

CULTURE OF CHANGE



You can't change people; people must want to change themselves. **Karen Williams** explores how workplace culture affects changes in an organisation

Culture is all pervasive and all-powerful. It defines our society and can drive social change. Organisational culture is no different. The attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values of those working within an organisation can and do have a tangible effect on change initiatives, particularly major changes such as mergers and acquisitions, and the implementation of the change process. Culture, and its adaptability, will determine whether an organisation achieves its long-term aspirations, or fails.

Without question, organisational culture is complex. It's an issue heightened by the challenge that it is largely immeasurable. Culture, by its very nature, works with intangibles. It's all about the attitudes, customs and behaviours that are characteristic of an organisation.

Most organisational change managers have encountered the full gamut of organisational cultures, from the robust, strong and healthy, to those requiring serious resuscitation. Typically these weaker cultures may be fractured, dysfunctional or downright toxic. The vast majority of organisations operate somewhere in between these extremes. Different cultures require different approaches to implementing change. Therefore, before devising the change strategy it is essential that the 'condition' of the culture is determined.

BUSINESS-OWNED, BUSINESS-LED CHANGE

Robust organisational cultures anticipate and thrive on change to satisfy the desire of doing business better. These organisations possess a state of readiness, which allows change to be embraced. Healthy, strong organisational cultures tend to subscribe to a 'business-owned, business-led' approach to anticipated change.

A 'business-owned, business-led' approach means the people within the organisation take ownership of their key business deliverables and lead on business improvements as part of their accountability. An organisation made up of likeminded 'business-owned, business-led' people becomes a cohesive and proactive cluster, making positive impacts and change on the organisation. They usually have a strong commitment to the impacts and prosperity of the organisation's people, processes and systems and take ownership of the business-led change. Such organisations have identified influential change leaders and responsive staff who can align the impending change with organisational improvement—they can see the benefit of the change so they are willing to support it.

Conversely, unhealthy organisational cultures already struggling with cohesive and meaningful business practice require stringent protocols and procedures to drive the change. The 'business-owned, business-led' implementation style is incredibly difficult for this type of organisation to grasp. Often, an external and temporary team is engaged



to assist these organisations to achieve new outcomes. This can be problematic as employees may be wary of external consultants. Partnering an internal change champion, such as a long-standing employee who is well respected and knows the organisation, with the external body may help.

Expecting a group to simply accept and embrace change is unrealistic, and if they believe a system, process or project won't work, they will ensure it doesn't. Empower staff to take ownership of change components or a project by making them feel included, ensure that their input is valued and encourage them to care about the impacts on and prosperity of the organisation's people, processes and systems.

Communication is critical—bring in all levels at the earliest opportunity and gain their feedback. During the tentative stages of implementation, encourage all parties to discuss effectiveness and outcomes. When dealing with systems and processes,



efficient testing and training will provide employees with the ability and confidence to use the new system, eliminate any glitches, and quell opportunities for staff to criticise change. Acknowledging and celebrating quick wins can help foster 'feel good' outlooks to change.

WORKING WITH TEMPORARY TEAMS

When you have temporary teams made up of two or more organisations working on a finite project, culture remains key. Bringing together temporary teams to undertake work on a finite project can be problematic if not handled properly, even when occurring in the healthiest of organisational cultures.

Projects are driven by an organisation's strategic direction. They differ from operational activities, in that they have a lifespan: a beginning, middle, and end. External consultants or contractors manage many projects. Full-time staff are generally engaged in the capacity of

'subject matter expert'. They may be fully dedicated to project activities or engaged on an as-required basis.

The project manager and organisational change manager must bring about a sustained change that will benefit their client. These two roles are pivotal. In addition to delivering on time, on budget and to quality standards, they are required to navigate the new organisational culture in which they and their project team find themselves. The challenge, however, particularly for project managers engaged on long-term projects, is to be aware of the culture, but not immersed in it.

A project's success depends directly on the ability of the project manager and organisational change manager to read and understand this culture, quickly. Organisational culture will directly impact their ability to make decisions, to extract critical information from subject matter experts and, above all, have deliverables signed off.

AVOIDING CLASHES

Bringing together internal and external team members effectively means disparate cultures come together for short and often intense periods of time. If these cultures conflict to create a 'we clash, who cares?' apathy or a 'he said, she said' scenario, project outcomes will be hindered.

Experience demonstrates that full-time employees often regard project teams, particularly those that comprise external consultants and contractors, with suspicion and scepticism. Mismanagement of this mentality can corrupt wider corporate values and ethos, particularly if the project runs for an extended period. The project develops a reputation for being 'hard-nosed', not delivering, causing trouble and so forth.

Every successful project dynamic requires its project manager to be a strong-minded leader responsible for generating ideas and driving these within the team while being sensitive to nuances of organisational culture. From the outset, project managers should take steps to engage internal staff members in project activities and open lines of communication. These might include:

- establishing parameters to enable internal and external staff to work efficiently and effectively together as soon as possible;
- being transparent with regard to the change process (using flowcharts etc);
- illustrating key players and their roles, particularly the importance of the contribution of internal staff members;
- involving the team in regular evaluation of the project rollout; and
- encouraging the entire team to celebrate achievement of deliverables.

UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS

Undertaking change always challenges organisational culture. Significant organisational change, such as that involved with mergers and acquisitions, often brings with it the complexity of emotion.

Merging companies or organisations are faced with integrating their operations, systems, processes, histories, traditions and, of course, cultures. The mission critical is to get on with the job as a new entity as smoothly and efficiently as possible with minimal disruption to business. The merging or acquisition process, particularly for the company being merged or acquired, is one for which organisations are often ill prepared.

Anxiety is sky-high as deliberations take place regarding new structure, new roles, employee contracts, potential layoffs, transfers, unfamiliar colleagues and new surroundings all start to become a reality. Careful and considerate management of the 'people' element of the organisational culture is key to uniting the new organisation in a common cause.

The most common detrimental factors to mergers and acquisitions are clashing cultures, poor management of the acquired company (its people, processes and systems) and the inability to implement and sustain change. A thorough, detailed and strategic approach with an appropriate evaluation element is tantamount to successful change



JOINT PROJECTS

- > management and to ensure the success of any merger or acquisition.

Many businesses may only experience a merger or acquisition once in their working lives. However, they still need to understand the effects this will have on them personally and professionally and take steps to manage themselves throughout the process. ✦

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EMBRACING CHANGE

Here are some recommendations for implementing and sustaining change during mergers and acquisitions:

- Engage a full-time integration leader, preferably a trusted external consultant, because managing change is a full-time, dedicated task.
- Identify the 'change champions' in your organisation—those people who are trusted and have influence in the business.
- Plan a communications strategy to ensure staff receive information at the right time, by the right source.
- Maintain a steady flow of communication by updating staff regularly—daily, weekly or whenever appropriate.
- Prime your change champions to be the 'source of truth'. Refer to them for the fullest and latest information regarding the change.
- Describe what a 'day in the life' of the new working environment will be like.
- If relocating, encourage staff to bring key office 'mascots' or items of corporate pride with them to make new environments less daunting.
- If changing to new systems and processes, ensure you provide sufficient, dedicated support with regard to training.
- Identify and provide necessary learning and upskilling opportunities.