HR^N Paper

Strategic change-readiness for organisations

IES Perspectives on HR 2017

Alison Carter, Principal Research Fellow

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Introduction

The world is a complex operating environment for organisations, but the future looks even more complex as the world is now changing at a rate that challenges basic systems, structures, norms and cultures built up over decades (Kotter, 2014). Trends in technology, ever-changing customer expectations, and the need to be agile, fast and responsive are all contributing to radical changes for organisations, and for the people who work within them. Whilst the need to support individuals through change has been recognised for some time, at IES we argue that it is time to overhaul the way organisations are made ready to face change. Organisations themselves need to be considered as 'virtual individuals' in preparing for change. If they are not, then they risk the same kind of dislocations and discomforts that bedevil the individuals that work within those organisations.

This is not a trivial problem: an IBM Study of 1,390 change practitioners across 48 countries and 20 industries found that 41 per cent of change projects were described as unsuccessful, and the gap between the magnitude of change and the ability of organisations to manage change also continues to widen (Jorgensen, Owen and Neus, 2008, cited by Bennett and Bush, 2014). Others estimate that over 70 per cent of *sustained* change in organisations is unsuccessful (Bennett and Bush, 2014).

This article offers reflections on how some organisations become resistant to change whilst others appear able to adapt and operate reliably in the face of uncertainty and complexity. In particular, we reflect on recent IES work that identifies mindfulness across a whole organisation system as a way of organisations simultaneously coping with, and benefiting from, change and uncertainty. Finally we introduce a model to help HR specialists and change leaders think about maximising the benefits from change and minimising the problems associated with change.

Organisations and change

We know that effective leadership at all levels helps when it comes to driving change (Jorgensen, Owen and Neus, 2008, cited by Bennett and Bush, 2014) and that successful changes in organisations require a vision that's better than the status quo (Bevan, Plsek and Winstanley, 2011). But why is successful and sustainable organisational change so difficult?

Resilient structures versus adaptable eco-systems

Organisations can be seen merely as structures that group people and resources to solve problems, achieve goals or perform activities. In theory, this approach smooths out over-

and under-performance by individuals; if a genius (or the opposite) is replaced, activities still continue. Organisations where this happens can give the illusion of being resilient, apparently able to preserve themselves in the face of challenges. These structures can, however, become a snapshot of how an organisation was structured when it was considered to be performing at its best. The problem comes when the snapshot doesn't age well, and becomes a faded sepia print. 'Resilience' can easily become 'resistance'.

Organisations with a long life span, that flourish, do so because they can change; because they can compete and co-operate with other organisations; and because they can encourage internal co-operation and competition between their component parts. Rather than being a monolithic, fixed structure, they operate as an ecosystem: an organic fusion of organisation structure ('who fits where') and organisation culture ('how we behave') so that change can be addressed, embraced, and celebrated.

Ecosystems adapt – the analogy comes from the living world – with ruthless efficiency. Ecosystems are accepting of change. Species evolve over time, species vanish, creatures change their behaviour, but the ecosystem continues. An ecosystem is a motion picture, not a faded sepia print.

It would seem that such ecosystems are all too rare; the management of change often receives rock-bottom ratings in employee surveys and constant re-structuring adds to the feeling of weariness. So, if our organisations have to change why aren't we doing it better?

Mindlessness versus high-reliability cultures

There is a growing recognition of the consequences of a lack of awareness, or 'mindlessness', in attempting to deal with organisational challenges. Aviles and Dent (2015) argued that much of organisational behaviour is performed mindlessly, on the basis of scripts learned through experiences. This also chimes with the consequences of a lack of empathy, a lack of emotional intelligence (Goldman, 1996), and a lack of emotional agility (David, 2016). Ashforth and Fried (1988) argued that mindless behaviour by organisational members can adversely impact or impede the success of positive organisational change.

