
Advances in Project Management Series¹

Who killed change?

Reconsidering the relationship between projects and change

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Society is full of potential change agents agitating for improvement, enhancement and further development. Aspirant initiatives range from improving public services, reforming government and available services, and engaging younger voters in politics, to the transformation of organisations, the successful implementation of mergers and acquisitions, and the development of digital presence, experiences and perspectives to corporate life, social communities and consumer behaviours. Yet, while change is ubiquitous to thriving societal and organisational life, change initiatives continue to flounder at an alarming rate. The poor success rate of change initiatives has intrigued change management and organisational psychology researchers and practitioners for over half a century. The remainder of this article focuses on some of the leading insights into change management and its successful adoption.

Leading change

In 1995, Harvard Business School Professor, John Kotter, published the results of a 10-year study of more than 100 companies that attempted major organisational transformations and turnaround projects (Kotter, 1995). His research highlighted the eight most significant errors made by organisations seeking to implement change programmes that can doom any change effort (and are slightly enhanced and expanded below):

Error 1: Not establishing a great enough sense of urgency: Often augmented by underestimating the difficulty of driving people from their comfort zone, or becoming paralysed by risks.

Error 2: Not creating a powerful enough guiding coalition: Potentially relegating change leadership to a functional manager, instead of seeking a senior line manager or sponsor with the ability to connect across silos and functional units.

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK and by Routledge publishers worldwide. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower/Routledge *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To see [project management books published by Gower and other Routledge publishers](#), [click here](#). Prof Dalcher's article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ.

Error 3: Lacking a vision: Presenting a vision that is too complicated or vague to be communicated briefly and effectively.

Error 4: Under-communicating the vision: May include missing opportunities to sell and present the change, settling on a single communication channel (e.g. a single meeting or one leaflet), or not getting executives to behave in ways that support the proposals.

Error 5: Not removing obstacles to the new vision: Obstacles may include organisational structures, culture, processes, systems or individuals, and may thus require changes to risk taking approaches, and the acceptance of radical or revamped approaches and ways of thinking.

Error 6: Not systematically planning for, and creating, short terms wins: Transformation takes time, so potential pitfalls to success may hinge on not including visible short-terms goals that can demonstrate achievement, failing to provide compelling evidence of success, and failing to identify and score success early enough in the process.

Error 7: Declaring victory too soon: Not recognising that early performance improvements are only early wins and thereby leading to failure to consolidate improvements and deliver more of the agreed upon change.

Error 8: Not anchoring changes in the corporation's culture: Potential failure to create new social norms and shared values consistent with the required change, or failure to promote and create a succession plan that is consistent with the new transformation.

Kotter maintained that many managers failed to recognise that transformation is a process rather than an event:

'The most general lesson to be learned from the most successful cases is that the change process goes through a series of phases that, in total, usually require a considerable length of time. Skipping steps creates only the illusion of speed and never produces satisfying results. A second very general lesson is that critical mistakes in any of the phases can have a devastating impact, slowing momentum and negating hard-won gains.' (ibid.; p. 59)

Realising that implementing change takes a long time can therefore improve the chances of success. Successful delivery of change requires advancing through stages (roughly corresponding to the errors discussed above) that build on one another. According to Kotter, pressures to accelerate and fast track the process, will encourage managers and leaders to skip steps, and these shortcuts are ultimately likely to lead to failure...

So, who killed change?

Change is often devised in order to improve the *status quo*, but the mere intention to effect such change invokes opposing emotions and feelings and fosters active and

intentional resistance. Italian diplomat, politician and philosopher, Niccoló Machiavelli memorably wrote: *'There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things'*.

Change is intrinsically difficult. Kotter and Cohen (2002) asserted that in order to make a transformation endeavour successful, one must change more than just the structure and operations of an organisation; indeed, the key challenge is to change people's behaviour. Garvin and Roberto (2005) likewise identified the key obstacle as the reluctance of most people to alter their habits:

'What worked in the past is good enough; in the absence of a dire threat, employees will keep doing what they have always done. And when an organization has had a succession of leaders, resistance to change is even stronger. A legacy of disappointment and distrust creates an environment in which employees automatically condemn the next turnaround champion to failure.' (ibid.; p. 26)

Ken Blanchard and his colleagues offered a novel perspective on the issues impacting change initiatives (Blanchard et al., 2009). Their published book features yet another failed change initiative with a hero attempting to solve the mystery of *Who killed change?*.

