



Reflections on different approaches to behavioural change

Views from the IES
HR Directors' Retreat

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Our recent HR Directors' retreat put the spotlight on behaviour change. We often think of change in terms of strategy, systems and processes. Whilst we consider people as one of the stakeholders of change and ponder how we might get them on board or consider how change will affect jobs or roles, we rarely consider their experience of change, what it will mean to them as individuals and groups living through the change process, or how they will feel in response.

Change means many things to different people and it can provide simultaneously conflicting emotions; it can be a cause for mourning and celebration, it can be both surprising and predictable, controlled and chaotic, spectacular and superficial, slow and far-reaching. And yet our expectations are frequently that it will be linear and plannable and that people can be brought on board. In this mindset, any hiccups are cast as failures to manage change properly.

In reality, individual responses to change can be very varied. Some are stimulated by change, seeing it as an opportunity to reframe their understanding, or the opportunity to seek learning. On the whole, such people start from a frame of trust. Some see change as undesirable, but inevitable. Such people are more likely to adopt resigned nostalgia as a response. Some deny change and choose to bury their heads in the sand and hope that the change will go away. And some (probably too many) react with high anxiety. For these people, change is frequently perceived as personally damaging and they are deeply reluctant to engage with it. Whatever the result, the response to change is always emotional. The Retreat provided a rare opportunity to reflect on the emotions of change and give them detailed consideration.

The more negative emotions towards change were beautifully captured by Jenny Knight from Brighton Business School who had researched how people react to change and written a poem 'Making Sense of Nonsense' in response:

*... 'the metaphors used to make sense of the mess;
are poetic, creative, dynamic and less;
about logic and facts and the way it should be;
and much more about feelings, immediacy'.*

Jenny describes an Alice in Wonderland World where nothing makes sense and workers resign themselves to a state of shared learned helplessness as relentless change and the duplicity of management washes over them.

Another of our speakers focused on what psychology can teach us on the human side of change. Jo Clarke from Petros and the University of York is a forensic psychologist who has worked with some of life's more difficult people (both children and adults) and spoke about the challenge of change for people and the importance of resilience. Jo explored how each of us makes sense of the world and our behaviour within it, in terms

of mental frames we create (drawing on personal construct theory devised by George Kelly in the 1950s). Kelly argued that each of us see the world uniquely through the lenses of our own constructs (internally-held representations or interpretations of reality that help us to understand the world), which are built over time in response to our experiences. As a consequence, we are all different and will react differently to what is happening around us. Sometimes one or more of our core beliefs will be threatened and this can be uniquely upsetting and cause quite significant responses. People may not even be aware of what it is they find so upsetting about change, but it is likely to be because the change is threatening a core belief or tapping into one of our key constructs.

Sometimes the impact of our constructs and our strong responses to them cause stress. Stress is never a good thing, it is not the stuff that makes us perform better or run faster, or pull the rabbit out of the bag just in time. Stress is the stuff of inattention, frozen reactions, panic, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and early death. Managers who think a little stress is good for people just don't understand its potentially catastrophic effects. To be fair, many people are positive about stress because they confuse it with pressure – they are a world apart. Whilst pressure can focus our attention and give us the gentle kick up the backside we occasionally need, stress is more like a sledgehammer to the back of the head. At our retreat, this distinction caused much debate and dispute amongst participants. The concept of healthy stress is not yet dead it seems. In reality, there is much that can be done to ensure pressure does not become stress. As we construct our sense-making frames that help us interpret and respond to the world, so we also construct a response to pressure that tips it into stress; 'there is no such thing as good or bad, but thinking makes it so' – Othello. Stress is frequently defined by rumination, the tendency to revisit negative thoughts over and over again, which can be broken by skills of focusing attention, detachment and letting go.

It is of course possible to learn to deal with negative emotions and enable people to lead happier and healthier lives. One of the ways in which organisations seek to provide a positive emotional environment for people is through framing the workplace in positive ways. For some this is about the articulation of values which can provide a uniting force for people; driving culture and behaviour change. Some organisations have even managed to create suitably uplifting acronyms; the London Borough of Sutton created PRIDE (Partnership, Respect, Innovation, Diversity and Empowerment) and Birmingham City Council had BEST (Belief, Excellence, Success, and Trust).

At the retreat we heard from Hendrika Santer Bream of the hard work that was done over many years at Guys and St Thomas's Foundation Trust (G&StT's) to shift culture. G&StT's took a culture led, appreciative inquiry approach, with considerable effort placed on deriving values but then found that if values are to be actually used rather than consigned to a proverbial shelf, they can be endlessly debated. In the real world people want to know what living the values really means and this can be highly varied if the organisation relies on personal interpretation. The next step of the journey for G&StT's was to open up the debate and achieve a common understanding of what

living our values looks like when we are at our best. This enabled them to collect stories and examples of what this meant to individuals and publish them throughout the organisation. Managers were supported to run workshops with their staff to promote common understanding and the values were used to underpin people management processes such as recruitment, induction, feedback and performance management and to form a springboard for change.

Another common lever is to engage people as change agents or through connecting them to customers and clients more directly so that they can make a difference. This kind of empowerment of the workforce can offset collective ennui and energise engagement and action. The retreat was given a very good example of this by Ruth Owen who recounted her experience of having to radically rethink how customer service could be delivered in Job Centre Plus when the demand significantly increased in the 2008 - 2013 recession. Ruth's problem was not one of a lack of concern for the customers, in fact staff felt passionately that they wanted to get people back into work, but rather that, despite this passion, customers felt the service to be impersonal and that there was a stigma attached to interactions with the organisation. The organisation's response to significantly-increased demand and a lacklustre service was to do things very differently and increase empowerment to district managers and to staff. Every advisor was empowered to decide what they wanted to do with that customer, the focus was on the outcome and staff could do what it takes.

Ruth pointed out that such an approach is potentially the road to chaos unless rules are in place. She referred to a concept of Steve Radcliffe's who suggests that people in organisations should be "unbridled yet corralled" (i.e. energised, innovative, motivated towards delivering the vision, strategy or goal). The art of empowerment is to create freedoms and flexibilities within frameworks of budgets, processes and priorities. Job Centre Plus started with four pilot districts run by their best district managers and helped those managers push the boundaries that would then become the norm for everyone else. The results were positive; staff were enthused by the changes, unemployment did not rise to the degree expected and clients were kept connected to the labour market despite the recession.

Although the approaches are quite different in these examples, there are some interesting commonalities. In both cases there was an understanding of the need for change and the need to ensure employees were emotionally positive about the changes being made. The focus was therefore, on making something work for employees and most importantly, change was given time, energy and resources and sustained. These were not quick changes but carefully planned and instigated programmes, where setbacks did not mean starting from scratch with something different, but adjusting what was being done and continuing. These programmes took years to come to full fruit and therefore needed the commitment and patience of leaders and the courage to do things differently and kick down a few doors.

The end result in both cases was quite different to the learned helplessness described so eloquently in Jenny's poem or the potential stress responses that Jo warned of. Instead there was a positive emotional connection with change done with rather than done to.

To find out more about IES's work on behavioural change, contact Penny Tamkin:

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