

Challenges of change

Six strategies for avoiding the pitfalls of change

The one overarching constant in the modern workplace is change. In the vast majority of situations, change in the workplace is a positive transformation, designed to help an organisation achieve its goals more effectively or efficiently. But without the right strategies or understanding to manage the process, change can quickly become a focus of negativity and distrust.

Suki Reilly, MovePlan Global Chief Operating Officer, outlines six strategies to help avoid the pitfalls of business change in the modern workplace.

There are as many different kinds of workplace as there are different kinds of businesses, so managing change in the workplace is never a one-size-fits-all exercise.

Nevertheless, there are common areas where projects are prone to coming unstuck. Understanding these challenges and how to deal with them is essential to keeping the project on track.

1. Communication vs engagement

For many people, a “change programme” means a communication plan. But in reality, it is about much more than that. A rigorous change programme should cover both communication and engagement. Communication is about transmitting information, whereas engagement is about making a meaningful connection.

Communication might be bulletins, emails or townhall meetings, whereas engagement might be focus groups, social media interaction, roadshows or one-to-ones that generate real engagement. Both are needed for a successful strategy, but people quite often just focus on communication – the easiest part – and don’t think of the engagement.

The risk is that by focussing too much on communication, you end up with just one-way communication – a monologue – when it really needs to be two-way, a dialogue.

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One project we worked on suffered from uniformly poor participation, with a low level of interest and very limited buy-in. Sometimes this happens on projects. When the only constant is change, people can get change fatigue.

We decided to give people an idea of what their new building would feel like to increase their sense of participation and engagement. At this point, the new building was just a building site, so we put a roadshow together with mock-ups of the furniture, the collaboration spaces, the coffee machines, the gym provider, the food service provider, even local shops and suppliers in the area, to show staff what the new building could offer.

We also had our designers there, and while we didn't have the budget for a full VR presentation, they were able to really bring the plans to life. Giving people the opportunity to have a digital walk-through of the new building meant they could imagine themselves in the new space. It helped to translate the new experience into real life and helped them to visualise themselves in the new building.

We followed this up with scavenger hunts, jeopardy games, competitions with prizes for the tidiest storage space, anything to make it fun and engaging, to give them an idea of what life will be like in the new building. And it worked. Participation and engagement levels shot up and the change programme was a great success.

2. Speak the same language

The workplace is full of jargon and acronyms. This can vary between internal teams like HR, IT and workplace, that often play a pivotal role in many change programmes. To avoid confusion, it's important to precisely define the terminology at the outset, so everyone understands the same language.

If you're talking about agile, open-plan, activity-based working (ABW) in collaborative spaces, make sure that everyone has the same understandings as to what that means. Don't assume that everybody knows what ABW is, what agile means, or what collaborative spaces are. Opaque jargon or a misunderstanding over terminology risks creating distrust or disengagement.

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3. Know the audience

You need to know your audience before you can communicate with them effectively. It enables you to identify the right type of engagement for leadership, departments and individuals – and even service partners, because service partners need to know how to service the space.

Engage with the different groups of stakeholders and understand how the process will impact on them in different ways. You can't employ a one-size-fits-all approach. Communication and engagement for an individual will be different to that for a service partner, and it will be different again for leadership.

Focus your communications and engagement. Take each of those audiences through the five stages of ADKAR (awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement), to make sure you've got every person covered. Also, don't be afraid to reassess or define a new audience during the course of the programme: the goal is to effectively manage change.

4. Disengaged leadership

Even when leadership supports a change, there is often a tendency for them to disengage during the preparation; the idea of 'come back and see me in six months when you're done'.

Try to avoid this separation. If leaders are excited and engaged, that energy will spread through the organisation. Don't take them for granted. Keeping them in the loop means keeping the organisation connected – enthusiasm is contagious.

In one project, MovePlan was working with a vocal but disengaged leader, so we enlisted other leaders to activate their support, and went back to the original leader to understand his concerns. We were able to reassure him about the new environment, and we backed this up with continual one-on-one interaction.

We also worked with the other leaders to help them understand how they were going to work in their

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departments in the new building. Building trust and creating accountability for the role meant they could recognise that they were leading the change, and they could see how it could work in the new workplace. This level of close engagement was instrumental in bringing all the senior leadership team into the fold.

5. Siloed workstreams

Any programme needs to consider people, place and technology. In most businesses, this will mean the HR, corporate real estate, and IT functions are critical.

Corporate real estate usually manages the space event, whether it's a new building, a lease break, or a building refurbishment. There's an HR element to putting any workplace strategy in place, because there are people involved. Then you have technology, which is a huge enabler, because you can't do any of this without technology. There's no point saying you're going to focus on collaboration, for example, if you don't give people the technology to be agile.

The central role of these three functions, however, does not mean you can ignore the others. Consider the design team, the business-as-usual facilities team, the front-of-house team, the security team, other service providers. The new way of working, or the new modern workplace, will affect all these functions.

6. Don't ignore resistance

No matter how well planned, managed and communicated, it is almost inevitable that every change programme will face resistance at some stage. As frustrating and demotivating as it might be, it should never be ignored. At MovePlan, we always work with our clients to deal with resistance head on. Identify it, listen to the concerns and do what you can to address them. If you don't, it's likely to lead to bigger problems further down the line.

In some ways, vocal resistance can be a positive thing, because then you know what you're dealing with. If one person is vocal about something, there are likely to be

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another 20 who share the same concerns but are less vocal. Never shut people down in these situations because their input reflects the issues people are concerned about. It shows where the gaps are.

Ignoring resistance and refusing to engage with people's concerns will simply create more dissatisfaction, more rumours and more mistrust going forward. Transparency is absolutely vital. Find out what people are worried about and then address it.

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About MovePlan

MovePlan is a leading provider of change and move management services across the globe.

Founded in London in 1986, we have over 30 years' expertise in specialist change management and relocation services.

We are proud to be a female-owned and female-led business. MovePlan was set up by Group Chairman, Cathy Ridley, and 90% of our senior leadership team are female.

We are adept at working smoothly with internal and external stakeholders, securing project buy-in at all levels. Thanks to our unique MovePlan Toolkit© and in-house training academy, our team are highly skilled and certified in the same proven processes and tried and trusted methodologies.

The fact that over 70% of our work is through referrals and repeat business demonstrates the confidence clients have in the reliability, quality and consistency of our services.

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