

Training for change

Employees need to be trained in several key areas for change to be a success, says **Robert Cole**

Most organisations are facing a lot of change, much of it driven by external forces. Nearly all organisations are finding that achieving successful change is difficult – research suggests that three in five organisations failed to meet their targets for their change initiatives¹.

Why are organisations so poor at what is clearly a core activity for most of them? Turning the question around, would a 40 per cent success rate be tolerated in finance, marketing, operations or HR? This suggests that senior managers are not sufficiently focused on change, for instance having a chief change officer at board level (just like finance, marketing, operations and HR).

The answer seems to be that the capability for doing change is insufficient and the capacity for doing change is overestimated. In practice, organisations try to do too much change and poorly execute it. In the same report,

McKinsey showed a direct correlation between change capability and the achievement of targets for change. In my view, the organisations that fail to achieve their targets for change have put

in place barriers to success (or built in failure) whereas those who succeed have managed to avoid these barriers by building in success.

At the Centre for Change Management, we define success as delivering the benefits identified in the business case for the change, within the agreed costs and time scales. To ensure training contributes to that success, we have identified four critical factors:

- **timeliness** Providing training when it is needed
- **need and application** Skills and knowledge to solve current problems
- **commitment** From staff and their line managers to success
- **other contributors** Training is necessary but not sufficient.

Training for capability is essential to overcome the big barriers to change. The key training topics for change are:

- benefits management
- stakeholder engagement and communications
- risk management
- people change and soft skills
- the business change manager role.

Barriers to change

The lack of capability in change management is probably the main barrier. Capability means staff with the knowledge, skills and experience to deliver effective change across the organisation, especially across the whole management structure. It is usually the middle managers who either make change work or get in the way. Knowledge and skills can be acquired (most obviously through training) and experience can be nurtured.

Most organisations stretch their human capacity too far



by trying to do too much change at the same time. Most of us have agreed to do extra work to deliver some important goal, as long as the workload goes back to something we consider acceptable when the goal is achieved. Doing change as 'extra work' will quickly tire people out as change becomes the norm and the extra work becomes expected. This results in poor execution and, very often, new changes sweeping away recent ones that have not had time to have an effect, so are wasted.

Capacity is a real issue because humans have an ability to deliver extra capacity, sometimes. A good way to characterise available capacity for change in an organisation is:

- **cash** Every pound (euro, dollar, etc) spent doing change is not being spent on the frontline or is subtracted from profits, so it needs to be spent very wisely
- **every person working on change is not working on the frontline delivering services or creating profit** Demand for frontline activity means there is limited capacity in an organisation if it is to continue to satisfy its customers.

Serious barriers to effective change are the senior managers in an organisation. Research by Prosci² using a worldwide survey of 650 organisations in 62 countries identified **senior management sponsorship** as the most critical contribution to success. Thus a lack of senior management sponsorship is the main cause of failure. As the pace of change and the need for efficient change has grown, these senior managers have not learned new skills and do not really understand what they need to do to make change work. They need new skills to see how to make change successful and their role in achieving that success: being a change sponsor is a skill. It requires the ability to be accountable without doing day-to-day management. It also requires the ability to stick with the change right to the end and not move off onto other initiatives.

Our own experience in UK companies and local government shows repeatedly that the most senior managers very rarely take part in any change training, while expecting their middle managers to take on board development without any release from day-to-day pressures.

Many organisations use projects to deliver change, which is an unsuitable method. A project is an excellent vehicle for producing something that has not been produced before but it usually finishes producing before people-change in the business is complete and embedded, so the focus is lost and the business fails to complete the change. This is especially common in technology-led

change. A structured method is the third most important contribution to success identified by the Prosci research, which also identifies project management as not being enough.

An obvious solution to the project problem is to have a separate change team responsible for doing the people change and following through to achieve the benefits identified in the business case. This, of course, requires additional resources of knowledgeable and skilled people! Most organisations don't have change teams so rely on good luck to make the changes work.

A final barrier to success is a focus on activities and getting something (anything) done. This is a common problem in project-led change. The purpose of change, emphasised in a good business case, is to deliver benefits to the organisation. These benefits will be aligned to the organisation's strategic objectives. A change should be benefit-led. Every action in the change should be focused on delivering benefits. Without a focus on benefits there is no mechanism for making priority decisions or managing scope creep, both of which make change much less efficient.

Training to overcome barriers

Increasing knowledge and skills can be achieved through training. By focusing the training and development of staff on overcoming barriers to change effectiveness, an organisation can have the most impact on its capability to do change. We have identified four factors that will affect the impact training has on change capability:

- **timeliness** Training needs to provide knowledge and skills at the time they are required, due to the very fast loss of knowledge and skill after training when it is not used. It is not efficient to train staff on everything in a week-long course when they will only use a very small portion of the knowledge in the near future
- **need and application** Training should enable staff to practise skills and use knowledge to solve problems that are relevant to current needs. Staff will want to solve problems that they have →

Why are organisations so poor at what is clearly a core activity for most of them?

