Operations change management made easy to explain and execute

The vision and benefits of operations change must be concretely translated in a way that demonstrates what both mean to the future of the organization, and for the future of the individuals directly or indirectly involved. The following offers advice on how to make the larger vision readily comprehensible to the many and the one.
“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.”

- Charles Darwin, Naturalist

Darwin’s work revealed something special, and very practical, about the sprawling spectrum of organisms that inhabited the natural world he studied: Adaptability is the indispensable ingredient in our quest to survive. So it is for the ever-evolving global business enterprise. Inhabitants must either adapt to change, migrate to a new environment that can accommodate them as they are, or face gradual (if not immediate) extinction.

Asking people to adapt is to ask them to change not only who they are inherently (inherited traits) but also who they have sought to be (traits willfully obtained and continuously refined to secure a necessary advantage). Therefore, change presented in terms of the self-interests of individual stakeholders is change worth “adapting” to because this type of change offers the best chance of realization.

A change manager must recognize differences in how change is perceived depending on the varying self-interests of the parties involved. For example, a change manager is very likely to face organizational leaders who appreciate the need for change, and who are relentlessly focused on seeing that progress toward change can be concretely measured. However, he or she is just as likely to meet middle managers who warily ask, “So, it’s your job to manage change. What do you really do?” Leaders must understand change management is more than the sum total of measurable outcomes. Middle managers, meanwhile, must avoid reflexively dismissing ongoing change management efforts as a futile waste of time, or worse, as a Trojan horse that conceals an agenda they would not otherwise welcome.

**Moving from resistance to voluntary engagement across the entire organization**

Change managers must have a strong understanding of human responses to change, and a strong resolve to take high-profile actions based on those responses. Viewed systemically, change management is the mechanism in which project goals are achieved with the participation of all stakeholders. Their voluntary participation is key to realizing project and organizational objectives. The none-too-easy trick is to move reluctant stakeholders from their varying initial postures of resistance to unchained engagement in the challenge at hand. Again, you must begin by recognizing that everyone involved has a different visible need and perception of the project. Their respective self-interest in meeting the “principal challenge” (or not) is as unique as any fingerprint. However, there are shared drivers in how everyone views, receives, and responds to change. We have found these drivers can be identified and managed en masse by working through the following series of questions.

**Questioning change**

What every project manager and stakeholder involved needs to ask and answer

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<tr>
<th><strong>Stakeholder level Qs</strong></th>
<th><strong>Manager level Qs</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why are we doing what we are doing?</td>
<td>What’s the larger vision driving the change?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why do I need to do, what’s ‘the ask’ of me?</td>
<td>What are the personal goals they must keep in mind?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What value will this change deliver to me?</td>
<td>What are the clear benefits of meeting those goals?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will I get the resources to do what’s asked?</td>
<td>How will they be empowered to reach their goals?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will concerns I identify be addressed, and how?</td>
<td>How will they be allowed to influence the larger process?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How will I be kept fully informed and engaged?</td>
<td>What’s the plan for maintaining 2-way communication?</td>
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With these questions answered, the next step is to give thoughtful consideration to other challenges across various levels of senior management. For example, do priorities on the broader management agenda complement or run counter to the priorities set for your initiative? If so, how might the desire to meet those priorities affect leadership’s expectations for your efforts? Once this bit of due diligence is completed, you must use what’s been learned to lead those within the upper echelons of the enterprise through the preceding list of questions. They should consider aspects from the stakeholder’s as well as the manager’s perspective.

As you do this, remember that change management is about bringing differing organizational perspectives into alignment. It’s
about identifying common denominators in those varying perspectives and using them to motivate all stakeholders to work for change. It’s about selling an end goal, with a clear promise to deliver on the expectations you have set. It’s about providing a regular reality check that reminds stakeholders all may not be well in the short and medium term as we work through the growing pains that come with embracing much-needed change. Those are sizable objectives. They can easily overwhelm stakeholders if the larger vision is not made simple to understand. In our work, we achieved this simplification by framing our overarching challenge under five structural pillars.

