen' to buy in rather than actually buying in which matters.

Because it is problematic to assess engagement it can be helpful to follow up this general enquiry with more specific questions about engagement behaviours. Very often this will reveal if the organisation is actually only asking direct questions through surveys or focus groups. If a more sophisticated approach is adopted which focusses on what people do, as well as what they say, then the question moves to what are you learning and what will you do with that information?  Engagement remains the area where most change efforts founder. We can spend a lot of time asking people questions and people second guessing the answer they think we want to hear. We can also spend a lot of time watching what people do but without understanding why they do it.

In 2011 the UK Government formed and sponsored the Engage for Success movement[iii] specifically focussed on identifying the employee engagement actions taken by successful organisations. The four differentiating areas they settled upon were Strategic Narrative, Engaging Managers, Employee Voice and Integrity. While this may be fairly criticised as stating the obvious, the research behind it was compelling. Successful organisations strive to engage with their employees. The interpretation taken was that this was justification to focus on the individual and their relationship with the organisation. This strongly assumes that the individual acts in an isolated way balancing the specific pressures and drivers then choosing an equally specific course of action.

The problem with this individual-focussed approach is it ignores that organisations are groups. Indeed they may be a loose coalition of disparate groups and cells and that behaviours are driven by the group interpretation rather than the individual. It has been said many times that individuals are thoughtful and rational but crowds are stupid and irrational.

William H Whyte Jr[iv] coined the term 'Groupthink' in 1952 borrowing in part from George Orwells novel 1984 [v]. The term became a recognised psychological state and in subsequent decades research by social scientists, like Irving Janis, suggested that we all balance our thinking and can be swayed into behaving in ways which are directly not in our own self-interest, or indeed particularly rational.

Perhaps the most famous example of this focus on the individual change experience is the 'change curve'. Usually attributed to the Swiss academic Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969 ), the curve was actually intended to reflect the stages which an individual can go through following bereavement. Since then the change curve has been presented by senior consultants as the central basis for leaders to understand and predict how their organisations will react to business transformation events. This is an exceptionally poor predictor of group response and may well be a contributing factor as to why organisations become so frustrated with their apparent inability to manage change.

If in response to the engagement question you find the organisation is building an engagement strategy solely around the 'change curve' individualised approach it is an opportunity to move the conversation towards how effectively they feel they can individually tailor their support and responses across the wider organisation.

It can be beneficial to support the organisations thinking by follow on questioning:

How do you measure engagement in your organisation?

Do you have clarity around the behaviours you want to see as evidence of engagement?

What's your approach to strengthen engagement across the organisation?

The real bottom line is of course when it comes to engagement, a Client who is choosing not to actively manage engagement has adopted a high risk strategy and is a major red flag to successful change.

If you don't know what good looks like and have no plan to promote and generate it you probably have an organisational maturity issue.

## 4. How have these programmes worked out in the past.

The collective memory of an organisational change can be a fractured and multi-faceted thing. It totally depends upon the experience of those involved and how they were impacted at the time. It also develops an after-life - continuing to develop and change creating new truths or at least interpretations of the truth. A successful change which delivered the intended outcomes and mitigated the majority of the negative impacts could still be seen as a poor change programme because some subsequent event has changed the story.

Stories are powerful things. In a recent Guardian article former MP and now Director of the V&A Museum, Tristram Hunt, wrote an impassioned plea for the British to protect their own national story because it, "provides us with a collective memory; [vii] it gives us a sense of connection to place, time and community."

Many Change consultancies promote 'Story-telling' as an accepted and effective technique in engagement and communications programmes, however not all stories are good or indeed have happy endings. As organisations for better and worse seek to use the story as a way of creating a more change-accepting environment it must also be remembered that there may well be more than one version of the story in play. Credibility is critical to the success of the story and if the competing stories have a different level of credibility then the impact upon the level of acceptance within the environment can be very negative.

This question brings into play a number of cultural aspects which will be important in the shaping of the successful change programme. There is a leadership style which always seeks to draw the organisations consciousness to the positive. 'Extolling the virtues' or as Bing Crosby might sing in his 1944 classic:

*"You have to accentuate the positive. Eliminate the negative"*

There is a balance to be struck between this mind-set and the potential damage that ignoring failure can have on the credibility of both leadership and the communications messages. This desire to paint a positive picture regardless of the truth seems hardwired into senior leaders. It can be useful to ponder on where this can lead.



Not everyone will remember both of these individuals from relatively recent history, they were on the opposite side of a conflict but they provide excellent modes of approaches which are often repeated in organisation-wide change programmes.

On the left George W Bush, the former US President, stood on the deck of an aircraft carrier and claimed mission accomplished in the 2003 Iraq war. He was focussed on his legacy and needed to project a positive outcome with a clear end point.

Programme leaders and sponsors need to be wary of declaring victory and walking away, especially if the ongoing commitments remain or the outcomes have not actually been achieved. The organisation has to live with the reality and limp towards some form of resolution.

