

The change roadmap

In the first of a series, KAREN SKILLINGS shares some personal insights into how to be the right agent of change.

Change management in business, new organisational structures, succeeding waves of technology – the impact on people and culture or process was traditionally not really talked about. It was just done.

Remember when you used to look forward to pay day and getting cash in your hand? Then you needed to adjust when pay went directly into your bank account; I

can remember the paymaster wheeling a trolley onto the floor and lining up to get that envelope with \$72 for the fortnight. Although I'm showing my age here, this is an example of business and process change that historically changed our lives.

Fast forward to transforming business from mainframe (big iron) to PCs and the advent of the internet. This was a part of the dramatic change during the 1980s and 90s.



Ultimately, we must tell people what they need to know, give them the facts, but help them digest it with the added support of a well-structured change and communication program.

We didn't look at it as business, technology, organisation, people and process change (BTOPP), but as the fast and heady new world of computing.

In my early career as a change agent, I was a trainer in accredited software packages. This gave me the opportunity to work with people who were the frontline change agents for their organisations and who were undertaking training in the new technologies that were available at the time they were moving from mainframe systems, and the use of a dumb terminal with no user interoperability, to a new world of PCs. It meant, for users, there was an entire new set of challenges.

Rather than mainframe systems supporting one choice of software for maintaining business functions, we saw a wider variety of software packages with early products such as Lotus 1-2-3 for spreadsheet functionality, MultiMate or WordPerfect (the word processing product of choice), Paradox or FoxPro along with dBase IV (the database alternatives) and let's not forget Lotus Symphony.

This was a significant change in the 90s for almost every office worker, and continued through the next 10 years with the computer giants fighting it out to come up with the industry benchmark products to support the new world. People were clamouring for help and happy to pay good money to adapt to the changes to come, and what is now the cornerstone of our connected lives.

CHANGE AGENT – THE SECRET IN THE ROOM

I was engaged to merge two divisions that had been primarily managed by two people for the previous 10 years under my leadership. One division leader headed into retirement and the other was managed into a new career.

While the ways these divisions operated were complementary and ripe to merge, to no surprise, the project didn't go as well as was originally planned, although I don't think it was

planned at all. The unfortunate experience started with the manager who was being moved on having a nervous breakdown and my leadership cohorts having suspicion and fear that their roles were next.

For many months, even years in this role, we needed to dedicate significant resources to alleviate the fear of business and process change with the leadership team. There was costly, but well-placed training for us all in tools such as Myers-Briggs, as well as investments in an executive leadership program (MBA) for the fearful and damaged leadership group to encourage team building and leadership qualities, and gain back trust.

We all got together at interstate venues over the next few years. Although the food at Melbourne Business School was great, and the view at Mount Eliza spectacular, the trust and suspicion built from that fateful and badly executed change introduction was never bridged.

Our mantra in this organisation was to speak with truth and integrity. Unfortunately, although we did, no one believed us, as they were overwhelmed with the feeling of desperation and fear that insufficient change management can invoke. There's no doubt that a poorly delivered change program can have lasting damage on organisations and their personnel.

As a change manager today, I remember that motto of acting with integrity and speaking the truth as the keystone to a successful change program. Ultimately, we must tell people what they need to know, give them the facts, but help them digest it with the added support of a well-structured change and communication program.

Fast forward 20 years and I am still working as a consulting change agent assisting organisations with any measure of business technology, organisation, people or process change. What has changed?

Well, one difference is our appreciation of the importance of taking the whole workforce on the journey – whether it be strategic organisational change or a change to the business landscape, with the company moving to agile working. Either way, a change manager can help by having a seat at the table with the senior leadership team and developing the right change and communications strategy that envelops and embodies the right level of ownership so everyone can feel that they are a part of the positive organisational changes to their business (and daily lives).

There is no better change agent than that person with real life experience to draw on and, in addition to sharing my own experiences, I am happy to share those of my colleagues and peers that also work in change. Over the coming months, we will share the attributes of great change programs, starting with the attributes of a great workplace change program – working agile. ●

Karen Skillings is principal of Skillings Education and an expert in information management, change management and relocations. She is an accomplished author with several publications to her name, and has developed nationally recognised training programs.