

I used to work in the head office of a large building society, which was about to become a bank. I was what you would call a middle manager; responsible for a few staff, but strictly within the limits laid down by their rules.

When we were going through all the necessary change needed to pare down the business and to increase the efficiency of our operations, I had to attend training courses on implementing change. We were encouraged not just to cope with change, but rather to embrace it, to seek it out. That change was a ‘good thing.’

One thing that struck me at the time was a description of what happens to the individuals who work for an employer implementing big changes. Some enjoy or at least accept the change and so help move the organisation to where it needs to be. Some do not accept the change and leave (or are got rid of), and this is OK too.

The problem comes with those who do not value or accept the change, but remain in place and the result is a sort of industrial sabotage from within. People appear to buy in to an idea, but carry on doing what they always did in the way they always did it. We’ve all done it – nodding our heads when our bosses explained balanced scorecards or the latest customer care initiative. Sometimes we even intend to do what they want, but events and our peers overtake us and we discover that nothing has changed in the end. This undermining of an organisation’s attempts to change may be conscious or not, but the result is always the same; failure. The building society was keen to avoid this, and put a lot of effort into understanding and managing the effects of this.

Switch forward a few years to where I was a bigger fish in a smaller pond; this time in the public sector and the change was being legislated upon us. I can remember our boss announcing what was needed to a meeting of senior

managers, and his message was clear – we were going to see change and nothing was sacrosanct. The only promise he made was that no-one would be made redundant against their wishes. His intention was to manage down the numbers through voluntary redundancy, retirements and natural wastage.

I thought through the people I was responsible for. I recognised we would all become anxious about what the future held, what our roles would be like and who we would be working with in the future. Some of my team were young, and ambitious; some had been with the organisation for years and had a wealth of experience and useful contacts. In both groups were people who were bright and those who were plodders. In both groups were people who were ambitious and those whose priorities lay elsewhere due to age, personal circumstance or attitude. I knew which ones I wanted to keep on working for me and those I would have loved to have got rid of or at least would just not mind losing. My fear was that if I, as the manager, didn't get a grip of things, many of the people I needed would leave, and I would be stuck with people too lazy or too useless to get a job elsewhere. The good ones that stayed might then become disillusioned and I would end up with my own team of industrial saboteurs.

Sure I knew how much more difficult it would be to do it my way, how we would be criticised by those we got rid of and the whole political thing that had to be managed, but I felt that it would be worth it in the long run, that the organisation would come through better and stronger. I lost the argument and left soon after.

This week I was reading a white paper on culture going up to the Scottish parliament. The government have already decided to move all the staff wholesale from two existing organisations into one bigger, better, brighter new one in a move intended to achieve great new things. I imagine all the staff

involved will nod their heads when being told about the plans and many of them fully intend to do what is being asked of them. But make no mistake; if the government and the leaders do not get all their people on board, then little will change.

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