The Forgotten Variable In The Change Equation
Change is a coming!

One of the most important trends affecting organisations today is the need to prepare their people properly to be able to respond to and embrace challenge and uncertainty in a rapidly evolving world. VUCA, as it has been popularly termed, has HR and L&D departments rummaging around in their development cupboards for the right tools for the job, only to find that along with the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous times that we face, nothing really seems fit for purpose anymore...

As the pace of change increases, the ability of the organisation to predict the future decreases. The pressures from a highly capricious environment will disrupt well laid plans and organisations will find themselves scrambling to cope with significant regulatory changes, technological advances and diversity of consumer behaviour. Organisations who want to lead, thrive or simply survive will have to learn to adapt very quickly.

Previously, the Harvard Business Review has told us that 70% of all change initiatives fail and for a time (where change might still have been considered to be an ‘initiative’) that may have served the consultancies selling us their ‘change management’ services (an oxymoron if ever there were one), but now…?

It’s clear that hoary old rhetoric about change is outmoded; change is the new black, and to embrace it we need to be ready to tear up the rule books on everything we know about old school management models based on hierarchy, bureaucracy and conformity; they’re not going to serve (save) us now.

So what is needed? Well, to develop the internal capability and agility needed to rise to the challenges of an unknown future, organisations need to bring into focus the extraordinary management that is already present, albeit often unseen, working tirelessly behind the scenes in most companies.

It is within the organisation’s under-culture that people demonstrate genuine creativity and where virtuous learning occurs. These people are not bound by the formal management of an organisation. They possess the qualities, if harnessed effectively and deployed widely, that can deliver the resilience needed to lead through change.

So, rather than managing change, let’s start talking more about enabling change which puts the people component of this new future clearly in the centre of the change equation.
The PEOPLE variable

The variable that is present in both ordinary and extraordinary management is the people working within these systems. Too often, in any organisational change, the people component is forgotten. To develop real resilience in the face of change, organisations must engage the hearts and minds of their people to emerge from the shadows and step up to contribute to change.

This though is no easy task. The psychological contracts between organisations and the people that work within them consist largely of assumptions and perceptions. These are highly individual, generally unconscious or invisible, and yet they can have a powerful impact on performance and motivation. Any change has the potential to challenge these relational contracts and result in the withdrawal of support and perhaps even sabotage.

Consequently, enabling people for change has to be about so much more than informing and instructing. To adapt and transform, organisations need to develop a strong understanding of how changeable, uncertain conditions impact on their people, on the psychological contract, and how individual and shared mental models about change can be both drivers and obstacles.

Barriers to change

People tend to have rigid belief systems that they have unconsciously developed since childhood. These beliefs, positive and negative, exist because they have been repeatedly rewarded in a way that is meaningful to the individual. This will significantly impact how an individual responds to change; perhaps change generates feelings of fear, anxiety, loss or distrust?

To further compound this, the parent-child relationship that exists in most organisations is also an embedded trait that is frequently reinforced by society - parents, teachers, legislators. It is familiar and feels safe. But, any departure results in negative feedback and in the context of constant change, this model is not effective.

Managers cannot possibly hold all the answers and without a change to this leader-follower relationship, skills, knowledge, creativity and innovation, essential for the change agenda will be lost.

We know that people are hardwired to move away from threat to survive, however we also know that a critical success factor in the survival of the human race is that people can and do adapt and learn. Beliefs can change and people can become attached to new mental models and this is central to enabling people for change.

Let’s look more closely at how this can be achieved then.
**Enabling people to enable change**

One of the most important things that can help people embrace change and be prepared for whatever will come is the ability to ask better questions. Insightful questioning is largely missing and without it organisations are bounded by the capacity of the few, rather than the unbounded talent of the many. A new psychological contract is needed which supports an environment that is primed to welcome questions necessary for creativity and change. This ‘enquiry-led approach’ (as we have described it) has the power to revolutionise what occurs between individuals and groups and to unleash untold potential.

**Disrupting the psychological contract**

Establishing a new psychological contract starts with awareness. Organisations can:

- **Raise consciousness** about which beliefs are shaping behaviours and how they are supported or rejected by organisational norms
- **Examine how people work inside and outside the system** and look beneath the iceberg for the real narrative
- **Explore roles, spheres of influence, expectations**, and how change affects a person individually.