References

- 1 LaClair J A, Rao R P "Helping employees embrace change" *McKinsey Quarterly* (November 2002)
- 2 www.change-management.com/
- 3 www.best-management-practice.com
- 4 www.best-management-practice.com
- 5 www.change-management.com/cmma.htm

The capability for doing change is insufficient and the capacity for doing change is overestimated

identified as necessary to their success. They should use training as the chance to try out skills and knowledge in a safe environment in which mistakes can be made and lessons learned

- **commitment** Effective training will only occur if the participants are committed to it and to their personal improvement. Too many people turn up on training courses with no commitment ('I was told to come, I have no idea why') and no agreement with their line manager about how the training will be used and what impact is expected in return for the investment. Both the participant and his manager need to commit to the training
- **other contributors** Training is only one of the contributors to improving capability in an organisation. Other contributions need to be aligned and put in place so a self-reinforcing environment and culture of improvement is created. They include mentoring and coaching, leadership and appropriate motivation.

Qualifications are a good way of signalling a competence, as well as providing value to individuals in terms of career development. However, it is useful to look at the method of assessment used. A knowledge test at the end of a course can only show recent knowledge that is subject to rapid decay; even worse, an objective test often focuses on textual analysis and demonstrates no practical application at all. A vocational assessment, in which the candidate must apply the course knowledge and skills to a real situation, will demonstrate understanding, analysis and application. Relevant knowledge and skills are reinforced through use in the vocational assessment.

Topics for change

Based on the UK government's Cabinet Office best practice methods for project and programme management³, we have identified five key topics that are ideal for training in successful change:

- **benefits management** Benefits are the reason why most organisations do change. Benefits describe the advantages that the change will deliver to the organisation and are an important

part of the business case for it. Delivering benefits requires them to be identified, planned and actively managed if they are to appear in sufficient quantity to give success. Indeed, the definition of a successful change is that it delivers the promised benefits. A common characteristic of an unsuccessful change is that it costs at least as much as predicted (if not much more) and all the benefits have vaporised. Learning how to define, validate, map, plan, measure and realise benefits from change is important

- **stakeholders and communications** How often have you heard complaints about poor, or non-existent, communication during a change, or about resistance that is not overcome? This is a failure of stakeholder engagement and communication. Effective communication was shown in the Prosci research to be the second most important contribution to successful change. Every change has a plethora of stakeholders across the organisation and beyond. They need to be brought on board and, for some, taken on a journey that involves changing their behaviour. This is not easy but, with analysis, planning and a methodical approach, it can be achieved. The key to effective stakeholder engagement and communications is having clear objectives and testing regularly against them. You don't have to be an expert in communications to be successful; you do, however, need to know what you need to communicate, to whom and when
- **risk management** Risk management is a technique for analysing and managing uncertain events in the future and using the information to make informed decisions in the present. Doing change and people's response to change are prone to risks. Benefits are in the future and themselves subject to threats. Management techniques to identify, assess, manage and mitigate risks are essential to understand the nature of a change and its potential success or failure
- **soft skills** Change in an organisation only results from people behaving differently to the way they do now and each individual finding his own path to adopting these new behaviours. Understanding the way humans are motivated and adapt to change, and the individual differences humans have in learning and communicating, is key knowledge for anyone hoping to do change in an organisation. Skills in recognising differences in, and types of, people change and adapting the change approach to meet individual and group needs will ease the resistance, increase the impact of change and reduce the risk of failure
- **business change manager role** Having a team of people to facilitate change in an organisation,



who are more than the project, is a good idea. This is the basis of the Best Practice method for managing successful programmes⁴ and is also identified in the Prosci research. Understanding how such a team role fits with a project or programme, works with (say) a project manager, or what makes a good change team member needs to be worked out to enable the change team to be effective. What the change team needs to know, when they need to know it and the skills they require will drive their training requirements.

Summary: Having an effect

Change is poorly executed in many organisations, in which a number of barriers to success exist. Training has a very important role to play in increasing successful change by tackling those barriers. It is necessary but not sufficient. This means training must be part of an organisation's willingness to change the way it changes!

Training for change needs to be effective in increasing the organisation's capability for change. Using a model of change capability, such as that from Prosci⁵, will help to identify knowledge

and skill needs. When training is planned, the organisation needs to ensure value for money and effective use through the four factors I identified above.

Provide training in bite-sized chunks that are focused on the needs of the moment. A topics approach provides a useful chunk of knowledge and skills that can be taken when needed. Staff need to be motivated by their line managers and training objectives for individuals need to be followed up, otherwise the training is just a day away from the office. The training needs to be part of a larger plan to increase, and support improvement in, change capability – it is not a magic bullet. **TJ**

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