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How can change and transformation be more ethical?

How can we be more ethical in the way we manage organisation development and change, to ensure it's done with, not to, our workforce, asks Sally Hopper

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You don't have to look too far to uncover the statistic that around 50–70% of organisational change fails ([Pasmore 2015, p xv](#); [Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011, p199](#)). What does this mean for the practice of organisation development (OD)? We spend half to two-thirds of every hour managing change that doesn't land – and this has a real business and human impact. What's going wrong?

Let's be clear; change isn't always inherently wrong and is often a commercial necessity. However, many current change and transformation programmes aren't managed ethically in a way that pays attention to the social environment of the workplace. We can place too much emphasis on project plans and fail to engage with the employees who will be impacted by the change. This approach fosters uncertainty and disillusion across the business and contributes to failure.

Traditional approaches to change management

In my experience and research, the way we manage change has relied on models like [Lewin's three-step process](#) of unfreezing, managing and freezing. Most modern change models suggest completing a series of linear stages or phases ([Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011, p261](#)). Project management courses such as Prince2 advocate driving

change within a controlled environment.

Two words stand out: 'linear' and 'controlled'. The harsh reality I have learnt during my career and academic research is that the working environment is far from linear or controlled. It is incredibly unpredictable.

To think otherwise loses sight of the power relations and politics that exist within our everyday social interactions at work. In other words, transformation is not linear at all. Often, senior leaders direct what change needs to happen, detached from the reality on the ground. Not only are there power relations at play between senior leaders and employees, but also between senior leaders and those managing the change.

Change in practice

To manage change there is a tendency to begin by crafting a plan with key milestones, plotting the various stages of the project. In one such project, we produced something of a work of art complete with colour-coded red, amber and green indicators to help us see at a glance the project's progress and manage the risk. The process of producing a project plan was a ritual, giving a sense of control.

Then came the big day when the senior leader announced the change to the workforce. Upon hearing the plan, employees started to talk about and challenge it, and things appeared less clear. The staff affected by the change were left displaced and unsure. As the cracks began to show, nobody wanted to tell the senior leader that we didn't ask the right critical questions, engage with employees, or plan for the human side of change.

Then we entered change overdrive. We optimistically tried to smooth things over and save face rather than admit that we hadn't anticipated this reaction or appreciated the power relations at play. Our carefully constructed project plan made no mention of how to manage the expectations of those impacted by the change. Colleagues started to disassociate themselves from the change and played down uncertainty. The prevalence of those power relations was heightened. Challenging the change was incredibly tricky.

Of course it's necessary to create positive messages about change, but it's also essential to respond to negative feedback and allow constructive challenge. Instead, we continued with the programme as planned and positioned it in a positive light. We developed what [Alvesson and Spicer \(2016\)](#) refer to as organisational amnesia, where we only seek positive news about change.

Thinking critically about change

The next change programme I led left room for iteration. I reflected upon previous experiences and didn't leap into relying on a project plan or seek to control the outcome. Instead, I walked the floor and ensured my team and I spent time with employees. We encouraged managers to talk openly to their staff about the change. These upfront discussions provided rich pickings. We started to think more critically about what change meant for us, why it was necessary and what we were trying to achieve.

From this we gained a more ethical and humane understanding of the people the change would affect. The transformation became part of the employees' everyday interactions rather than an abstract 'thing' controlled elsewhere. The change required less of a hard sell to the workforce as they became engaged with it in a meaningful way.

These two contrasting approaches teach us some valuable lessons. Managing change in a linear and controlled way leaves little room for iteration and engagement. If we don't pay attention to what is going on in the everyday lives and interactions of colleagues, effective change is unlikely to land.

We need to recognise this and adjust our approaches. Otherwise, change becomes unethical. If we don't consider the impact of transformation in the short and long term we create uncertainty for the workforce.

Real, rather than superficial, engagement is also vital. You may have identified your key stakeholders but beyond identifying them, have you spoken to them and allowed space to think and interact in an open and uncontrolled environment? Authentic engagement encourages dialogue around what the change will mean for the people affected by it. Otherwise, we consign people to a faceless list of key stakeholders.

Creating ethical transformation

How do we change the rate of failure around change? First, we need to consider the part we play in this failure. We often depend on a plan and various theoretical linear models to manage change, all of which temporarily bring about a level of certainty. Yet, in reality, our social workplace environments don't fit these models. Ignoring this and 'sticking to the plan' makes change unsustainable and ineffective. It creates unnecessary stress and uncertainty for employees. In turn, this impacts employee well-being and limits the workforce's engagement with the change.

Second, we need to measure the human impact and use this to evaluate how we manage change. It is not easy to measure the social consequences of change, but this is something we must focus on as people professionals.

Finally, we need to think critically about change. Often, we operate on directives from

senior leaders, but let's not lose sight of the staff who are impacted by those directives. Critical thinking can highlight what won't work or what needs to be in place to facilitate change. We should combine this thinking with courage. We need to be challengers, not facilitators, of organisational development that appears doomed to fail. It can be a delicate balance to strike, but it is necessary to ensure that change and transformation are ethical. Critical thinking and professional courage provide less certainty than a project plan, but I argue they lead to more ethical and ultimately successful change in the long run.

The CIPD's series on the state of play in organisation development can be found [here](#).