The relevance of mindfulness for organisations in a context of complexity has been particularly highlighted in relation to High Reliability Organisations (HROs). Examples of HROs include nuclear power plants (Bourrier, 2011), naval aircraft carriers (Rochlin, La Porte and Roberts, 1987) and air traffic control systems (La Porte, 1996). Failure in any of these organisations would be rather more than inconvenient, and the outcomes could be catastrophic if individuals and organisations behave mindlessly (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2006). These workplaces all operate, as writes Rochlin (cited in Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfield, 1999), in an environment 'rich with the potential for error, where the scale of consequences precludes learning through experimentation, and where to avoid failures in

the face of shifting sources of vulnerability, complex processes are used to manage complex technology.' In all of these environments, changes must be carefully considered and carefully introduced by a management entirely mindful of their people, and conscious of the high price of a systems failure.

In addition, in an extensive review of the organisational change literature, Weick and Quinn (1999) made a contrast between 'episodic' and 'continuous' approaches to change. They argued that episodic change follows the sequence unfreeze-transition-refreeze, whereas continuous change follows the sequence freeze-rebalance-unfreeze: each type implies different roles for change agents.

What is meant by 'change-ready'?

The term change-ready as applied to employees, refers to a set of key cognitions, beliefs and behaviours that make up a prevalent positive attitude toward the process of transforming to a strategically different position.

Change-readiness in organisations is more than the sum of individuals' change-readiness, although that is important. Change-readiness at a whole-systems level operates at interpersonal and collective levels. Individuals, processes and policies interact in unforeseeable ways (Sutcliffe, Vogus and Dane, 2016) and the benefit of employees embracing change (at a collective level) is the collective capability to consider emerging situations, and to act swiftly in response.

Change-ready organisations demonstrably put into practice the three key concepts of organisational resilience, learning orientation, and adaptability. Together, these three ideas lead to better performance outcomes (Carter, Tobias and Spiegelhalter, 2016). Leaders in change-ready organisations exhibit mindful behaviours which have a 'snowball effect' on their wider organisation, encouraging organisational ambidexterity, and creating alignment and adaptability at the same time. Change-ready, mindful leaders are continuous learners, drawing on others at different organisation levels, and integrating everyone's contributions.

Managers must learn to recognise interconnections between different environments with competing priorities and make intelligent decisions. It is with this need in mind that mindfulness has been put forward as a way for managers and employees to learn skills of self-regulation, attention and awareness (Brown, Ryan and Creswell, 2007). Coaching meanwhile has been put forward as the intervention of choice for enabling leaders and employees to engage in critical conversations, remove corporate stumbling blocks and sustain momentum long enough for the benefits from change to be realised (Bennett and Bush, 2014).

Therefore techniques, such as mindfulness, coaching, reflective practice and others, could be applied at multiple levels (individual, team and organisation) simultaneously and

flexibly. A multi-level approach would enable leaders and teams to genuinely develop a sustainable capacity for identifying and addressing difficult and unexpected challenges.

