

Knowledge in Action – Issue 32

Navigating through change

Managers leading change initiatives in the area of knowledge and organisational learning will be uncomfortably aware of the difficulties of successfully implementing change. For a diverse set of reasons – including failures of vision, poor design, inadequate planning, lack of ‘buy-in’, and poor execution – few change initiatives fully succeed.

Based around real-life knowledge and organisational learning change initiatives within five real-life organisations, research undertaken by the Henley Forum ‘road tested’ three well-regarded change management methodologies. The result: practical insights into what worked, what didn’t – and why.





In organisations, change is an unavoidable fact of life. But that doesn't mean that change comes easily – to individual managers, to their teams, or to the broader organisations within which they work.

In theory, there's help aplenty. Amazon, for instance, lists no fewer than 8,500 change management books. Change management methodologies abound.

Yet many change initiatives either fail, or only partially succeed. Managers and their teams can end up dreading change, but know they must embrace it, and somehow struggle to a conclusion.

And within a knowledge and organisational learning context, even less clarity surrounds the art of successful change management. Despite the wealth of methodologies, 'how to' books, and academic articles, little is known about successful change management in a knowledge and organisational learning context.

To address this gap, the Henley Forum investigated how a range of change management methodologies worked in practice in relation to knowledge and organisational learning initiatives. Six real-life managers within five real-life organisations applied three well-regarded change management methodologies, distilling insights into what worked – and what didn't.

The result: practical advice, insights, and suggestions that will be of value to any knowledge management practitioner leading – or helping to lead – a change initiative in their workplace today.

“An understanding of change metaphors was very helpful: the organism metaphor helped to describe what needed to happen to understand the issue, the political system metaphor explained how to leverage the interests of different people to create a plan of action, and finally the machine metaphor was appropriate when senior managers needed to commit to the change initiative and drive its direction.”

Setting course

Change initiatives have a poor success rate, with research repeatedly showing that fewer than 30% of change initiatives count as 'successful'.

Failed change initiatives represent both a waste of resources and a source of harm to organisations that had judged those initiatives necessary. Not surprisingly, a huge body of research and guidance has therefore sprung up in an attempt to improve the success rate of organisational change initiatives.

But the challenge is vast: change initiatives fail for a diverse set of reasons – failures of vision, design, planning, 'buy-in' and execution, for instance – and no single remedial 'fix' can simultaneously address such a spread of causal failure factors.

Hence the development of formal change methodologies, which are reckoned to improve change initiatives' success rate, often by forcing those leading them to recognise and address commonly encountered failure points.

That said, most of the popular formal change methodologies do more than just adopt a 'check list' approach to formalising change. Instead, they are built around an underlying theory or model of organisational change, and attempt to codify best practice within the context of that theory or model.

As such, they have their roots in a number of disciplines, such as sociology and psychology, management and leadership, and engineering management and industrial engineering. In turn, they also generally employ various metaphors to describe organisations undergoing change: metaphors such as machines, political systems or organisms, for instance, and also as collections of tensions and conflicts prompting organisations to undergo processes of flux and transformation.

A Henley Forum 'action research' project sought to compare and contrast three such formal change methodologies within a knowledge management and organisational learning context. The objective: 'road testing' the degree of assistance that they offered, and drawing out any lessons and conclusions that might be relevant for a broader audience of those trying to develop a learning organisation.

Consequently, six real-life managers within five real-life organisations collectively applied three such formal change methodologies to a number of different knowledge and organisational learning initiatives over a six-month period.

Collaboration, insight ... practical value

Co-ordinated by Dr Christine van Winkelen of Henley Business School, the insights into change management described here originated in a Henley Forum 'action research' project undertaken in 2015. Studying real-life change initiatives, the project team included representatives from the Financial Conduct Authority, Roche Diagnostics, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Wendy Jordan and Dr Roger Darby supported the group as change management coaches.

Each of the methodologies is in widespread use, and collectively they embrace a wide range of change metaphors. The methodologies in question: Kurt Lewin's three-step model, John Kotter's eight-step model, and Peter Senge's 'systemic change' model.

At the end of the six-month evaluation period, the research team compared and contrasted the performance of these formal change methodologies in each of the change initiatives where they had been deployed.

Lewin's Three-Step Model in action

The Lewin model was judged to be useful in relation to knowledge and organisational learning change initiatives in several ways.

Easy to understand, it is both flexible and simple to use – characteristics that are especially useful for managers who are inexperienced in leading change. But its fluidity provides little by way of firm structure, and requires change leaders to possess those skills necessary to deal with resistance and political issues.

Key learnings:

- A useful way of getting started, it doesn't provide much help in identifying specific actions to carry out.
- The initial 'force field analysis' is helpful in identifying sources of help and resistance, but becomes out of date once the initiative is underway.
- Establishing ongoing 'temperature checks' in order to get feedback about what is working and what isn't working helps to refine the approach as the situation evolves.
- Refreezing as an end state is probably simplistic, with repeated cycles of change being more likely.

Kotter's Eight Steps in action

The Kotter model was also judged to be useful in relation to knowledge and organisational learning change initiatives.

Its straightforward structure provides a clear starting point, and emphasises the value of initiative 'champions' as well as the importance of involving others. But it treats change as a single event rather than a continual process – which is often the case with knowledge and organisational learning change initiatives.

