comma
PARTNERS

Psychology of change and IC's role in it

By Alison Boothby

With its fuzzy jargon, complicated models and endless spreadsheets, 'change management' strikes fear in the heart of many communications professionals. Does anyone ever say what is actually being 'changed'? Is 'change management' just fancy project management? And why is communication always the last line of a project plan?

Change management projects, transformation programmes, call them what you will, but what is inescapable is that an entire industry has grown up around these topics. Change management is ubiquitous yet widely misunderstood with businesses of all shapes and sizes claiming their change programmes are necessary for a brighter future. The reality that we witness time and again is that they are a drain on energy and resources and a significant source of stress and unhappiness in the workplace.

What on earth is going on?

In the latest Comma Partners event, Dr Adrian Britten, Chartered Psychologist and communication leader led an informative and entertaining session explaining what the psychological evidence actually tells us about changing human behaviour, and how this can inform our practice as communications professionals. Drawing on his 30 year career spanning numerous sectors around the world, Adrian busted a variety of 'change management' myths and replaced the fuzzy faerie stories with a simple, evidence-based framework.

Change programmes focus on the wrong things

Most change and transformation programmes list a range of changes that will support the transition from the current state to the desired future state. These usually include things like ownership structures, strategies, technologies, systems, locations, processes, products and services but as Adrian Britten pointed out, "These are not behaviour changes: these are *doing* changes. Behaviour changes must include things like meanings, emotions, values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, power, relationships, identity, language. In short, change isn't something done to you: it is something you choose to do for yourself. Most change management programmes that purport to change employee behavior are not about behaviour change at all. Similarly, a set of communication and engagement activities is not a behaviour change programme!"

Where is the evidence base?

Of the seven most widely used change management models, only one has any empirical support, claims Adrian Britten. All models include a planned set of activities designed to change the behaviours of target people so that the new situation can become reality, but few practitioners understand the basic principles of the change process (Lichtenstein, 2000) and all too often rely on the beliefs and opinions of consultants and 'experts'. Evidence is largely based on anecdote, personal opinion and untested case studies. "Published evidence is substandard" he adds. "The widely-cited research uses self-report after the event, it describes the change efforts NOT the change process itself, and focuses on the manager or change agent and not the participants who are changing. Importantly, context and diversity are largely ignored by change models and change practice. It is little surprise that so many change programmes fail!"

Individual differences are important

There is still no model for how individual participants will decide to change but we all know that people interpret and give meaning to the efforts to create change and decide themselves how to respond. This cannot be mandated in any plan! People differ on their commitment to change; their perceived ability to implement the change; their tolerance of uncertainty as well as things like their levels of optimism and flexibility. Furthermore, change often disrupts the valuable relationship networks through which most stuff gets done in an organisation (Wallander, 2002) - something again, which models ignore.

Exploding some myths

During the evening, Adrian Britten chose five well-pedalled 'myths' for scrutiny:

1. *There is no change curve!* The ubiquitous misallocation of the Kübler-Ross model was described by Adrian as 'mad, bad and dangerous!'. "There is no evidence base that this model (which was originally based on discussions with 24 terminally ill patients) has any value when applied to organisational change. It is a fallacy to use it in the design of organisational change and it undermines natural human responses and reinforces passivity. As communications professionals we are in danger of creating unsuitable communications and interventions in response to it."

2. *Create a sense of urgency* Often referred to as creating the 'burning platform'. Motivating by fear is never a good idea. The evidence for creating a sense of urgency is negative, with reduced uptake of information, reduced assimilation of attitudes, an increase in resistance and an abandonment of values.

3. *The change starts now!* Waiting until the plan is complete then 'launching' wrongly assumes a fixed starting point for an ongoing process. Adrian says, "By the time you 'launch' your change programme it's too late! People have been creating their own meaning for ages. They have heard rumours, gossip and

speculation and will already have their own views on what's going on. Trying to plan change in secret reinforces distrust and makes the challenge of gaining support that much harder.

4. *People are afraid of change!* Adrian says, "This is a ludicrous statement to make! If we were actually afraid of *change* we would still be in the cave, we'd never try out new activities or travel to new places or meet new people. The reason people may seem reluctant to change is to do with a dislike of being told what to do, especially if there is some perceived lack of status or economic security. Leaders frame the need for change as being about new technology, customer orientation, competitive position and market developments for example; employees interpret change as being about cost cutting and profit generation. There is little doubt that people fear *change management*!"
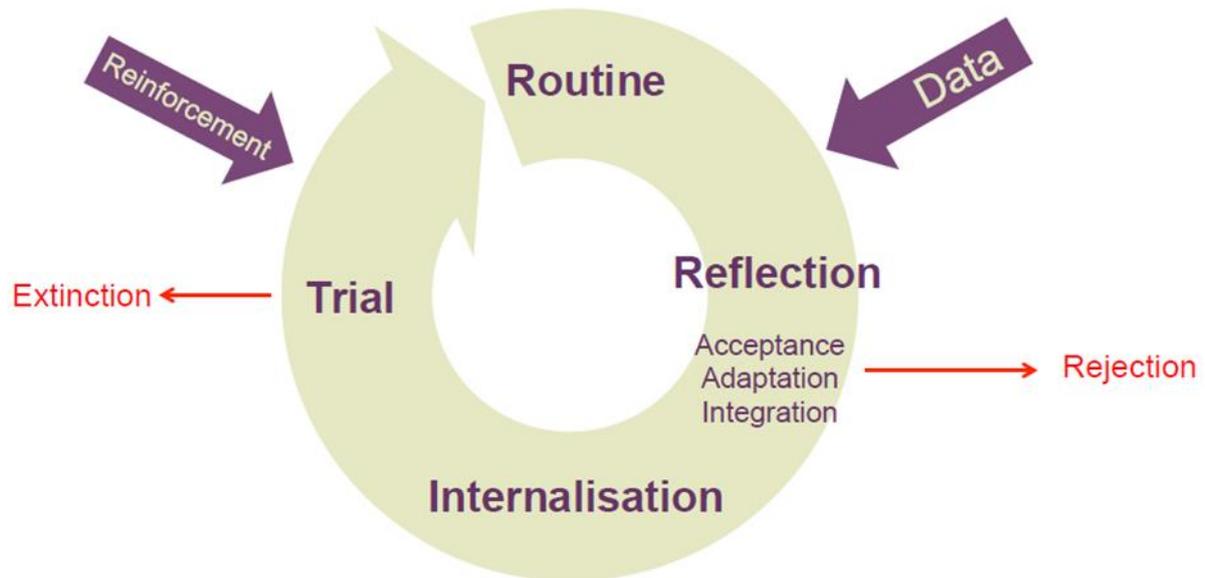
5. *It's all about culture. "*The managerial concept of culture is superficial, loaded with slogans and wishful thinking" says Adrian. Culture is not there just because it is talked about. Culture refers to the shared beliefs, attitudes and understandings that are behind observed behaviours. It's about actions, not words. It is something an organisation 'IS' rather than something it 'HAS'. Culture is largely beyond control.

