

# Making change work

The Change Management Consortium Research Project examined change management activities across both the public and private sector over a four year period. Having analysed over 200 interviews and 5,000 survey responses from around 12,000 employees, we can identify key differences between the public sector and the private sector change agendas. It is these differences we consider in this article and also draw down some general lessons about how to manage change within the public sector in an efficient and effective manner, say **Julia Balogun** and **Veronica Hope Hailey**

**PROFESSOR JULIA BALOGUN** is The Professor Sir Roland Smith Chair in Strategic Management and Director of the Centre for Strategic Management



**PROFESSOR VERONICA HOPE HAILEY** is Professor of Strategic Human Resource Management at the Cass Business School, City University



One of our key learnings about change in any sector is that it needs to be designed and rolled out in a manner that is sensitive to the needs of the organisational context. Why is that important? Well, change needs to be “context sensitive” in order not to waste resources on change programmes that have no meaning or relevance for lower levels of staff. The failure to see relevance in change results in these staff disengaging from the change process and overall the desired change is not delivered.

Eight key contextual features need to be assessed before going on to take decisions about change design.

“..... my experience of staff is that they don’t particularly want airy, fairy concepts .....”

Considering these eight features in turn, we can assert that public sector organisations are often expected by politicians to deliver significant transformational change within a short time frame. The reason that these unrealistic deadlines are set

is because frequently both politicians and senior managers fail to adequately assess the scope of the change, particularly in terms of the depth of transformation required. Whilst reorganising or restructuring can be achieved on paper in a short period of time, the cultural transformation of staff behaviours and attitudes can take years and years.

Added to this are problems in terms of capacity: public sector organisations are given few resources (either money or people) to invest in change implementation as they find it difficult to justify the diversion of resources from the delivery of front line services.

This hampers their ability to deliver change efficiently. As one middle manager expressed it: “in my mind I’m running but I’ve got lead boots on in trying to get there.” Couple this with minimal experience of implementing transformational change at middle and lower levels and one can also see that capability acts as a constraint as well.

We found that, despite internal merger activity within our public sector cases, the original local sub cultures were ‘alive and well’ long after the formal merging of structures.

The impact of this local diversity was that staff still felt huge loyalty and identity with their

local offices and local managers – they were seen as powerful figures in the geographically distributed office locations. However, the same level of trust in senior managers at the centres of these organisations.

Despite these differences in levels of trust, the programmes we researched failed to engage local managers in the practical design of change concentrating instead on centralised directives: “that’s the big problem as I see it with –the department, they – they’ve sorted the top out first and what they should have been sorting out is the bottom where the work is actually done.”

Feeling ignored by the senior teams at the centre, local managers often declined to communicate the reason for the imposition of change initiatives instead blaming the strategic centre for their invention. This lessened the levels of awareness and commitment for change at lower levels and overall reduced the organisation’s readiness for change.

Nevertheless this lack of awareness of the need for change is counterbalanced by our survey finding that a high proportion of people are “prepared to put in extra effort to help their organisation be successful”. In addition, compared with the private sector, we found equally high perceptions of justice and

fairness of management practices at a local level. This two positive aspects of organisational climates need to be preserved.

So, given these kinds of organisational contexts, how should change be designed so that it is both efficient and effective?

First, senior managers should break these huge change agendas into bite sized pieces, concentrating first on performance uplifts and restructurings before going on to effect cultural transformations through changing attitudes and behaviours.

This phased change path should be explained to all levels of staff so that there expectations about delivery times can be managed. Whilst the general strategic direction can be set centrally, the start point for real cultural transformation must be decentralised to local offices.

Local managers must be allowed to participate in the formulation of communication and change programmes. Rather than using a directive style of communication, senior managers need to

encourage local managers to voice their views and opinions about roll out.

The role of local leaders is critical in translating centrally derived directives into locally relevant and appealing initiatives. When we interviewed lower levels of staff they said they wanted the change process described in practical terms in language they could understand and with clear milestones in place to measure progress.

As a local manager explained to us: “I don’t think there’s enough come out to actually, to actually explain. And I mean people want explanations, they want somebody to actually say what this means.

You know my experience of staff is that they don’t particularly want airy, fairy concepts. They want to know how that’s going to affect them in terms of what they are doing.”

At the same time managers need to be clear about what the end target is: are they asking people to change their performance targets or their behaviours or, perhaps, their values.

Whatever the decision, the appropriate level of investment needs to be made in change levers and change activities. For instance, if values change is the desired outcome, then substantial investment will have to be made in a whole raft of training, communication and symbolic changes.

Lastly, senior managers need to ensure that the initiatives coming out of different functional areas all communicate the same core message about change – they must seem joined up in the eyes of the recipients!

Delivering effective change in the UK’s public sector matters to all of us. We found well intentioned civil servants at all levels of the organisations we researched but many felt frustrated and worn out by engaging in a great deal of change activity much of which failed to deliver all that had been promised at the outset.

We hope our research will highlight some lessons that politicians and civil servants alike can learn from so that change can be achieved in a more efficient manner.

“..... the start point for real cultural transformation must be decentralised to local offices .....”

