

will you be champions this season?



by matt hardy

Winter is coming. The start of a new season in each of the football codes comes with a renewed sense of hope about the future, building on an off-season full of deep reflection and review of past performance, competitive benchmarking, personnel changes and new goals. And increasingly more talk of ruthless execution, and of personal pledges to the team or organisational ethos.

Successful coaches know the importance of the base work in the off-season, and how each pre-season builds and builds until there is a peak of capacity or potential to win premierships.

So too do good organisations manage themselves when it comes to change. It's all in the preparation, or their pre-season, when they can review and act on past performance and focus on emerging needs and opportunities.

At Right Lane we have worked with a wide range of organisations from many different sectors, and seen first-hand how they deal with the seasons of change that are always on their horizon. It might not be a new 'season' in the same clearly defined manner of a calendar or sporting season, but most clients are dealing with a season of change, be it driven by changes in customer preferences, competitive intensity, technology, or political or regulatory developments.

We have reflected on all our experiences and learning from more than 60 different clients, and absorbed the literature

and case histories, to focus on what differentiates those organisations who defy the research of people like Harvard's Michael Beer and Nitin Nohria, who concluded that 'the brutal fact is that 70% of all change initiatives fail' (2000, p.133). The work of John Kotter reinforces this stark statistic: 'If you're like most of us, you've been part of a failed change initiative. Change is hard and few organizations master it. At best, only 30% of such efforts succeed' (2012 p.4).

What comes through clearly are some basic principles that will go a long way to determining whether the outcomes of change management match the ambitions. The principles might seem like common sense, but if they were more commonly applied then the success rate of change management projects would be much higher.

As new football coaches can sometimes find, people are naturally resistant to change; they prefer continuity and stability, the known and familiar. Change is seen as a potential threat to something: continuity, certainty, status and influence. Change by its very nature is hard for us humans – where we have a choice, we commit to change only if we believe we can and will get to a better place because of it.

Studies of change failures show that some of the most common elements are poor communications and engagement, insufficient investment in the 'human' aspects of change. This is often evident in one or more of the following:

Right thinking

- We need approaches to defy the findings of researchers like Harvard's Michael Beer and Nitin Nohria, who concluded in their 'Cracking the Code of Change' that '70% of all change initiatives fail'.
- Successful change management means doing five things right:
 1. Leadership from the front
 2. Clear definition of the change and the change-readiness
 3. Face-to-face engagement with your people on the 'what', 'when' and most importantly 'why'
 4. Change implementation actions that cater for human behaviours as much as necessary process changes
 5. Structured approach to change.
- One of the key factors in successful change initiatives is investment in, and understanding of, the 'human' aspects of change, such as energy levels, attitude, culture, change-resistance, bias, role-modelling, inter-disciplinary rivalry, and competitiveness.

- Leaders who do not effectively and convincingly communicate the goals, the thinking and the benefits, and are not seen to be driving or sponsoring the change. Studies show that effective sponsorship by senior leadership is the single most critical factor in the success or failure of organisational change (Prosci 2012)
- A lack of clarity or transparency regarding what the goal of change really is, what has to be done differently to reach that goal, and how the change outcome is going to outweigh the effort of implementation
- A lack of 'buy-in' – people want to feel that there is a sense of trust and confidence in them and a shared knowledge relating to the change, and they want to play a part in the thinking, shaping and implementation
- No compelling plan – people's confidence is partly shaped by the quality of the approach to the change. Does the plan make sense? Is there evidence it is timely, considered, viable, well planned and appropriately resourced?
- A 'set and forget' approach to change management. Change requires adaptation and so does change planning. Successful implementation requires taking the pulse of the organisation, identifying change resistance and dynamically addressing the barriers to change.

Most industries have undergone substantial change in recent years, be it technological, economic, cultural, geographical or regulatory. And those changes across multiple fronts will continue, so it is behovent on organisations to develop more change-strength.

Organisations need to carefully develop their own change management capacity, but we believe that these key principles matter most.

1. Ensure the senior team truly leads the change.
2. Define the change and the change readiness.
3. Engage people.
4. Address 'human' and 'process' actions.
5. Take a structured approach.

1. Ensure the senior team truly leads the change.

All five principles need to be done well and concurrently, but this is where the axiom of 'in the end is the beginning' comes to life.

Surveys consistently have this as the number one pre-requisite for successful change. If leaders do not consistently evidence they are absolutely engaged with the change, then people will quickly pick up on that.

