

# Ringling the changes

As the public sector grapples with an accelerating pace of change, **Jill Flint-Taylor** looks at how leaders can keep staff motivated and focused during radical upheaval

**W**e hear much about the accelerating pace of change these days, and organisational change that might have seemed cataclysmic in the past is now accepted as normal. An increasingly common example of this in the public sector is the planned deconstruction of entire organisations. This might be an agency whose role has been split between two newly restructured government departments, or an entire department that becomes a casualty of a major shift in policy.

In some cases this is managed very effectively and in others much less so – often with negative consequences for staff and the public they serve. I want to draw on my recent experience of working in this context to explore how leadership teams can keep staff focused and motivated when radical change lies ahead.

There are, of course, no easy answers or a single formula to follow. But observing leadership practice in radical change scenarios has thrown up a few clear differentiators of success. The first is communication. It is well known that the communication of change is a critical factor in sustaining the commitment and motivation of staff – but what does this mean and why is it so important? The answer relates to the number one demotivator and stressor for staff in change situations: the feeling of not being able to control events.

For communication about change to be effective, it must be designed to give those affected the feeling that they have, at least in part, some control over their destiny. The first mistake many leaders make is to delay communication in the well-intentioned belief that it is better to say nothing until they can be clear about the detail of what is going to happen and how it will affect people. This invariably creates a situation where rumours abound and people's energy is sidetracked into anxious speculation.

In this situation, proactive employees will do what they can to take back control and one of the most damaging effects of this is the loss of talent. Organisations that are managing themselves out of existence usually rely on their most talented people to help manage the transition and to continue their work in the new organisational context. However, too many leaders assume such people know that they are valued and that their careers are safe within the new structure. Failure to make this clear often results in the most talented being the first to leave – because they have the confidence and skills to do so.

Successful leaders also look for opportunities to involve people in decisions and to show them that their suggestions have been taken into account, even if the decision has negative implications for them. Both of these approaches significantly increase feelings of control for staff.

Communication is not the only differentiating factor in successful change. It is important to do everything possible to provide people with the resources they need to continue their work, even as colleagues leave and budgets are cut. Similarly, the risks of overload and underload should be carefully managed. Team and individual development should also be a priority – the investment will pay off in both the short and longer term, even though it may seem difficult to make a business case at first.

Leaders also need to give people a clear sense of purpose to ensure their continued engagement during the transition and beyond – this may change week to week, but that's fine as long as staff have clear, specific objectives for their own work. Don't be afraid to make these goals challenging either. One of the most damaging effects of winding down an organisation may be boredom or "rust-out"! It's also really important that leaders provide staff with a compelling vision of the long-term gains to be made by the change; even if they are not going to be around they can still derive motivation from putting the foundations for the future in place.

Public sector leaders are increasingly selected and rewarded for their commitment and ability to drive change through the organisation – the press is full of high-profile examples who build a career on their track record in this area. These recruitment decisions are designed to support significant improvements to service delivery, but they also carry certain risks that must be managed.

The very characteristics that make someone a successful leader of change can, if taken to extreme, impact on staff in a way that puts the whole process at risk. Such leaders need to be careful not to promote change for change's sake, confuse activity (change) with productivity (improvements), embrace change without taking time to think through the implications or value new ideas more than achieving tangible results. A diversity of leadership styles is key here, ensuring that the leadership group rewards follow-through, delivery and long-term results as well as ideas, innovation and pace of change.



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