In President Bush's case his 'mission accomplished speech was followed by 11 years of violence and the Washington Post argues 400,000 deaths, leaving the next administrations to struggle with an unwanted US military presence in the middle-east. This was not the clear end point or the legacy he desired and although he had orchestrated a clear communication this wasn't enough to outweigh the evidence.

On the right, Muhammed Saeed al Sahhaf, is perhaps the 21st century's most infamous exponent of relentless positivism in the face of the truth of utter calamity. You may remember him better from his western nick-name 'Comical Ali'. [viii] Forced by circumstances to operate very much in the 'now' seeking to stiffen the resolve of the Iraqi armed forces and civilians to fight the Coalition Forces.

There are many corporate examples of organisations including HR teams and change teams,communicating, upbeat positive messaging in the face of the facts. Indeed in 1999 Phillip Morris commissioned a study on the economic effects of smoking in the Czech Republic. The company argued that premature deaths due to smoking were, on balance, a positive thing because the government saved money on health care and pensions.[xi]

In Muḥammad Saʿīd Al-Ṣaḥḥāf case during one of his final statements on the Ministry roof in front of the world press cameras he was claiming that the Americans had been thrown back from the suburbs of Baghdad with terrible losses when several US armoured vehicles appeared in the background. It is interesting to note that Muhammed Saeed al Sahhaf, when looking back on those days, describes himself as a 'Communications Professional.'

This isn't about the politics of course it's about the process - allowing a chasm to open up between reality and a story is loading up trouble for the future. The evidence suggests that reliance upon 'Spin' or 'relentless positivism' or eliminating the negative to smooth over a credibility gap, is at, best optimistic. These are all approaches which have a high failure rate.

Other high failure rate but frequently evidenced approaches would include:

The 'shouting loudest' styles of communication which focus on one-way broadcasting.

The drowning out communications style which buries stakeholders in communications

Both can be effective at silencing open debate but is probably going to drive dissent underground where it gains further credibility while the 'official line' bleeds credibility away. It can be true that a change event may need some 'enthusiasm and energy' via communications, but it remains clear that credibility is a critical factor in organisations' retelling of their own experiences.

The follow up to this question is about getting beyond the story and into the detail:

Have you successfully delivered change programmes in the past?

What made previous change programmes successful?

Did you achieve all the original outcomes you intended?

The questioning approach around the story of the organisation needs to uncover the real levels of skill and experience in successfully delivering a change into the organisation, and if it is actually still available to the organisation. Along with this a good understanding of what has worked well and by deduction what has failed or underachieved. Some level of understanding around why things were successes or not is also extremely valuable.

The experience of envisioning, designing, delivering, deploying and measuring the impact of a significant organisational change is a critical factor in understanding an organisation's maturity and readiness. Unfortunately experiences are not always learned from, and potentially more frustrating the lessons that are learned are not always the right ones. This is particularly true in terms of tactical approaches and techniques which have a limited shelf life and number of applications.

As change events seem destined to happen to organisations with increasing frequency, and organisations are naturally keen to point to past success as an indicator of future experience the expectation will be that storytelling, which is a recognised approach will increasingly be adopted.

If the answers to the questions raised in this section suggest that the organisation is building a credibility gap it should be regarded as a major concern and a strong indication of a troubled change programme to come.

## 5. Where have you got to so far?

This question helps to locate the obvious timeline of the programme, be it somewhere between initial set up and mid delivery. It also helps to clarify where the team, the leadership and the sponsors are with regard to maturity of approach. Most organisations understand the value of clarity of scope and business case development even if they sometimes find it painful to achieve.

This question is also intended to reveal the thought and effort that has gone into a business case, a budget, some clear desired outcomes as well as the measures that will confirm the change has been delivered and achieved its objectives. This would be indicative of a mature and well developed approach focussed on outcomes.

Indicators for low readiness include a focus on tool sets, or reliance on a particular philosophy of change. This can also be reinforced by a tendency to adopt a methodology or partner organisation which will reinforce the deliverable rather than the outcome, and often completely miss any fundamental issues that sit behind the requirement.

This is not necessarily a failure of leadership in the organisation and may have much to do with the wider industry and the way change has been marketed over the past 30 years. Whether it is called an 'Approach', 'Methodology', or 'Framework' these are the tools organisations use to deliver their programmatic changes. These tools have been created by large organisations, consulting houses, bespoke and niche organisations, academics, along with some 'self-styled' lifestyle gurus and a few charlatans too. Designed to provide structure and control and fit change into the other deliverables of a programme. The more proscriptive they have become, the more comfortable senior leaders are that they are managing the process.

Are the tools appearing to become more important than the outcome they are intended to deliver? Possibly. It does seem to be that the energy and effort required to operate and maintain these tools seems out of proportion. Weighty governance structures and oversight systems work together to provide organisations with programmatic total control. Is that control real or is it an illusion?

