A synopsis of:

The Psychology of Change Management

Emily Lawson and Colin Price
The McKinsey Quarterly, 2003 Number 2 Organization

Psychology theory shows that four things are needed to enable individuals to start, transition and complete a behaviour change. The basis of changing a mind-set is:

- The individual can see the purpose of the change and agrees with it
- The rewards and recognition system must support the new behaviour
- The individual must have the skills for the new behaviour
- Key people who are role models must be seen to model the new behaviour

To adopt new actions a person must align their beliefs. Once the personal beliefs accept that the new behaviour is desirable then action will follow. To bring people along with their beliefs they must see how they fit into the proposed change, what are the implications of both change and not changing. The story of the change: the drivers in the current situation, the role played by individuals and the new desired state after the changes is a key instrument in communicating and changing beliefs. Ideally this story is cascaded through the organisation so that each person can see their role in their context in their language.

Reinforcement systems are essential to any behaviour change, positive and negative reinforcement. Rewards for performing the new behaviours, measures on the outcomes of using the new behaviours, mechanisms to identify use of old behaviours and bring them to the persons attention. This requires very careful people management as well as carefully designed reward and recognition systems.

Providing the basic skills for new behaviour is down to training and education. Teaching is not enough; time must be spent on assimilating and practicing new skills. Kolb’s learning cycle must be completed before training can be said to have been completed. Having people explain how they will use new skills to effect the new behaviours is a strong mechanism to learn how to use them.

Role models must “walk the talk”. In any society the leaders (who are not always just the senior managers) set the social norms. Change can be silently sabotaged by people who ask for change then don’t do it first. Appropriate role models should be identified at all levels. A person’s manager is very important in this respect. Dissident voices can build up a resistance to change, these have to be sought out and attempts made to bring them onside. Sometimes putting dissidents outside is the only way forward.