

By SARAH LEWIS

➔ How do you help your client manage change in their organisation when so much of what we know about change isn't necessarily true? Let's dispel the myths and find some new approaches that will help leaders on their journey

IF YOU'RE COACHING a leader through organisational change, there are a few myths it is important to dispel.

In my experience, most people seem to believe that 'people don't like change' and 'change is hard'. Neither of these statements is necessarily true, as we see below. What is true is that the way we understand organisations, understand change and go about achieving change, can make the job much harder than it needs to be.

So if your leader wants some help managing change within their organisation, here are the myths you need to tackle.

Myth 1

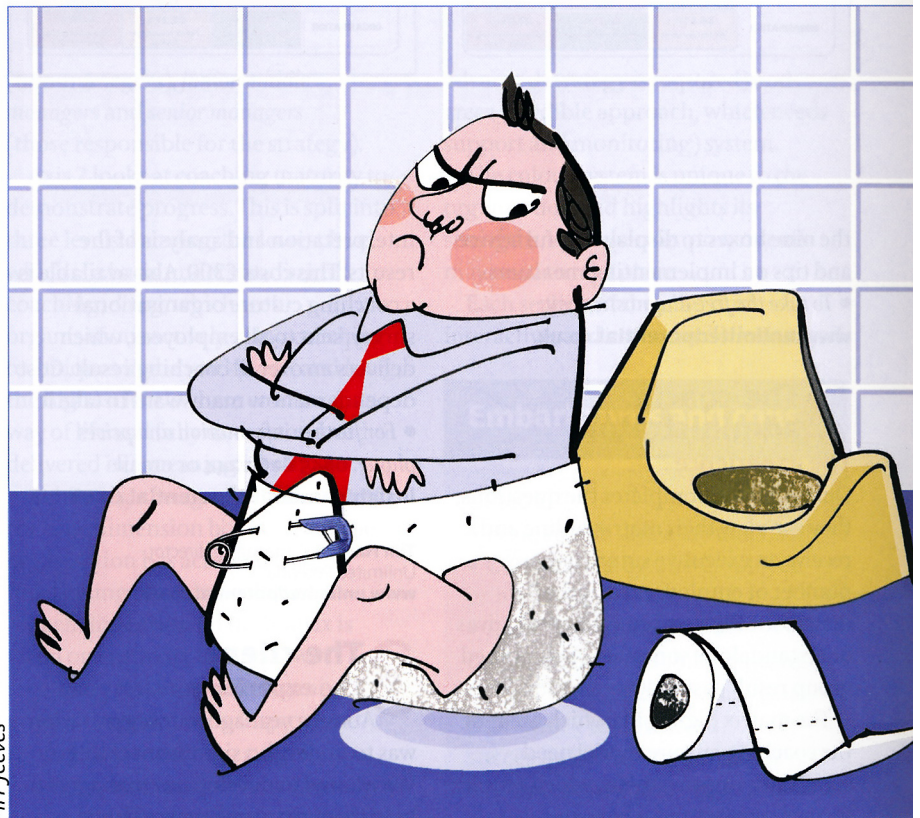
You can't implement the change until you have thought through every step and have every question answered

● *Not True.* In many situations it is enough to have a sense of the end goal, or key question, along with some shared guiding principles about how the change will unfold.

For example: 'We need to produce our goods more efficiently' or, 'How can we cut our process times?'

With these in place, leaders can call on the collective intelligence of the organisation as it embarks on learning by doing.

This 'all-seeing' belief leads to exhaustive energy going into detailed forecasting, ie, paralysis by analysis. It slows things down, allows rumours to fill the information vacuum and creates feelings of disempowerment. Worst of all, it disregards the huge knowledge base that is the organisation, thus wasting organisational assets.



Myth 2

You can control communication within the organisation about change

● *Impossible!* People are sense-making creatures who constantly work to make sense of what is happening around them. By withholding information we still convey something – usually distrust or secrecy. But more than that, in this day and age, with so many communication channels instantly available to people, there is no chance of being aware of everything being said about the change.

Instead, leaders need to focus on making sure they get to hear what sense is being made of what is going on

so that they can contribute a different or corrective perspective.

This 'control' belief leads to embargoes on information sharing, 'until we have decided everything' and much investment in finding 'the right words' to convey the story of the change. Meanwhile, people are free to make their own sense of what is happening uninhibited by any corrective input from management.

And when the carefully chosen words are finally broadcast, the leadership is often dismayed to discover that they don't work to create a shared sense of the meaning of the change.

Myth 3

To communicate about change is to engage people with the change

● *Not necessarily.* People start to engage with the change when they start working out what it means for them. They become more engaged when they are asked questions, such as: 'How can we implement this here?' 'What needs to be different for us to be able to...?'

The belief that communication alone equals engagement leads to an over-emphasis on communicating about 'the change'. Staff hear managers talking endlessly about how important this change is, yet no one seems to know what the change actually means for people.

To be part of this scenario is to suffer a confused sense of: 'But what are we talking about?' This, in itself, is usually symptomatic of the fact that at this point there is only a fuzzy picture of what this much-heralded change will mean for people.

Myth 4

Planning makes things happen

● *Sadly no!* Creating plans can be an extremely helpful activity as long as we realise that what they do is create accounts and stories of how the future can be. Until people translate the plans into activity on the ground, the plans are just plans.

This belief in 'plan as action' fuels a plethora of projects and roadmaps and spreadsheets of interconnection, key milestones, tasks, measures and so on. People can invest time and energy in this, fondly believing that they are 'doing change'.

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A much more energising alternative is to bring people together to start exploring 'the change' and generating ideas for action, and then to write documents that create a coherent account of the actions people are taking.

Myth 5

Change is always disliked and resisted

● *No.* If this were true none of us would emerge from babyhood. Our life is a story of change and growth, of expansion and adaptation, of discovery and adjustment.

It is not change itself that is the issue, it is the effect that imposed change can have on things that are important to us: autonomy, choice, power, desire, satisfaction, self-management, sense of competency, group status, sense of identity and so on.

If we attend carefully to enhancing these within the change process, then there is a much greater chance that it will be experienced as life-enhancing growth, like so many other changes in our lives.

This much repeated and highly prevalent belief leads to a defensive and fearful approach to organisational change, inducing much girding of loins by managers before going out to face the wrath of those affected by the change.

What next?

So, what is the alternative? How can you help the leader you are coaching?

Many new approaches that focus on achieving collaborative transformation are emerging, such as Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space and World Café.

These approaches recognise organisational change as a collective effort. They work with the best of the human condition – the importance to us of our relationships, our imagination, our ability to care and to feel and to create meaning in life.

By using these techniques you can help release your client from the impossible responsibility of foreseeing all possibilities, and instead encourage them to liberate the organisation to find productive ways forward together. ■

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