

Dear Social Service Practitioners and Leaders,

Leaders are often asked how they manage change. Most leaders would find this topic an uncomfortable one especially when change entails moving people from a comfort zone to a less certain future. However, change cannot be ignored. The environment we now operate in is an ever changing one which requires leaders to be mindful about managing change. As the saying goes “change is the only constant”. To understand change, we need to understand the push and pull factors for change and how to read and calculate these to ride the winds of change. We need to ask ourselves how we can help enable change to take place in a more purposeful and intentional way.

What to focus on in bringing about change



If the environment is always changing and leaders operate in a changing environment, then learning to adapt to change is inevitable. The question we have to ask ourselves is how we should focus our attention. A good starting point in managing change is to pay attention to how organisations and systems are organised, the service delivery standards and the cost and value of everything that we do. We also need to understand that cost and value are different concepts.

For those in policy leadership roles, there is the need to coordinate policies and programs across all departments and manage the coordination setup. Paying attention to coordination will better enable us to manage the bottle necks or tensions that often reside in the nexus of structures and people in various parts of the organisation. Links or the lack of links can facilitate or sabotage change.

For all leaders, there is the non-negotiable challenge of HR management – the system of hiring and dismissing, performance management and people development which few enjoy but is at the core of people management. It takes courage to hire or promote someone who may break the tradition or prescribe norms for qualifications and experience in order to get the right person for a job. In some instances, someone with a good track record may be better suited for a role than someone who has served for many years.

Changing the status quo

Sometimes it is much easier to bring about change in a crisis as the reason for doing so is clear and urgent. It is harder to bring about change in the status quo as there will always be the proponents of the “don’t fix it if it ain’t broken” mentality even when there are ideas for improvement. In some situations, improvements or change may mean shifting people’s power and authority which often goes against our human nature. Change is after all mostly uncomfortable.

So how can we better facilitate change? It begins with building trust and offering a professional view without any hidden agenda. We can begin by talking about best practice as people usually want to be seen doing what is best.

Changing mind sets



Managing change requires persuading groups and individuals to change the way they work and to think differently about their jobs. There are generally three levels of change.

1. At the most straightforward level, a unit can act directly to achieve outcomes, without having to change the way people work by for example divesting non core work or services to focus on the core business.
2. At the next level of change, staff may need to adjust their practices or adopt new ones in order to reach, say, a new target. An already "lean" unit might, for instance, encourage its staff to look for new ways to reduce waste, be more productive or have outsiders propose fresh ideas into the organization or unit.
3. At the third level, it is about cultural change which involves changing the mind-sets or aligning the ways of all the staff in an organisation. This is often required when an organisation aims to reach a higher performance goal by having its staff throughout the whole structure interact in alignment with a new goal. This is also required when an organisation wants to become more efficient, relevant or competitive by changing its culture fundamentally - from being reactive to proactive, hierarchical to collegial, or introspective to externally focused. Since the collective culture of an organization is an aggregate of the shared group and individual mind-sets, this will be a challenging task.

Understanding the Purpose of the work



In the social service sector, beliefs and mission play a big part in providing the purpose in the work for staff. All enter the sector with a noble reason. But some do find that they begin to question their purpose and reason or experience some distress when they find that their beliefs are inconsistent with their actions in their organisations.

In such situations, what the theory of cognitive dissonance¹ says is that the individuals will find that they need to change either their actions or their beliefs. So what happens is that if the staff believe in the organisation's overall purpose, they will be happy to change their individual behaviour to serve that purpose. But to feel comfortable about change and to carry it out with enthusiasm, staff must understand the role of their actions in the future of the organisation. We all know that it isn't enough to tell staff that they will have to do things differently. Anyone leading a change program must take the time to think through its "narrative" - what makes it worth undertaking- and to explain that story to all of the people involved in making the change happen, so that their contributions make sense to them as individuals.

Ensuring Sustained Change



We often hear that it is most difficult to change mind-sets. But it can happen when staff understand the reason for the change and support it. Staff must have the skills to do what it requires and see the people they respect consistently showing the new behaviour. These add up to behavioural changes in organizations by changing attitudes about what can and should happen at work.

To sustain change in any organisation, reporting structures, management and operational processes, and measurement procedures - setting targets, measuring performance, reward and recognition systems – must also be consistent with the behaviour that staff are asked to demonstrate. When an organisation's goals for new behaviour are not reinforced, staff are less likely to adopt it consistently. For example, if senior staff are urged to spend more time coaching junior staff but coaching doesn't figure in the performance appraisal, they are not likely to do it well.

For behavioural change to be sustained, organizations that want to maintain higher performance need to continuously ensure that the structures and processes that reinforce or condition the new behaviour are "oiled" regularly and not assumed to be on autopilot.

Skills and Role Models for Implementing Change

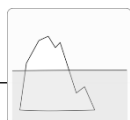
If an organisation asks its staff to be 'client-centric' but paid little attention to the client in the past, the staff will need to learn how to do this as they would not have any idea how to interpret this principle and won't know what a good outcome would look like.

¹ 1957 the Stanford social psychologist Leon Festinger published his theory of cognitive dissonance when he observed in the subjects of his experimentation a deep-seated need to eliminate cognitive dissonance by changing either their actions or their beliefs.

How can adults then be equipped with the skills they need to make relevant changes in behaviour? The ACTA training advises, based on Kolb's learning style², that adults will need time. In practice, this means that we can't teach everything there is to know about a subject in one session. We need to break down the formal teaching into chunks, with time in between for the learners to reflect, experiment, and apply the new principles. Change happens only in steps. And as the organizational psychologist, Chris Argyris has shown, people assimilate information more thoroughly if they go on to describe to others how they will apply what they have learned to their own circumstances. Training or workshops can help to change behaviour by establishing personal meaning as well as creating emotional connection between staff and the new behaviour.

In any organization, staff model their behaviour on "significant others" and these are usually those they see in positions of influence. So we need role models at every level to "walk the talk" so that people in different functions or levels have examples to emulate.

Checking assumptions



In implementing any change effort, it is useful to recognize assumptions as it is a bias that is pervasive in humans and exist in the various systems we experience daily. Some of these are so subtle that we do not know that we are being exposed to them. We may assume that what worked will always work. For example, we often do not take into consideration the changes that have occurred such as the changes to systems and changes to context. We tend to think that what we see is all of what there is, like the ice berg assumption when we know that the majority of the ice berg is below the water.



Embracing change

As we seek to improve services, change, which involves making delivery better for clients, will be a norm. Sometimes the change may involve innovation and creativity, sometimes it may require abandoning of old ways to encompass or install new ways or new behaviour. The change may start with individuals, small groups or across the board. Whatever these may be, leaders need to be equipped to lead change through acquiring the skills, strategising the change process and focusing on the human dimension for change in order for it to be sustained when it happens. Change is after all part and parcel of leadership.

Ang Bee Lian,
Director of Social Welfare, MSF
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² David Kolb, a specialist in adult learning, developed his four-phase adult-learning cycle. Kolb showed that adults can't learn merely by listening to instructions; they must also absorb the new information, use it experimentally, and integrate it with their existing knowledge.