



AGILE CHANGE
management limited

Selling change to reluctant stakeholders

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Introduction

Effective change management involves influencing, motivating, and persuading those impacted that they want to abandon their current ways of working, and are excited about adopting new approaches.

The changes we want to implement do not become a reality unless those that will have to work in the new way adopt them as new routines and habits. Change cannot be done by the few to the many, change is a contact sport that involves the engagement of everyone. Inevitably this means that we need to work with those who do not want to change. There is a famous model that captures this dilemma, highlighting that there will always be those who adapt quickly to changing circumstances and those who remain committed to the current status quo.

This paper is about persuading those who want to continue the current ways of working that change is needed. Specifically this paper addresses those who have "evidence" on their side, because the current situation is successful.

Current persuasive messages

Selling the benefits of change to someone who is very happy with the status quo is our biggest challenge. As Change Agents (irrespective of our job title!) we must mobilise all of those impacted by the change, getting them to participate in creating the new ways of working and taking ownership. It is their new ways of working, not ours so we need them to take the lead.

This selling message is a complex mix, highlighting the advantages and improvements offered by the new ways of working, whilst emphasising how it the change fixes current problems and issues. However, these two streams of benefits are a weak argument if the current ways of working are effective, achieving great results and are commonly regarded as "best practice".

In these circumstances, those being asked to change have strong reasons for ignoring the change and staying as they are, and it is often difficult to disagree, especially when they are backed up by measurable evidence that the current ways are delivering great results via customer feedback; staff engagement; revenue and profitability measures.

Traditionally we market the benefits of the future by targeting two perspectives:

1. **Fixing the problems of today** – we highlight how the change will address issues and problems by introducing a "better" way of working. However, this can be interpreted as a negative message because it implies that things are not as good as they could be, and that staff are not doing the best job possible, so improvements are needed.
2. **Explaining the attractiveness of the future state** – we highlight all of the advantages and improvements of the new ways of working. However, this can be a problem when it is no more beneficial than the current ways of working, because these are already so good. The obvious resistance is "why suffer all the disruption of change to achieve nothing better than we already have?"

The new case for change

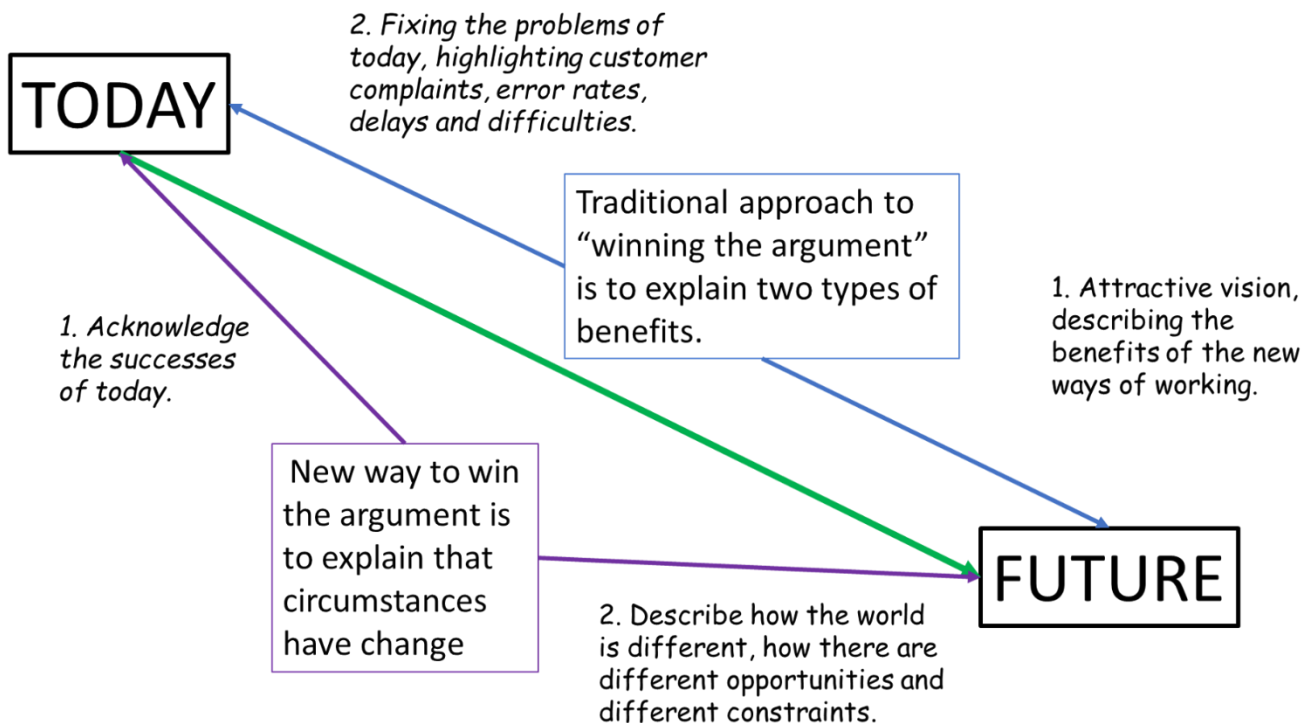
To create a sense of urgency and build support for change in these circumstances requires us to make a different case for change, looking at it not from the perspective of the change, but from the perspective of the situation that is driving the need for the change.