Mindfulness as a catalyst for change-readiness

IES has been collaborating with Cranfield School of Management in an exploration of mindfulness as a catalyst for strategic change, working with an organisation to design, pilot and evaluate a mindfulness-based intervention specifically to target change-readiness. The project has made us think about how existing interventions can be deliberately designed to contribute to systemic transformation across a large organisation or sector, with an ultimate goal of the whole system performing reliably and with agility in the long term. By applying mindfulness at individual, team and whole-organisation levels, we expect that the approach will foster reliable performance in the face of uncertainty and contextual complexity, as shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Components of a change-ready organisation
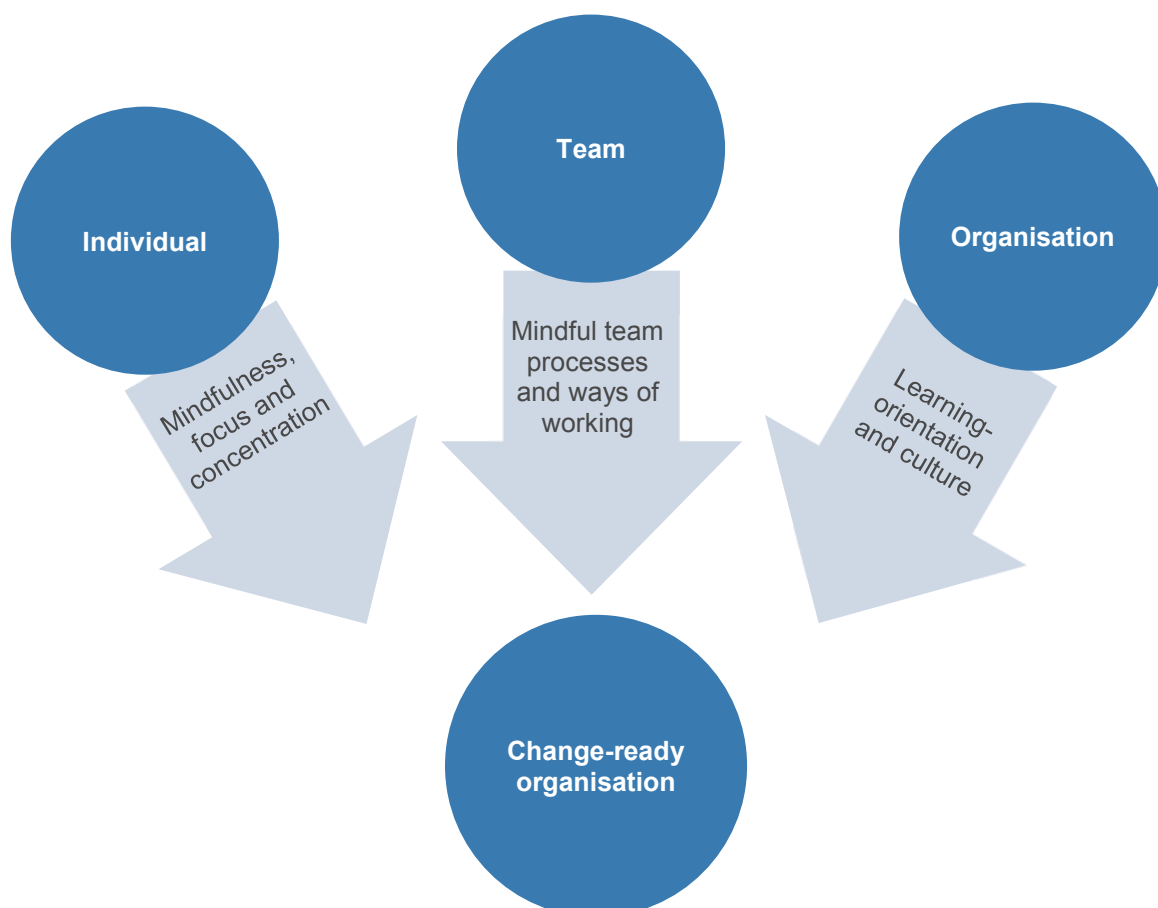
Source: IES

Our research has allowed us to explore how an intervention can be designed and used at multiple levels. In this context, that means designing a mindfulness-based intervention that goes beyond just training individuals in meditation techniques. We conducted an

evidence review (reported in Carter, Tobias and Spiegelhalter, 2016), which uniquely brought together the scientific threads on strategic change and mindfulness at work. In the mindfulness literature, two bodies of research have emerged: one focusing on the internal psychology of individual mindfulness, the other on the social processes of collective mindfulness (Sutcliffe, Vogus and Dane, 2016). A deliberate application of mindfulness techniques could help to soften and adapt to the impact of change in an organisation.

