

Make or break: The universal enablers and derailers of change

Our own research has shown us that although change can take many forms,¹ there are core enablers and derailers that can make or break a change no matter the context.

Enablers

Co-creation

When leading a change you need to find a way to bring people with you on the journey. That way is through co-creation. Get this right and people will feel valued and empowered. Get it wrong and negative effects will linger, with the lack of participation resulting in high levels of 'change cynicism'.²

Key tips

Co-creation needs to be done at the right time so ideas can be actioned. It also needs to be implemented systematically so it doesn't kill momentum. And, it needs to involve as many people as possible without certain groups feeling excluded from the process.



Two-way communication

Successful change is not a linear process but an iterative one; it involves a continual cycle of reviewing, refining and reimplementing. Leaders therefore need to have their ear to the ground when implementing change, constantly tuning into how the change is progressing and how key messages are landing.

Key tips

Issues that arise will need to be heard, reviewed, and learnt from. To respond effectively, leaders should set up the right channels for two-way discussion and prioritise feedback at every opportunity.



A safe environment

During change, people must be able to sense-make, raise concerns and ask for help. Emotions run high in change and are extremely contagious, so it's vital that questions and issues are aired openly rather than festering away unseen as people don't feel able to speak up.

Key tips

Set the tone of sense-making sessions from the top by having key leaders explain why it's important to be honest and get the real discussions out on the table. In addition, upskill managers on how to support people through change and spot the subtle signs which suggest that someone might be struggling.



Future-vision reality

For people to really get behind a change, they need a compelling and vivid vision to buy into. Specifically, leaders should give people enough detail to understand what the change will be like in practice.

Key tips

As much as possible, give people a realistic preview of the change. If there's going to be a relocation, take groups on a tour of their new offices. If a new CEO is coming in, have them do a webinar. If teams and roles are changing, run events where people can experiment working on a project with their new team.



Derailers

Underestimating the "human stuff"

Implementing any change is like navigating an emotional minefield. Whether it's a new IT system or total restructure, our brains will be on high alert for potential threats.³ No matter what the context, leaders should not underestimate the emotional fallout that comes with change.

Key tips

Factor in the neuroscience of how our brains respond to change by providing open and honest communication, allowing time for people to make sense of the change, and using a strengths-based approach to forming new teams.³



Lack of upskilling

There are a number of valuable skills people need to perform successfully during change, including resilience, negotiating, decision making and storytelling. However, our research suggests that equipping people with 'change skills' just isn't something the majority of leaders think about.

Key tips

It's often assumed that business performance will drop during change. Yet, this doesn't need to be the case. Carry out a gap analysis of the skills people have and the skills people need to implement the change successfully. Then run targeted training and development to fill the gaps.



A disconnected leadership team

Our research suggests there are various ways a leadership team can be disconnected during a change. They can be disconnected from:

1. People's real concerns. What leaders assume people understand, want to know and are concerned about, doesn't always match up with what people actually know, want to know and are concerned about.

Key tip: don't second-guess, find out. Hold Q&A sessions where leaders can answer the questions people really want answers to. It's also important to provide people with opportunities to send in anonymous questions.

2. The current change. By the time a change is launched to the business, leaders will already be planning the next one. Consequently, there's a tendency for leaders to take their eye off the ball when it counts most.

Key tip: leaders need to visibly support and champion the change when it matters most (i.e. at launch and roll out). It's important to remember that while, in their heads, leaders may have crossed the finish line on that change, the rest of the business has just set off from the start line.

3. Each other. Leaders often approach change initiatives from very different perspectives and with that comes a range of opinions for the course of action.

Key tip: it's important that any differences in opinion discussed in the boardroom do not leak into the rest of the organisation. For change to be successful, the leadership team needs to present a united front, with everyone formally and informally embodying the agreed change.



Whilst there are any number of factors that can underpin the success or failure of change, our research has suggested that these are the most likely culprits. These will be your biggest headaches and your best success secrets, so remember them when planning and implementing your change.

To find out more about our approach to change, [click here](#)

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