Key learnings:

- The starting point of creating a sense of urgency around a major issue is not usually appropriate for knowledge and organisational learning initiatives: emphasise instead the importance of addressing a specific problem through collecting evidence to understand how it is affecting individual and organisational performance.
- The context in which the change is happening needs to be explored at the start, reviewing issues such as the organisational culture, its history of achieving change, and other current ongoing initiatives and priorities. Lewin's 'force field analysis' can be useful here.

Lewin's three stages in a nutshell

Kurt Lewin was the first to explore organisational development from the perspective of planned change and applied behavioural science. He saw successful organisational change as a three-step process:

- 1 'Unfreeze' the current situation, by picturing a desired state to move to and identifying the forces that are respectively supporting and resisting the transition to the new state.
- 2 Move towards the desired new state, by working with both the forces supporting change and those resisting it – the so-called 'force field analysis'.
- 3 Refreeze when in the new state, recognising and managing the natural tendency to revert to the old state by the use of policies, rewards, new processes, and new standards to reinforce the new state.

Kotter's eight stages in a nutshell

John Kotter first published his eight steps in the Harvard Business Review in 1995, followed by his well-known book, *Leading Change*, in 1996. His approach is based on his consulting experience, rather than being research-based.

Kotter's eight steps are:

- 1 Establish a sense of urgency.
- 2 Form a powerful guiding coalition.
- 3 Create a vision of a post-change state.
- 4 Communicate the vision.
- 5 Empower others to act on the vision.
- 6 Plan for and create short-term 'wins'.
- 7 Consolidate improvements, and produce more change.
- 8 Institutionalise the new approaches.

Senge's 'systemic change' model in a nutshell

First described in Peter Senge et al.'s 1999 book *The Dance of Change*, the Senge model takes a different approach to managing change, focusing less on the creation of an initial vision and more on leveraging small-scale changes and pilot projects to build the case for change.

The Senge approach has been summarised as:

- | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Start small. | Keep goals realistic. | Grow steadily. | Don't attempt to plan the whole thing. |
| Stay close to ongoing change efforts. | Expect challenges and mis-steps. | Reinforce activities that are going in the right direction. | Be open to feedback. |

Top tips

Be flexible and adaptable: change models are a guide, not a rule book.

Develop your skills: networking, leadership, influence, communications, politics, and stakeholder management.

Have a really clear vision about what you want to achieve.

Become a conscious 'change manager': connect with others, read about change, and reflect on change.

Try to fully understand the situational context from the start.

Engage people at all levels of the organisation in thinking about the implications of the initiative.

Connect with other initiatives and activities in order to amplify, influence and help lead the change.

Design activities to get quick 'wins'.

Take time out to gauge progress, and be willing to evolve your approach in response.

Supplement your team with a senior influential sponsor to influence the senior team of the organisation.

Senge's 'systems change' model in action

Senge's model also proved useful for knowledge and organisational learning change initiatives.

Offering flexibility and a way of growing initiatives from small beginnings, it recognises that a change initiative can have an amorphous end point – a common occurrence with knowledge and organisational learning initiatives. But its lack of prescription means that it can be difficult to see how to move forwards from an initial pilot project.

Key learnings:

- The thinking behind the model is highly relevant to knowledge and organisational learning initiatives and those leading them – further reading is strongly recommended!

“The one piece of learning that I will hold onto longest is the importance of reflection. We're all guilty of rushing from one thing to another, but sometimes our first thoughts about a solution to an issue are not necessarily the best.”

- While limited in terms of practical guidance, the idea of starting small and growing organically places an emphasis on trying things out for real, and learning from them.
- Combining the approach with practical techniques such as Appreciative Inquiry can provide specific actions with which to move forward.

Conclusion

Managers tasked with leading knowledge and organisational learning change initiatives will be uncomfortably aware of the dangers and difficulties of organisational change.

The good news: an extensive body of literature and advice exists, with direct applicability to those knowledge and organisational learning change initiatives.

A prudent manager may want to learn from this body of guidance, so as to be able to select appropriate tools and methodologies as required.

Where to start? For a straightforward introduction to the subject, we recommend *Making Sense of Change Management: A Complete Guide to the Models, Tools and Techniques of Organizational Change*, by Esther Cameron and Mike Green (Kogan Page, 4th edition, 2015).

Henley Business School

Founded in 1945, by business for business. Henley's full-service portfolio extends from undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes to a world-renowned executive education offer, from cutting-edge research spanning a broad range of fields to specialist consultancy services. Henley develops leaders to make the right choices: right for themselves, right for their organisations and right for the wider community in which they exist.

Henley Forum for Organisational Learning and Knowledge Strategies

The Henley Forum for Organisational Learning and Knowledge Strategies, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence. As a membership-based community, it is a magnet for leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders from the knowledge, learning and OD communities. Our partners collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance that advances knowledge, learning and change practice in order to develop dynamic organisations.

To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Marina Hart +44 (0) 1491 418723

For more information visit www.henley.ac.uk/henleyforum or email henleyforum@henley.ac.uk for an information pack.

Publishing services provided by Grist. www.gristonline.com