This cannot be ‘done’ to someone – it can only happen by invitation. Inviting people to think about what will help them to adapt and become resilient in a more uncertain world is an evaluative process of self-exploration which raises self-awareness through insightful questions. This will help people start to understand the value of developing an enquiry-led approach in their own roles, how they engage with people at work and more broadly, in life.

Essentially, by helping people to adopt coaching related behaviours, organisations can stimulate a level of questioning that comes from a place of genuine interest and confidence that people have all the resources they need to self-generate. This level of enquiry encourages better answers and better outcomes for individuals, teams and organisations. A coaching style of engagement that is multi-directional within the organisation will prove to be an invaluable skill, critical to establishing the resilience to face down anything that change can throw at us, as questioning itself also helps to unpack any last vestige of the status quo.

Here at Notion, we have developed a healthy respect for this process of change and the sheer scale of the challenge for many organisations.

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The people component in action

Supporting organisations with the people component of change is our single focus. We provide an experience which helps people to build new mental models about change and to explore limiting beliefs and unveil behaviours that will help them to embrace change. These behaviours can transcend the individual and have a profound impact on the relationships between people, the quality of ideas, and on the way things are done.

And this is the key – behavioural development is generative, like change, it has no real beginning or end and creates the possibility for increased resilience and self-sufficiency. We have witnessed this time and time again in the work we do with our clients. We often start working with them towards a specific objective but the advantages that they reap are far reaching.

For instance, one client wanted to introduce a new business critical IT platform. Before embarking on the implementation, we helped them to develop a strong shared mental model of what the change would look like. Fundamentally, we helped them to identify what it was they were asking of their people, what response they would need to engender, and how they could accomplish this. We worked with them to show them how to incorporate the coaching skills required to ask better questions of themselves and of others so that they could communicate and collaborate more effectively and increase ownership of and empowerment within the change agenda. This was a really great example of an organisation focusing on their people and using an enquiry-led approach to implement a new system.

Sometimes, change is initiated by new people bringing a different external perspective inside an organisation. Here is an interesting example. We started working with a highly operational client after a new CEO had joined the business. The CEO’s first act was to implement KPI’s up and down the organisation. The organisation had not operated in this way before and the initial response was shock. The KPI’s had been articulated very clearly but little thought had been given to the extent that people would need to adapt their behaviour to work in this measured, target-driven way. We started working with the leadership team to think about how they could enable people to manage in a different way to encourage an increased contribution. The CEO quickly came to understand that in order to change the behaviours within the organisation he would first have to adapt his own management style and the way in which he engaged with the board. This was achieved by utilising an enquiry-led approach. By changing the dynamic between the CEO and the board, they too were freed to change their own relationship with their senior management team. They now understood that they would have to step to a different beat if they were going to realise change.

Within several weeks, the senior management team began to identify ‘nodal managers’ within their own divisions (those who were the most resourceful - the ones around whom things tended to flow internally). When they started to display a different set of behaviours they signalled a new expectation to their teams. This cascading effect ensured that a new internal language was reinforced and people could sense a palpable cultural shift. ‘Enquiry-led’ leadership and ‘coachable moment’ soon became common parlance as a new way of working was emerging.
In both organisations, through our endeavours, we were able to demonstrate significant returns on investment for each change situation. However, the real advantage for each organisation is that by developing coaching behaviours in a culture that is open to questions and enquiry, they now possess the collective mindset and the skills to adapt and transform to meet any new situation.

So, what does all of this add up to? Well for one thing, our understanding of change needs to change. Change isn’t a thing anymore, and we’re all probably served better by dropping the terminology; it’s power to trap us in its headlights has diminished as we have begun to realise that each one of us has to develop a broader skillset. Enabling our workforce to be more self-reliant, to question the status quo and to be empowered to step-up and contribute at a higher level are the virtuous benefits of encouraging more of an enquiry-led approach to leadership and management. Set this within the context of an emerging ‘coaching culture’ supported vocally by the leadership, and you begin to see how untapped potential is unleashed.

Questions anyone?

For more information about how Notion can support your organisation through change, contact us for an informal chat.