We also spoke with organisations to explore their experience of mindfulness-based interventions as a tool for building organisational change-readiness (Carter, Tobias and Spiegelhalter, 2016). We found, as with other interventions, the right 'hooks' are needed to draw in the people who need to participate. Open workshops for self-selecting employees may increase wellbeing and their ability to cope, but won't necessarily help the organisation as a whole. Further, if these positive results for individuals are isolated from improvements in the workplace environment, the overall impact on employee engagement can be negative. As for other training, disillusionment results if individuals identify a better way of working, but are then not 'allowed' (or given the necessary support) to implement their ideas. However, it doesn't have to be that way. In one of our featured case studies, leaders were targeted in a cross-government programme. They described a ripple effect: by being a mindful leader, they produced team-working, higher performance and improved employee experiences of the workplace. For organisation-wide outcomes, a focus on leaders might well be worthwhile.

Our research findings to date suggest that mindfulness-based techniques could be applied simultaneously and flexibly at multiple levels. A multi-level approach would enable leaders and teams to genuinely develop a sustainable capacity for identifying and addressing difficult and unexpected challenges, a useful skill set during periods of change and uncertainty. Mindfulness-based methods need to match the complexity and context-dependency of today's organisational reality.

What can organisations do to increase change-readiness?

There is a large volume of psychological studies on team effectiveness, OD, leadership, adult learning, ethics and change (eg Kozlowski and Ilgen, 2006; Avolio, Walumbwa and Weber, 2009), much of which has found its way into business school curricula and popular press. This evidence base is being supplemented by a growing number of books on the benefits of the emotional agility of individuals (eg David, 2016) and mindfulness (eg Chapman-Clarke, 2016). What is missing from the change practices of many organisations is *use* of this evidence base.

In recent years, IES has explored a variety of organisation approaches to change in a series of articles and change-centred events. These have included: employee involvement

in co-creating the change process (Garrow, 2016); change coaching to help individuals or groups successfully implement current desired change whilst simultaneously developing increased capacity to make future changes (Bennett and Bush, 2014); repositioning coaching programmes to leverage their contribution to implementing organisational change (Carter, 2015); ethical leadership to create and sustain organisational culture change (Tamkin, 2016); appreciative inquiry to generate positive energy for change in a very large organisation (Garrow, 2015); and mindfulness techniques as a complement to organisational and strategic change initiatives (Carter, Tobias and Spiegelhalter, 2016).

In the face of so much evidence, what is needed is a way of deciding which methods to select and where best to deploy them to maximise benefit in terms of change now and change-readiness for the (as yet unknown) future. There is also a need to integrate these methods within a leadership ethos of managing change with compassion and ethics.

The first port of call would seem to be a reflection on the current state of readiness for change using the IES Model of Change-readiness (shown in Figure 2).

