Managing Change - strategies, ideas, and a pragmatic approach

# The need for change as an enabler and catalyst for growth

Everyone's heard of this age-old proverb – “The only constant in life is change.”

Over the years, this has motivated and inspired great minds across the world. When famous playwright George Bernard Shaw underlined change as an essential for creativity, success, and society as a whole, he was drawing from the same fountainhead of ideas. “Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds, cannot change anything,” he said.

In fact, history is littered with examples of exceptional leaders who acted as engineers of change, helping their companies achieve success at critical business junctures. You need to look at only the last couple of decades, to be amazed at the decision-making capabilities that these game-changers have displayed.

Take the story of e-commerce giant, Amazon, for instance. Since its inception in 1995, its always been led by the same man and has dealt largely in the same segment. CEO Jeff Bezos constantly faced scrutiny for running what people thought was an ‘unprofitable’ business, but all of this changed completely in 2015. As Amazon stepped into web services, video, and even original content, the margins soared, and investors responded kindly.

Yet, Bezos never gave up on their core inventory. Last year, Amazon Studios took home three Oscars, arguably the greatest accolade for original content. But the focus on selling products and connecting businesses never changed.

Any impactful change management journey, at its heart, is just this. Change cannot be for the sake of it, and ‘agile’ cannot simply be a buzzword thrown about in boardrooms and used to justify risk-taking. Change must be backed by data, insights, and real foresight into what the future holds, without compromising the company’s primary responsibilities.

# There’s no such thing as an overnight success

Rising bar graphs, positive reviews, and a surge in market interest always begins internally, through a painstaking and often long-drawn change process involving hundreds of employees, stakeholders, and even multiple companies working towards a shared vision.

Around 2015, Amazon’s undeniable success made another industry leader sit up and take notice. Wal-Mart had always been a ‘brick-and-mortar’ company, but quickly realized that in the digital era, you either change, or lose customers to your competitors. The company acquired e-commerce platform Jet.com, and in 2018 has bought a stake in India’s Flipkart. While these moves fortify the company’s market presence, they also stir the internal pot significantly – teams need to merge, offices need restructuring, and policies demand a complete rethink.

When rolling out enterprise-wide change, on a large, incremental scale, it’s important to recognize and leverage change networks. These are the people who can aid your change strategy, ensure business isn’t disrupted, and employee discontent is contained and resolved.

# The role of change networks and how HR can harness their potential

Companies that blindly focus on formal structures, often ignore the ones that are informal – networks formed by their most important resource, the people.

Successful change implementation relies on buy-in from three kinds of people. First are ‘brokers’ or people who link multiple teams. This could be your regional HR head, the admin person, IT support professionals, or even an employee who has been with your company for years now – earning respect, trust and credibility, regardless of his or her designation. This segment can help negotiate inter-team or inter-branch conflicts.

Next are ‘leads’ or central connectors, the people capable of influencing an employee set, grouped by team, region, designation, and so on. A mentor is a central connector for interns, and a team lead for his or her reportees. The ‘brokers’ in conjunction with this group can effectively communicate change to the third group – the employees.

Remember, this is an informal structure, meaning one individual can hold more than one position and needs to be treated as such. A network approach has helped several companies address change, easing growing pains and allowing employees to collaborate effectively after a merger or acquisition.

With Wal-Mart now entering the e-commerce space, where it competes against industry stalwarts like Amazon or Alibaba, several internal positions could be reassessed. Their president and CEO Doug McMillon famously said that “we need more speed and less bureaucracy” – and never has this rung truer than now, as we move from overarching digitalization to a more targeted intersection of technology with core business objectives and operational blueprints.

# HR leaders, change evangelists, and making tech a part of ‘everyday’

These days, you rarely hear of change without digitalization fitting into the story. Can we picture a major M&A move without integration of employee portals? Can a business-focused pivot come without new apps or solutions to support the change?

It’s important to adequately understand the impact of all these prongs, and guide employees through change on personal, organizational, and tools-centric levels. Here are 5 steps, that I believe could help transform your team from change-resistant, to change-champions:

**Acceptance is all-important.**

Change will always evoke an emotional response, which needs to be fully unraveled. The introduction of a new technology in the workplace, for instance, can make older employees feel apprehensive about upskilling, or even becoming redundant. It’s only acceptance that can help air complaints and lay the foundation for meaningful discussion.

**Assessment guides the transition.**

Change impacts every individual differently, and the distinctions need to be analyzed and studied. This process allows objective evaluation, often alleviating much of the initial emotional recoil, eliminating unnecessary ‘chatter’.

**Action is a driver for the 'new'.**

After the response stage, once the immediate and lasting impacts have been fully identified, it’s time to outline the pathway that can make change a reality. This includes mapping all the people involved, the processes that need overhauling, and connecting with your change network. The key, here, is to not rush or give up when faced with teething troubles.

These are inevitable, but never unsurmountable.

**Acknowledge what's working and what isn't.**

It’s helpful to break the change process into “bite sized” components that can be executed and achieved easily, moving one step closer to the envisioned result. These offer “small victories” that can encourage employees, keeping them on track and motivated.

**Actualize the need for change and the involvement in the process.**

**T**aking ownership is key to any change strategy, at any level, and approaching this with a sense of humor and optimism can help sustain the process. A change champion must truly believe in the vision, and lead by example.

Today, our primary employee-base is a 'millennial workforce'.

The millennial worker looks for simpler, faster, smarter processes, from the moment he or she walks in. Traditional systems are slow and protracted, taking days to complete routine tasks, such as employee code generation. A smarter way to keep these employees energized and engaged is to use technology to help simplify outdated or complex processes, while also enlisting support and assistance from other teams/divisions to create a sense of ‘oneness’ and collaboration.

This makes any kind change, a more balanced and well-defined reality.

# Don’t shy away from change – industry myths, and what’s actually possible

You might have heard this statistic recreated and replicated in different contexts, that 70% change programs do not succeed. However, what’s often left out of the narrative are the reasons, and how to resolve them. Employee resistance is often cited as a big contributor, and poor planning could also play a major role.

The thing is, in this day and age, these are not deal-breaking factors at all. State-of-the-art business intelligence and assessment tools can offer insights into your company’s future pathways and strategies. Emerging learning tools are paving new ways to upskill your employees, ensuring they aren’t just equipped to tackle change, but can also proactively participate in the process.

Often new and innovative program, like placing senior executives in unfamiliar but enriching environments, could encourage fresh thinking. This helps generate new ideas – cultivate a readiness for change – and later, these ideas could be used to derive differentiated value across the product or service line. As a result, employees are always on the cusp of change and alternate perspectives, revitalizing their skill-sets and expertise.

There you have it. Change, must be effectively percolated across the organization, keeping in mind the 'human side of things' and ensuring every employee or stakeholder is one with the migration. Finally, as mentioned before, the key thought driving the change, is essential. It must bring genuine productivity improvement and have a lasting effect on a company's value systems and business targets or goals.

Change, with a purpose, is the true motivator for growth and development.