The unfolding mystery described in the style of a business whodunit offers insights into change. The investigating agent examines the scene and is able to identify thirteen potential suspects most likely to have been involved in the snuffing of change. The full list of suspects features a number of familiar faces encompassing culture, commitment, sponsorship, change leadership team, communication, urgency, vision, plan, budget, trainer, incentive, performance management and accountability. The unfolding case depicts shortfalls in all thirteen areas, drawing suspicion to each and all of the suspect characters. For example, Clair Communication is suffering from Laryngitis. Change, it appears, cannot survive when communication is faulty or non-existent. Perry Plan is always late, thereby continually disappointing all interested parties. Victoria Vision is myopic: If vision cannot see properly it is unable to support its role. Meanwhile, Earnest Urgency is always late and fails to inculcate the dire need for change.

The story also encompasses additional witnesses, the stakeholders, and their view of the demise of change. The stakeholders assert that there are a number of barriers that are mostly ignored by senior and middle management, which are only observable by front-line employees and engaged supervisors. The stakeholders see a different side of change that is not visible to the senior management team.

Many factors can contribute to the failure of change initiatives. Indeed, all the aforementioned characters play a part in the death of change, by combining their flaws and impacts to suffocate the initiative. The short answer to who killed change is everybody through acting together and interacting.

However, the autopsy report compiled by the investigating agent identifies three perilous, yet typical, assumptions:

- People leading the Change think that announcing it is the same as integrating it.
- People's concerns with Change are not surfaced or addressed.
- Those being asked to implement Change are not involved in the planning.

The assumptions appear to hold true for many organisations and change endeavours offering a further understanding of the shortfalls of change efforts.

Where is the project manager?

Reassuringly, the project manager was not one of the characters directly responsible for the failure (arguably because they were not around when the change was conceived – or when the business case was being developed).

However, change management is increasingly creeping into the discussion surrounding the success of projects. Project managers join the dance of change further down stream when many aspects are already defined, agreed, and in play. They are increasingly called upon to utilise change management approaches to address the softer aspects of change, leadership and stakeholder engagement, and directly engage with all the normal suspects.

Yet, there is little guidance within the profession regarding the role of change in projects. This month's column begins to address this gap. The article by Nicola Busby is developed from her book, *The shape of change*, recently published by Routledge. Nicola draws attention to the scope of business change in projects. Her worked example shows the importance of understanding the impact of change, not just from a practical perspective. Indeed, by employing strategic tools, she is able to show a need to consider wider aspects of leadership, culture and behaviours that contribute to the demise of change. Above all, the example confirms that if we change the way we look at things, the things we look at (and therefore the potential ways of addressing them) change.

Nicola's work supports the change journey of organisations and initiatives from a pragmatic and workable perspective that enables change agents to shape their efforts and tailor their approaches to delivering change. Her focus on stakeholders and their role, is essential to making sense of engagement and resistance, laying the foundations for addressing support, communication and learning needs within organisations seeking to keep change alive and well.

The value of the approach is in highlighting essential aspects of a project that cannot be accessed through typical project management routines or expectations, thereby augmenting existing approaches and encouraging a longer-term perspective on change. Russian author, Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, better known as, Leo Tolstoy, lamented that *'everyone thinks about changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself'*. Professionals often need to change themselves and their approaches in order to improve, develop, and fundamentally alter their performance. Nicola's book encourages project managers to consider the impact and scope of change and develop new and informed approaches that are able to leverage the new understanding in order to enhance change efforts and their likelihood of succeeding.

Reprising change

Project managers are increasingly aware that the success of their projects and resulting products extends beyond technical implementation and handover. Indeed, the success of many change efforts relies on the outputs being utilised and used regularly in order to deliver the stream of benefits and thus realise the promised value. Such changes in behaviour and the acceptance of new patterns of engaging with systems and technologies can only be enacted through engagement with stakeholders and users. They also imply understanding organisational, cultural and social expectations and norms and working to deliver meaningful and sustainable change.

Change is messy and frustrating; often requiring muddling through and making sense of the participants and their preferences, unpicking the individual needs and priorities and the different aspects and contextual elements of a situation. When change efforts fail, it can prove extremely difficult to untangle the diverse influences and priorities of the various actors and participants and determine conclusively who killed change.

Yet, identifying the culprit, is less important than avoiding the unfortunate death of change endeavours. It is typically reckoned that, at the very least, two thirds of change initiatives flounder. Developing a range of new perspectives and extending our repertoire to encompass change management tools and frameworks, may not eliminate the death of all change initiative, but can make a new start towards reducing the list of 'usual suspects' that threaten the health of new change efforts. It can also encourage society, the economy and our corporations to aim higher and deliver more sustainable, more prosperous and more meaningful and relevant change endeavours.

References

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