Figure 2: IES model of change-readiness
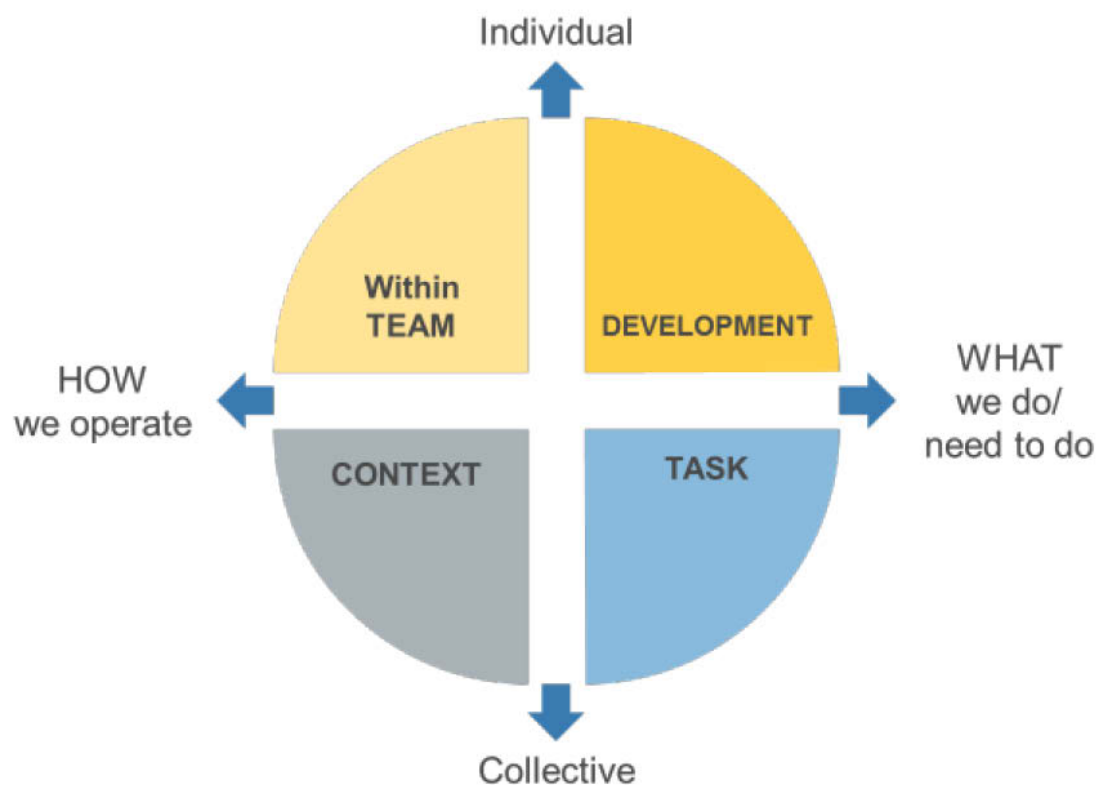
Source: IES

The model has two main axes. The vertical axis separates interventions which support **individuals'** change-readiness from what is in place to support **collective** change-readiness, eg for teams, divisions, or the organisation. The horizontal axis separates out whether interventions target changes in the way the business runs, its shared values and

its culture in the broadest sense ('How we operate') or the content of business activities/operations ('What we do/need to do'). The four quadrants form the essential aspects of what contributes to change-readiness at organisational level. If you leave out any of these, something is going to be missing, and barriers to successful change will appear. The model is, however, neutral: it does not tell you what interventions you should put it place, just be sure to consider all four quadrants to make success much more likely.

Final thought

The emerging literature seems to provide a solid body of evidence that links mindfulness to multiple levels of change through its operation at both individual and collective levels. Individuals, processes, and policies interact in unforeseeable ways (Sutcliffe, Vogus and Dane, 2016). Collective resilience, learning orientation and adaptability shape interactions in all directions, and are more than the sum of individuals' resilience, learning and adaptability. The result is a collective capability to discern discriminatory detail about emerging issues, and to act swiftly in response to such details. The development of mindful leaders should be encouraged: they are continuous learners, able to draw on others at different organisational levels, and integrate everyone's contributions.

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More on this topic

This chapter continues IES's work on mindfulness in organisations. Alison Carter's HR Network paper, *Mindfulness in organisations*, will be available to download from the IES website in February 2017. The paper is currently available exclusively to IES HR Network members. To find out more about our corporate membership programme, please visit: http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/network

To learn more about IES's work on change-readiness in organisations or to discuss how this concept might be applied in your organisation, please contact Alison Carter, Principal Research Fellow:

alison.carter@employment-studies.co.uk | @AlisonCarterIES

Integrating mindfulness and compassion

7 Sept 2017, London

Mindfulness and compassion are increasingly being mentioned as features present in great places to work. Research studies indicate the employee wellbeing and performance improvements which can result. In this experiential workshop we will explore what these concepts actually are and how they might be taken beyond training programme provision and leveraged to support organisational transformation and culture change.

This event will be facilitated by Alison Carter who will be joined by Dr Jutta Tobias, Cranfield University School of Management, and Liz Hall, IES Associate and Professional Coach.

To find out more or book a place, please visit: http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/events

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The full report is available online at: http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/hr2017

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T: 01273 763400
E: penny.tamkin@employment-studies.co.uk

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