

Leading Change: *The Jagged Edge*

The implementation of change almost always occurs in an uncertain, 'jagged edge' manner. This is due to behavioural factors such as low psychological ownership, lack of confidence and fear of the unknown, which if left unaddressed have the potential to derail everything. However, effective leadership can sharply reduce behavioural resistance and improve the acceptance and application of a new way of doing things.



'It's easy to change the things that nobody cares about. It becomes difficult when you start to change the things that people do care about - or when they start to care about the things that you are changing.'

Lorenzi and Riley

Situation

Change is a constant. However, it affects each person differently according to real or perceived personal and professional loss, and in doing so impacts on the rate of take-up which is often a trade-off between the long and short term.

Further, one person may see the change as merely a variation of current practice while another may see it as being asked to do something significantly different. Marzano et al. (2005) refers to this as the difference between 'first' and 'second-order' change. It's not the change itself that matters, but the implications of the change for those charged with carrying it out.

The type of change also adds to the 'jagged edge' effect.

- **Operational change** (e.g. the automation of notification of absences) impacts on day-to-day activities, and is typically felt at the lower levels; whereas the upper levels may never notice them in their daily work.
- **Political change** (e.g. restructuring) impacts on policy and structure as part of partisan politics or internal power struggles and is typically felt most at the higher levels and is rarely noticed by those working at the lower levels.
- **Strategic change** (e.g. moving to online courses) impacts on service direction.
- **Cultural change** (e.g. inclusivity and service focus) impacts on values and beliefs and is typically felt across the board.

Solution

Implementing change takes time and constant attention until the new ways of working are ingrained in people's habits. Managing the resistance and converting it into commitment and enthusiasm must be a planned process.

- **Identify** the roles of those involved, being careful to recognise multiple roles, and constantly monitor whether roles are changing.
- **Provide** time for staff to learn new practices. Change requires effort to learn the new, and can take time and energy from other tasks.
- **Make** a convincing case for the advantages of the change. Although some may welcome the learning opportunity, many won't want to invest in it unless they see overwhelming reasons to do so.
- **Gain** the support of middle management. Change initiatives often result in shifts to their personal and organisational status, and if they resist it can be the undoing of the change before it starts.
- **Ensure** people feel good about themselves. People like to take pride in their work, feel responsible for a job well done, feel they are part of a quality organisation, and that their contribution is valued.
- **Accept** that some will move ahead faster than others, but don't accept saboteurs; work closely with them to minimise their concerns and influence, while maximising their take-up.

'Start with good people, lay out the rules, communicate with your employees, motivate them and reward them. If you do all these things effectively, you can't miss.'

Lee Lacocca



- **Pay** attention to the sub-culture. People often use strategies unknown or misunderstood by management to gain control, belonging and significance from their work. Change initiatives can, unknowingly and unintentionally, cause angst as these are disturbed.

One of the most difficult problems educational organisations face is dealing with change. It's never seamless and always occurs with a 'jagged edge'. Individuals give up familiar routines and, in some cases, their position, power and networks of friends and colleagues as they have to change the way they work. In all cases, leadership practices are crucial in assisting people to let go of the old and move on to the new.

As a leader, ask yourself:

- 'How do I deal with change?
- What is my current change challenge?
- What is my role as a change leader and what do I need to do differently?
- What is my default leadership style when faced with driving significant change?
- How do my change style preferences impact those around me?
- How do I ensure we have leadership capability for change throughout the organisation?'
(Dinwoodie et al. 2015, p. 3).

Key Points

- It's not the change that matters, it's the impact on those charged with carrying it out. One person's micro-change is often another's mega-change.
- All change involves loss. Involve people affected from the outset to clearly understand the impact and resolve difficulties. Let the people do what they do best - think, be creative, and solve problems.
- Implement change without wasting opportunities and resources.
- Change nearly always occurs in an uncertain, 'jagged edge' manner.

References

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