People like to be led, at least in the hierarchical structures that exist in most organisations, and they will warm to and respond to those they feel will lead them to a better place. And if they are not so convinced, they are less likely to follow.

Leaders demonstrate their engagement in their language and behaviours. They can bring focus and energy, provide resources and support, articulate, motivate and listen. And the people around leaders can be highly adept at picking up the signals that leaders send, whether consciously or sub-consciously, about what matters in their environment.

The other important aspect is that in addition to the leadership of a board or senior executive team, there are leaders, or pivotal players, in every part of the business, and their support and behaviours can also seriously elevate or negate any proposed change.

These factors are evident in football teams. Think of the rise of leadership groups within football teams or the criticism team leaders get when their heads drop during games.

2. Define the change and the change readiness.

Research shows the importance of being very clear, and having a shared view, on what the change is. It is the same whether the change is organisation-wide or much narrower, incremental or rapid. It still requires a clear understanding of what impact the change will have on people, and how it might impact their sense of involvement, security, status or role.

The other key aspect is to have a clear and shared view on the organisation's capacity to absorb and undertake the change. From the get-go, do the decision-makers and implementers have a shared confidence that the organisation has the capacity to effectively implement the change? Is there enough energy and appetite for the change?

In football, the notion of a three year rebuild is an attempt to manage expectations and give a team a realistic context within which to change.

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3. Engage people.

Once the organisation knows the 'what' of its change, it has to then focus on the 'who' and the 'why': Just who do we need to engage to ensure this change is successful, and how do we best achieve that engagement?

There has to be convincing answers to some basic questions: Why are we changing? What is our change story? What is the extent of the change? How will it impact me? Why should I care? A combination of listening and story-telling is how leaders and their people understand what needs to get done and why the change is worth doing.

However, people pose the questions in the workplace, we've found that it helps clients to employ the ADKAR scale, a model developed by Prosci (Hiatt 2006) to help organisations understand whether their people know why they should change. For those not familiar with it, it helps organisations identify where their people are on the scale of Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability and Reinforcement, the building blocks needed for change to be successful: Awareness of the need for change, Desire to participate and engage in the change, Knowledge of the skills and competencies needed to successfully change, the Ability to perform the necessary skills and the Reinforcement to sustain the change.

These insights help to inform the initial engagement, and then continue to inform it, because the scale is not static; that is, people's place on it evolves during the change process.

Football teams frequently find it difficult to sustain new team structures and can be scored against heavily while they learn new game plans. They also find out more about themselves as they go along, and make adjustments to style, structure and personnel to adapt accordingly. And so it is with organisations. Leaders need to reinforce the compelling need for change as their people's resolve is tested, and leaders also need to be in tune with their people to recognise the need to adapt the course without adapting the destination.

4. Address 'human' and 'process' actions.

The process part is what is usually pretty evident and expected: the mechanics of the project, timeliness, phasing, measures, targets and so on. It involves hard data and facts about what has been going on and measuring or mapping the impact of changes.

The human part is often the subject of less investment, but is probably more potent and can still be measured. This goes to people's energy levels, attitude, culture, change-resistance, bias, role modelling, rivalry and competitiveness. Whatever is in people's mindsets will be evidenced in behaviour at some stage during the change process. Having a deep understanding of those mindsets can help prevent a project failure, underwrite its success, or even take the project beyond its intended levels of success.

'Human' actions recognise the need for congruence and consistency in order to behave in the new way – practically this means actions such as visible role-modelling (leaders walking the floor and asking about the change, reinforcing with verbal and email support, rewarding new behaviour) as well as compelling story-telling and open communication. Process change actions include reinforcement through updating operational and personal performance measures, as well as visual metrics, strategic updates, and training and development of the new skills and capabilities required by the change.

Key human and process actions in football include cultivating competitive instincts by building up a rivalry or 'us against them' mindset, as well as measuring progress against known predictors of performance (in the AFL context, clearances, contested possessions, etc.).

5. Take a structured approach.

People asked to implement or absorb change need confidence in the game plan, and the steps that will be taken from ambition to achievement. Successful change management will usually be based on a very structured, clear and deliberate approach. In much the same way, we see the best kickers in football go through a very consistent and deliberate approach to executing their skill. Successful execution is the result of a range of separate but connected steps, each creating the basis for the next step.

For champion football teams, as for all organisations, success comes from embracing and dealing with change, which means investing in a very considered and committed pre-season before tackling the challenges and glorious opportunities of a new winter season.



References

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want to know more?

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