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Thought Leadership: **Changing how we change:** **overcoming resistance to introducing new policies**

In with the new

The only constant, someone once said, is change. Why, then, are we so afraid of change, and why is it so hard to effectively introduce something new? This Thought Leadership piece briefly outlines some key considerations in introducing a new policy, or any other change, in your organisation.



It's fear of uncertainty, not change

When it comes to change, we're usually afraid of the uncertainty of the unknown rather than the change itself. That's because, as Futureye's [Daniel Abbas](#) explains, change naturally triggers emotional or psychological responses in us. Those responses often lead us to fear the worst, feel a loss of control or set off our "outrage triggers".

"What typically makes it worse, which makes people feel even more afraid or resentful, is these responses aren't recognised, which means there's little chance to engage in rational dialogue about what's actually going to happen," Daniel says.

"People are more concerned with the injustice of it and failure to recognise the things that trigger that emotional or psychological response to change. So they're not able then to think along a rational narrative because they're focused on that reaction, which is quite rational from a psychological point of view but not very rational when they look at the actual impact of the change."

So, if you want to introduce a new policy or drive change in an organisation – and actually get people to act – how do you overcome this natural human resistance? The key is in the preparation or, as Daniel Abbas puts it, "it's not what you say, it's how you say it."

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The typical approach – and a better way

The typical approach is company management takes a decision and announces it. This approach creates an adversarial situation, where the decision is defended by one side and resisted by the other.

Two hallmarks of a more effective approach to change are having a 'genuine conversation' and sharing control *before* decisions are made.

A genuine conversation is a two-way consultation, where the results of the consultation inform the strategy implemented. That consultation is wider than just those impacted by the change; it should involve each party with a view on the change, including external organisations such as unions, and is not confined to those with a 'supporting' view. This approach helps identify the real issues because it creates a safe environment for all views to be explored.

The first step in sharing control is what Daniel Abbas calls 'declaring a dilemma', adding that not sharing control in decision making exaggerates psychological triggers. Even well-intentioned management, who take into account all factors that impact their people, are still taking all the responsibility for deciding the change.

"We acknowledge there are a number of different directions we could go. Importantly, we're telling you about all the forces at play. We don't have all the answers but we feel responsible for solving this, and that's what we call declaring a dilemma," Daniel says.

"And then you acknowledge some of the shortcomings. It might be that previous attempts haven't worked as well as we'd like or we don't have a track record at being good at this. That's quite different to the approach that doesn't work. When you're in the defensive mode of the typical approach, you tend to jump into benefit selling, where you continually tell people why they should adopt this thing you've pre-determined for them.

"However, the more we sell the benefits, the less likely people are to support them, and it will undermine trust entirely if you discover some of the negatives about what's being proposed by yourself.

"So it's not just about what you decide, it's about how you decide it."

An environment where genuine consultation is undertaken and control is shared encourages people to engage because they know it is worthwhile, making them more invested in the change process and its outcome.

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Investing for next time

Daniel Abbas has some other key tips to consider before embarking on this more consultative approach to instigating change or a new policy:

- In sharing control, management should be comfortable with the level of control shared;
- What is the organisation's culture around conflicting views? Is there, for example, a fear-based culture where only supporting voices are welcome? "We find that culture is the one that typically leads to a refusal to share control and to run a genuine two-way conversation with people who have contrary views," Daniel says.
- If culture change is required before you can undertake a genuine change process, does the organisation have the capability and understanding to implement a more consultative approach?
- Understand the network of influence in the organisation so you can properly involve people. Consider who is or will be most engaged with the topic rather than whether they're likely to support or oppose the change.
- Consider what's negotiable and what isn't? For example, market shifts may necessitate a change in services offered to remain competitive. That's not negotiable. The process to implement that change is. "Quite often it's remarkable how much people realise is entirely negotiable – and that enables an authentic conversation," Daniel says.

One final critical aspect in the change process is to evaluate the effectiveness of a new policy or progress of an internal change. That brings accountability, making people more willing to engage next time a new policy or change is raised.

Investing in change – 10 key considerations

- We're naturally hardwired to resist change
- It's not what you say but how you say it
- Preparation prevents poor performance
- A genuine two-way conversation improves engagement
- Sharing control helps drives effective change
- Do you have the culture or capability to achieve the goal?
- What's really non-negotiable, and what is negotiable?
- Create a safe environment for all views to be shared
- Outline the agenda, don't keep it to yourself
- Evaluate progress to create 'investment' for future change

"Whatever the change or the policy is, it won't be the last one," Daniel says.

"If the experience of being involved previously was 'I'm not sure where that went', 'we developed a policy but I don't know if it was effective' or 'I don't understand the connection between what we talked about and what we've done', the next time you're asked to be involved in something, you'll moderate your view of whether it's worthwhile based on your experience the previous time."

Futureye Director Daniel Abbas is an experienced management consultant and technologist with a background in business and digital transformation and particular skills in business strategy, innovative business models and building agile organisations.