State that the change is needed because how work is carried out today is based on the circumstances of today. The future will be different, and whilst what they are currently doing is fit for purpose now, it is not fit for purpose in these different, future circumstances.

Provide as much evidence as possible about the new circumstances that we face, identifying different possible scenarios that we will encounter as the future is not certain, but we can highlight factors that will give us an understanding of how things might be different.

To give structure to this description, use models including McKinsey7S and the PESTLE and SWOT assessments.

At the same time, be empathetic about the current situation. Be honest about the successes that the team enjoys today and congratulate them for being so good. Commiserate about the effort required to change, acknowledge the losses they will experience and the disruption to their well-established routines



Example

I have first-hand experience of this, working on a change to how children are educated, and arguing the need for change with Head Teachers running amazing schools, with brilliant levels of pupil involvement, parental support, and fantastic exam results.

To tell these Head Teachers that there is a better way, and that the changes I am proposing will fix their current problems was nonsense. After all, I am proposing a possible future, with anticipated benefits, and they have evidence from the current situation. Putting their definite benefits against my potential improvements is a weak argument, coupled with the disruption to pupils and staff during the transition to the new ways of working.

Instead I got their support for doing things differently by talking about how their superb results were a testament to their educational skills, recognising that they would need all these skills to make the changes being proposed.

The rationale I gave for the changes was that the current approach worked for the assumptions we have today about what children need from their education. The objective of education is to prepare pupils for the future, and especially the future of work and society so that they are equipped to cope. After all, educators are preparing children to go out into the world, so that is the future state that is relevant to them.

I used research from consultancies, academics and “think tanks” to describe possible scenarios for the future of work, and how that was going to be so different from what we have today. By explaining all the ways in which society and technology will come together to require different jobs that we have not even invented yet was a powerful argument for changing today.

It made the point that we cannot continue as we are, and that as the future continually evolves, education practices must evolve with it.

Conclusion

I think the Covid crisis gives us an opportunity to consider what the future of work is, enabling us to develop powerful arguments for the changes that we have been planning to make within our organisations. I know I am involved in a number of process efficiency and technology adoption transformations that will benefit from the arguments presented by the new societal norms that are likely to exist after the immediate crisis has passed.

We cannot know everything that is going to be different, but we do know that when lockdowns end we will be returning to a “new normal”. This gives us the opportunity to re-invent today. To help you achieve this, use my guide to factors to consider for the [“new” normal](#), the post-Covid future.

About the author

I have been responsible for the successful delivery of effective change and for creating environments that support transformational change for over twenty years. I have an impressive track record of successful consulting assignments and I am an acknowledged thought leader in Change Management.

I am the Chief Examiner of the Agile Change Agent qualification from the accreditation body, APMG-International. I am also the UK Country Lead Change Management Institute and a respected author of text books and articles on change, project and programme management.

To access more resources about change management, connect with me on LinkedIn
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