

Generating Cultural Change

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Guidance notes for the would-be transformer

Overview

Transformation and cultural change are likely to be remembered as the defining characteristics of businesses in the early 21st century. The move to become a dynamic, enthusiastic, energetic and high achieving organisation is almost universal. However the means by which it is to be achieved are widely misunderstood. More of what once worked is not a prescription for success. The means of change in yesteryear were fit for their time, but the needs of today call for a modern-day approach. Professional coaching is that modern-day approach and it is proving to be successful.

History

To see the required change in perspective it is useful to look back at the immediate history in respect of business organisation. In the past three centuries we have moved from a commercial base grounded in small localised organisations, from cottage industries producing goods, small traders moving them from one place to another, and shipping companies that are tiny when compared with the monolithic organisations of today. Then the very small became much bigger and needed far more organisation as the industrial revolution got underway. After that the booms and crashes of a developing investment market, open to much larger numbers of potential investors, stimulated the need for more effective ways of managing, hiring and firing people. Two global conflicts later and numerous major conflicts around the globe firmly established the top down, command and control, organisation structure. Then came the Internet and the chaos of rapid communication, globalisation and unprecedented levels of employee awareness. Is it therefore any wonder that a by-word for the first few decades of this century is likely to be recalled as 'transformation'?

Allow the old regime to die with dignity

To carry out an effective transformation there must be a recognition that an organisation, just like any other 'organism' needs to be regularly recreated in order to survive. It is an essential and inescapable aspect of being. People come into the world, come together, create new people, do their best to leave the world better than they found it, and then die. Every 'living' thing on the planet, in its own way, does the same. Organisations are alive. If something looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it's a duck. Organisations live and breathe, they are a reflection of the collective actions of the living people who create them. Therefore just like the duck, they are what they appear to be - alive! All living things must learn to live well and, just as importantly, learn to die as gracefully as possible.

Unfortunately in most transformational situations there is little or no recognition of this crucial aspect of change. Organisations act like a hoarder, pushing old practices and approaches to the back of a cupboard instead of letting them go. They end up being stuffed full of useless junk with little room to take in anything new. During transformations people will say things like 'We need to hold on to what is good and add new things that make us even better'. I submit that this is ineffective and, quite simply, wrong. By all means learn from what has passed this way before, but re-evaluate it in the context of now and never assume that because it was good yesterday, it is also good today. Allow old ideas and old regimes to die in peace, then incorporate the good things learned from them in the new creation you bring into being.

People change more quickly than the organisations they engage with

Necessity is truly the mother of invention. People will do whatever they need to in order to meet the demands of the moment. Achieving transformation and cultural change is no different. For change to be effective it is essential the change becomes a MUST and not a SHOULD. When something is presented as an inevitability rather than an aim it carries with it both conviction and certainty. These are necessary to balance the natural stimulation, on the one hand nervous and the other excited, that comes with any significant change. Get a person excited and give them certainty at the same time and they will jump at the chance to take action. However be careful, because if you generate fear of the future without conviction that it will all be OK then you guarantee inaction - maybe even a stubborn refusal to move.

People also want to feel valued and valuable. Effective transformation requires that a person gains more personal significance, not less, from the change. It also requires that they simultaneously feel the comfort of being part of a team, group or community that are engaged in something of value. When an organisation makes sure that each and every individual has a clearly defined and specifically important role to play in the change, AND that they are supported by everyone around them, then action and momentum is virtually guaranteed. Get this wrong however and the opposite is going to happen. Organisations that assume people know that each person will somehow just 'know' that their role is important will fail in a bid for transformation. Organisations that put the weight of responsibility on the shoulders of individuals without the support of a 'team' will equally crash and burn during a transformation attempt.

Most transformations start with an announcement of intent with details to follow. This approach is lunacy. People will search for their certainty, stimulation, connection and significance in the few moments after they learn about impending change. If their experience is negative at this juncture then the organisation has given itself an enormous additional and unnecessary mountain to climb.

By all means find ways to invite participation but not before communicating with clarity regarding the destination, enthusiasm for the birth of a new organisation, determination that every individual will be valued and add value, and commitment to share the burden of success and challenges together. Only invite people to play once the rules of the game have been made clear and the ways in which to win have been understood.

We already know how to manage

History has taught us how to command and control. It is highly likely that an organisation has become very good at managing, supervising, delegating, reporting and politicking. They already know that what gets measured gets done, and that the more specific the requirement to report, the more specific that feedback will be. However transformation does not happen by improving what

already works reasonably well. It occurs by addressing what does not work so well, and in most cases those things boil down to two needs;

- i. A need to create generative improvement in the effectiveness of informal relationships
- ii. A need to create generative improvements in unsupervised behaviour

Generative change occurs when one change causes another even better change to happen. The adage, give a man a fish and you feed him for a day but teach him to fish and he is fed for life, is an example of generative change in action. Therefore to create transformation in an organisation the focus of attention must be on changing the behaviour of individuals in ways that cause them to respond better to each other and desire to do more to achieve their aligned goals. There is of course a well tried and tested approach that does exactly that. It is coaching.

Of course coaching is the key to transformation

Coaching IS transformation. So to imagine any other approach will achieve a better result would be rather odd to say the least. My favourite definition of coaching reads;

"Coaching facilitates self-improvement by supporting the individual in systematically acquiring the skills and tools to discover barriers that stand in the way of achieving personal and professional goals"

It is the means by which to achieve individual generative change summed up in one sentence. This simple definition that underpins the mechanics of culture transformation and suggests that;

- a) There will be a need to make it easier to achieve self-improvement by equipping people within the organisation with reflective coaching tools.
- b) There will be a need to integrate a positive question-led methodology (as opposed to slightly negative, statement-led approaches), into existing meetings, briefings, updates, performance reviews, informal meetings and any other existing platform where human interaction occurs within the organisation.
- c) There will be a need to tutor managers in the use of coaching tools of which they may have some, little or no prior experience of using in a professional manner, with an awareness of the humanistic psychology that underpins their effectiveness. There is no pint in them having the will without the skill.
- d) There will be a need to identify with clarity both the strategic and tactical barriers that hinder progress toward the desired organisation culture, before seeking to implement ways in which they might be overcome. The easier the rocks-in-the-road are to see, the easier they are to avoid or move.
- e) There will be a need to ensure that personal goals are aligned with the organisations goals in every instance, paying equal attention to the personal return on investment that may not be measured in financial terms as the organisational monetary ROI

If transformation requires the elegant death of the old and the exciting birth of the new, then coaching is the method by which it can be achieved. Knowing how to do it does not make it easy, but it offer a means by which to make it happen.