Many of the organisations who have admitted to failed change programmes had high quality best practice methodology in place. A poignant example being Queensland Government – Queensland Health Payroll implementation programme. The Australian Government review report states that it was, "the worst failure in public administration in Australia's history."[x] This programme was led from a technology implementation by possibly the most experienced and respected of the technology implementation organisations and very much a methodology and governance-led organisation.

It would seem that access alone to excellent methodology isn't enough to guarantee success so if organisations are using this as a form of insurance policy it's a strong indicator of a risk to the programme's success.

Does this mean that the stronger the focus on the intended outcomes and outputs early on is a better indicator for success than being drawn into the detail of the 'how'? Certainly we believe so.

## 6. Are you well positioned to deliver manage change successfully?
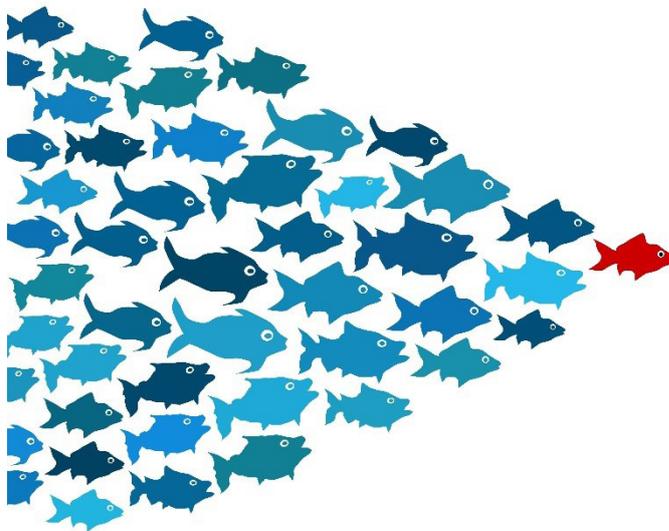


As we suggested at the beginning we have worked our way back to the big question.

Having asked, and listened to the responses, to the preceding questions you should be in a better position to have an understanding around what the change is, the relative maturity of the team focussed upon its delivery and a clearer picture of the readiness of the organisation to change.

You may conclude that some organisations should perhaps be looking at a more fundamental shift in their collective behaviours. This may lead them to embark upon leadership development and behavioural change interventions, such as building an emergent change culture, intended to develop the general ability of the organisation to cope and thrive in an inherently uncertain environment. That approach however isn't well suited to the actual hands on delivery of a specific outcome within a specified timeframe, or a change which requires a more structured approach. A factor that Deborah Rowland, one of the leading thinkers in emergent change, recognises in her writings in Still Moving when she states:

'For sure there will still need to be set piece change.'[xi]

Sometimes of course these conversations are happening after the change programme has begun. The train has left the station and your job is to catch it and get the driver back in the cab.  Even in those circumstances it still makes sense to ask these kinds of questions, and re-set the common understanding:

So what are you looking to achieve?

What sort of impact do you expect this to have?

How engaged do you feel the organisation is with this?

How have these programmes worked out in the past?

Where have you got to so far?

If you do find yourself becoming bogged down in the detailed comparison of the best approaches to adopt, or buried under a mantra of communications, or perhaps forced to look at every action as though the organisation was made up of entirely self-contained non-interacting individuals it can be useful to go back to the beginning and ask about what it was that you wanted to achieve, and understand the intended outcomes. Sometimes starting at the end makes absolute sense.

John Hunter 2018 HRCubed

i https://hbr.org/2018/01/the-culture-factor

ii Peter Drucker? Giga Information Group? Mark Fields? Eli Halliwell? Richard Clark?- https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/05/23/culture-eats/

iii Engage for success movement - http://engageforsuccess.org/

iv Groupthink - William H Whyte Jr -  Fortune Magazine March 1952
v 1984 - George Orwell – 1949 Secker& Warburg

vi Elisabeth Kübler-Ross – 'On Death and Dying' 1969

vii Tristram Hunt - https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/28/tristram-hunt-history-teaching-schools

viii https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Saeed_al-Sahhaf

ix https://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/18/news/tobacco-giants-analysis-says-premature-deaths-cut-costs-in-pensions-and.html

x https://www.exoplatform.com/blog/2017/08/01/5-of-the-biggest-information-technology-failures-and-scares

xi Deborah Rowland – Still moving- 2017 - Wiley Blackwell

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At HRCubed, we enable HR departments to achieve their transformation objectives by delivering a comprehensive process and change management programme. We are a technology agnostic consultancy and deliver impartial advice on using technology (existing or new) as an enabler to improve success. Technology is of course just one piece of the puzzle and if considered in isolation can have disastrous results. Strong and engaging HR leadership is the ultimate catalyst for success in an organisation - empowering employees and managers to be the best they can be. Combining the power of Organisation, Process and Technology together we can deliver success to your organisation that positively affects business outcomes.