The 5 pillars of change management

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<th>Simplify (to create vision and understanding)</th>
<th>Identify (stakeholder expectations across levels)</th>
<th>Plan ahead (to manage, engage and involve)</th>
<th>Invest (in change capability)</th>
<th>Prepare (to sustain the change)</th>
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When you are making a sales pitch in a Latin American or Asian market, ideally, you would not do it in English. Likewise, change management teams must be capable of translating the vision for change into languages and contexts that can be readily understood by project participants across the horizontal and hierarchical spectrum of the organization. The urgent need and expectations for change must be communicated in whatever strategic or tactical vernacular these audience segments will most welcome. The alternative is to leave various stakeholder groups to do their own translations. This invariably leads to misinterpretation of what is expected of them in the current environment, and in new operating state just over the horizon.

“Linguistic breakdowns” in understanding the mission can have direct consequences when, in truth, there is no great difference among involved groups in the type of change that should be made, and what end state is most desirable. Such breakdowns often lead to misalignment in stakeholders’ perceptions of the benefits to be shared. That disconnect becomes particularly problematic when (a) stakeholders are having difficulty maintaining operational stability in the face of change initiatives or (b) they are further challenged to cascade the vision down or across teams and to then persuade team members to accept the vision presented and execute on it.

The vision for change and the benefits must be concretely translated in a way that makes clear what they really mean for the future of the organization, and for the future of the individuals directly or indirectly involved. If not, stakeholders on the receiving end of unclear communications may strongly resist. This is especially true if the stakeholders misconstrue the immediate impact of change as highly undesirable. There are also times when a specific initiative or broader transformation has a severe personal impact even as the change being implemented benefits the overall organization. Given all these possibilities, clear communication is vital. Your job is to understand (and show others) the difference between legitimate apprehension and stakeholder misapprehension, and then refine the messaging accordingly over the life of a change management effort.

Last, you must ask, how do you make the vision and shared benefits clear to key individuals or stakeholder groups that may have little to no direct incentive to act? There are no real shortcuts here. However, in our experience certain basic rules can be applied to manage all stakeholders in a timely and fair fashion regardless of how the change effort directly or indirectly affects them.

Identify your major stakeholders and map them according to their viewpoint on the project. Be brutally honest by including views of those likely to be most critical. That may mean widening the circle of people whose opinions you seek. Make a true effort to understand why they feel and behave as they do. This understanding will form the basis of how you attempt to align them with the objective. Remember, it’s about translating a vision so it appeals to all stakeholder groups, and this is how...
you reach that end. Communication in the various forms it plays is the key.

Tell them all you can before the need to know becomes apparent. Always openly and honestly share what you can, as early as you can. Concede to a certain amount of uncertainty while promising it will dissipate over time. Even if there are open ends to tie up before details can formally be shared, it’s better to begin sharing informally with those directly affected. The alternative is to let a deafening silence speak for you (and to permit it to suggest the worst to apprehensive stakeholders who can’t help but listen). Change management is about building trust and confidence through your communication. Sometimes it’s also about forging partnerships built on forthrightness that let you say: “We don’t have all the answers yet about how we will reach our goal, but we are working toward them, and as we move forward we will keep you posted.” Such candor gains you trust and credibility, and pays untold dividends if you must deliver hard news.

No matter how simple and aligned with the flow of organizational activity, change efforts must still be carefully orchestrated and planned to maintain alignment and drive enablement. This nuanced task requires you try to influence without giving the impression you are. So plan, but ensure there is enough flexibility to move around and adapt to the environment. A keen ear to the changing environment is the key to successful planning and executing an agile and responsive plan.

