

Change: it's a lot more than choosing a new name

Short-term fixes dressed up as structural change can do more harm than good, says **Georgia Kerr**. Successful change management requires real commitment from everyone involved

Planned changes to skills funding in England due in April have come under fire from critics. The Skills Funding Agency (SFA) is due to replace the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in a bid to simplify and streamline skills funding.

On the face of it, this is a sensible move in a climate where efficiency gains are on the agenda for most departments most of the time. But the criticism is that the management team from the LSC is also going to be that of the SFA. So it seems like a case of “spot the difference” and hardly a recipe for radical change.

I don't want to be too negative about this management team when they haven't even started yet, but the example raises an important point about the challenges of managing and achieving cultural change.

Organisational culture has been widely written about in management literature and broadly refers to the “personality” of an organisation. Essentially, it's the set of

beliefs, values and attitudes which guides “the way things are done around here”.

In the past 15 years change management specialists have popped up in almost every corner of the economy – sometimes to good effect, but in other cases giving the topic a bad name. Big promises of “culture change” expertise and change management methodologies have been made by consultancy firms and there is a certain amount of scepticism these days. For many, culture change is simply not tangible enough to take seriously.

One thing is for sure, though – sometimes culture change is required and it can rarely be a quick fix. It's not something that a change in title can achieve, or even a change in senior personnel, in and of itself. It is a long-term journey based on a clear vision that an organisation needs to embark on from several different angles involving staff along the way; as opposed to a discrete six-month project led by external consultants.

At best, the latter can result in superficial changes, which may or may not become permanent. More importantly and worryingly, short-term fixes in the name of change often result in feelings of apathy, cynicism or even anxiety from the employees who hear about change, but never get any specific guidance or leadership around it let alone see the benefits from it.

Leadership plays a huge part in setting and shifting organisational culture. In the SFA example, by keeping the management team in place, one has to ask whether any sustained changes are likely. If this team has created the change strategy and is fully committed to it there may be hope. However, if it created the LSC strategy and is having the SFA vision imposed upon it by the government there

are likely to be issues with buy-in. Involvement is critical for making change happen, especially when it comes to the management team.

Getting leadership support is an important first step, but is not enough. Unless the key aspects of change are bought into at every level and in every department, real change is unlikely.

And this must be more than paying lip-service – line managers need to be on board so that they will sell the change to their teams. Full commitment is required – including accepting some level of discomfort and inconvenience along the way. This may mean change on a very broad scale: team structures; established procedures; the competencies against which people are selected and appraised; changes in personnel. The bottom line is that if there is a real determination to do things differently then it's all up for grabs.

One thing is key – the changes must be part of a cohesive strategy and should not take place in silos. This silo effect is never more apparent than in large, national organisations – where change led from the centre so often fails to result in anything more pervasive than discussions around the coffee machine about what “they” are trying to do now. Once the change is seen as being driven by “them” rather than “us” you are on a downward spiral.

Adopting a few key principles can maximise the chances of success:

- Identify and acknowledge the size of the specific change challenge
- From the start, ensure good communication between the people leading the change
- Communicate the change to the whole organisation in a planned, comprehensive and engaging way. The change needs to be lived
- Get an external perspective – this doesn't need to be a consultant. In the case of the SFA, for example, it could be a new non-executive director
- Be flexible – give line managers the freedom to communicate and manage change to suit their own team's culture
- Acknowledge that a fundamental culture change requires a challenge to the status quo and to behaviour that no longer fits with the new culture
- Be persistent – in most cases, if you stop driving the change then the change stops – so be aware of what the desired end state looks like and beware of new initiatives that may derail your change process.

These simple principles can go a long way to ensuring change is more than giving the organisation a new name.

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