People do fear change management

With a history of poor change management it is understandable - and reasonable - that it is often met with cynicism, frustration, resentment, stress and fear. Too frequently, change is experienced as loss or damage, underlined by a perceived lack of fairness. Much of what Adrian presented challenges the orthodoxy of change management. From talking with people at the event it was clear that many had experienced the disconnect between the theory of change management and the realities of working in organisations. [Adam Morris](), Culture Change and Communications Lead (Freelance) at IBM, commented, "It was really refreshing and energising to hear someone speaking honestly about the realities of how organisations handle "planned" change. It was also helpful to hear something about the psychological evidence that supports what many of us have experienced repeatedly in our roles: that change is emergent and invariably can't be "managed". We can support it and facilitate it but we can't manage it."

The communicator's role in change

"Change is continuous, open and unpredictable, making it messy and political," explains Adrian Britten. "Change comes from the individual energy that each person gives to it and not from the efforts of the plan or planners." That's not to say that there shouldn't be a plan, but as people across an organisation interpret what is going on, it is essential that plans get modified and reinterpreted as they interact with the organisation. There has to be a degree of fluidity. The model below shows a simple evidence-based framework for successful change.

Reinforcement

Routine

Data

Extinction ←

Trial

Reflection

Acceptance
Adaptation
Integration

→ Rejection

Internalisation

This model is based on the knowledge that people change themselves – they cannot be changed. As communicators, we need to create the conditions where individuals are motivated to consider new data. They then need to have the opportunity to explore the new attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and skills from their own self-interested point of view. They will then decide whether and how to internalise these new ideas. Hopefully these new beliefs, skills and knowledge will be reinforced by the wider environment with others in the organisation providing opportunities to try out what is new. Internal comms can help by gathering peer to peer stories, and sharing successes.

Adrian continues, "As Internal Communicators, we are the oil in the organisational engine and ideally positioned to facilitate the conversation around change." Nicola Cohen, an experienced change and engagement professional currently working as Senior Change Management Consultant at Anglo American picks up this point, "If things are unspoken, they will never happen. Any change starts with a conversation and our role is about orchestrating that conversation."

Having designed communications activities that introduce new ideas and new ways of thinking and kick start conversations, it is important then to allow people to reflect on how these might play out for them. It is essential too that desired behaviours are role-modelled from the top of the organisation. Nicola Cohen again, "Where organisations get it wrong is where leaders expect others to change but don't model that behavior themselves. If words and deeds don't line up, change will not succeed."

Change occurs through conversation

Adam Morris adds, "Adrian's comments about how change occurs through conversations, which help us make sense of and change our world view, rang true for me both personally and professionally. And, as organisations are ultimately groups of people organising themselves minute-by-minute through these conversations, internal communicators are well-placed to help create the opportunities for people to talk together to make sense of planned (and unplanned) organisational changes. We can help people make sense by providing clear accessible information through formal IC channels as well as promoting informal channels (e.g. quick get-togethers for managers and teams, encouraging leaders to walk the floors and talk) and supporting leaders to be clear in what they want to achieve. These can all help stimulate and inform the conversations that create change."

Virginia Hicks of Comma Partners concluded, "Adrian's psychological perspective was both refreshing and challenging to standard approaches to the delivery of change. Adrian's arguments were about evidence-based decision making and it was gratifying to hear his absolute conviction that communications is a critical process to effect change; that it enables employees to make sense of the change occurring around them in the workplace."

Five key takeaways

- **Avoid reinforcing the sense of change being done to people:**
    - Programmes fail when they control and direct
    - Focus on the people involved in the PROCESS of changing
    - Create opportunities for people to take charge of change
- **The real work of change is in people's heads:**
    - Each person interprets, judges, accepts, amends or rejects content from their individual position
- **Communications shape change by providing content for "sense making" to happen**
- **The most critical factor is horizontal "sense making":**
    - Takes place between people (partic. middle managers) in everyday conversations, storytelling and gossip (Balogun, 2006)
- **Change is emergent – you can be in charge but not in control**

[Adrian Britten](#) provides international communications consultancy to business leaders, brand directors and change programme leads in some of the world's leading organisations. By drawing on 30 years' professional communications experience and behavioural science knowledge, his evidence-based practice challenges much perceived wisdom in the field of change.

Specialising in change and communications, [Comma Partners](#) provides high calibre interims and coaches. Clients and candidates can contact Virginia Hicks on 0208 943 0686