Keep stressing the end goal in every interaction. Across project phases, it’s important to keep teams and leadership continually focused and aligned to the end goal. Then, in moments of struggle and extended effort, the goal stands as a promise of the future. And, in moments when an intermediate success is realized on the long road to change, the goal acts as an energizing reminder of the bigger prize to eventually be won.

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Many times, change leaders fall into the trap of aligning a person to execute a plan and assume the action needed will be taken. They presume their job is done when it’s really just begun. Change capability must be driven across the enterprise to gain from the combined energy of the teams. Again, we are not saying everyone should become change practitioners; just that there must be investment in the organizational culture, and methods for understanding and accepting changes, whether fast or gradual, must be developed. Coaching and training play a key role here by helping people understand and make time for change and, in essence, communicate in the right modes and forms.

Hear concern, and give it voice. Often as managers focus on driving toward an end goal they make the mistake of assuming teams on the ground can blindly execute based on the instruction flowing from the top. In our experience, the people we deem executors or “task closers” have a viewpoint they feel must be heard. Often, they also have specific insights into the project that are relevant and critical to the endgame, and could save lots of rework or backtracking down the line. We found that by sounding out these stakeholders you make them part of the process. That inclusion ensures the end goal is thoughtfully pursued and reached as expected (as opposed to someone reflexively completing an autocratically dictated task to the letter, yet not achieving the intended result).

Let stakeholder group representatives make key execution decisions. Once the end goal is expressed, executing on it collaboratively will serve to drive wider acceptance among project participants. Though bringing critics and resistors into the tactical decision-making process may be more work at first, getting them on board up front will make for a smoother path as you close on your goal. Recognizing where reluctance or outright resistance is valid also helps establish you as a change manager deserving of follow-ship even if lingering doubt remains about the end goal. We’ve also discovered that actively inviting dissenters into the change management process allows the project team to access and share additional information that proves very helpful. One warning: Don’t underestimate the value of this effort, or the merit of engaging resistors along with motivators.
and believers. Closing the loop only at leadership levels won’t do. Remember to do so across all execution levels.

**Sustain stakeholder involvement and commitment to change.** Keeping people engaged is as important as getting them engaged. It’s essential to the success of longer-term projects where focus can be easily lost as you get pulled to and fro by shifting priorities. As pressure for deliverables increases, there’s a tendency to forget or de-prioritize the importance of a particular engagement. This is true not only for project teams but also for stakeholders. Different priorities and time conflicts will continue to challenge commitment. To realize progress and achieve the end goal, be sure to vigilantly maintain touch points. The focus on cost control and maintaining momentum can also lead you to lose sight of the need for continuous engagement. To always link back actions and expenses to the ROI on change management efforts, carve out time and dedicate budget resources expressly for this cause.

Ultimately, you want to implement your change programming in a timely, practical fashion that’s relatively easy to execute. Thankfully, when managing change within the parameters of a discrete project it can often be reduced conceptually to a series of down-to-earth, pragmatic actions. In many instances, it is a simple matter of taking obvious steps.

The catch is you often have to take steps in areas of the enterprise where change management isn’t a focus—places where its value isn’t inherently understood and/or hasn’t yet been adequately explained to those whose commitment is paramount.

Your ability to recognize varying contexts in which change must be directly affected determines to what degree and speed you can affect it. Change management is not merely about changing minds; it is also about establishing an organizational “state of mind” that’s fertile enough to allow the seeds of change you sow to take root and grow.

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**Create** inspiring messages that encourage involvement

**Prove** you can transition and “let go” in a timely way

**Rank** change high on your list of priorities

**Avoid** rigid planning; flexibly move with tide instead

**Establish** a strong leadership coalition

**Have** all involved move as one team at crucial times

**Secure** the (silent) backing of those in C-suite

**Pair** active change with active communication

**Form** strong change teams at all levels

**Show** a desire to know/connect with key stakeholders

**Give** teams the trust and room to do their “change magic”
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