



CHANGE MANAGEMENT

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The Spiral of Action (Resource Material 14) outlines the change planning process. A structured approach to assessing and managing risk (Resource Material 15) can help an organization anticipate what might go wrong and limit the likelihood of unexpected changes. This Resource Material offers some useful guidance on implementing a planned change process and dealing effectively with changes that cannot be predicted.

It includes:

- creating conditions for change;
- dealing with the unexpected;
- anticipation of change;
- management of the most difficult situations.

An environment conducive to change

Dealing with change is never painless, but with forethought and good management the process can go smoothly.

Especially important are the procedures for making the right decisions quickly when needed and so people learn how to make quick decisions in difficult situations. Make sure there is a clear delineation of authority in the absence of key people. For example, who makes the decisions during a crisis if the chair, vice chair and managers are absent?

It is necessary to develop an organizational culture in which:

- change is seen as a positive thing;
- people do not hesitate to express their feelings about change, whether positive or negative;
- situations are resolved calmly and practically instead of with panic;
- emphasis is placed on creating options and taking action to cope with changing situations,
- rather than focusing on anger, guilt, or the feeling that they have become powerless victims of external circumstances;
- has clear objectives, priorities and policies (see Resource Materials 14 and 21) so that decisions about change, even those that need to be made quickly, are made in a coherent structure;
- people show respect for the chair, board members and managers and recognise their right to make decisions, sometimes in haste and without time for adequate consultation.

In practice, developing good administration and information systems (see Resource Material 24) and ensuring more than one person knows how to manage them means that the organisation will not fall into a helpless state if an employee falls ill or leaves unexpectedly.

Parameters of change

The key factors in change management are:

- ensuring as much control over the situation as possible by anticipating change, recognising possible risks and developing different measures;
- the inclusion, as far as possible, of people who will be affected by the change in decision-making;
- acceptance that some aspects of the change will be negative and an attempt to reduce negative impacts on individuals and the organisation;
- recognising that nothing will go exactly as expected and maintaining a sufficiently flexible stance to changing situations.

The skills and processes involved in change management depend on its nature. In general, it is more difficult to manage changes that are unexpected, originate outside the organization, or have long-lasting effects; it is easier to manage those that can be predicted and planned, that originate within the organization, or that have short-term effects.

Rhythm of change

An environment of constant change can be very exciting for ambitious, dynamic people. Every individual and organisation needs to be constantly changing: new activities need to be undertaken and old ones need to be done in a better way. But too much change, especially if imposed without adequate consultation, is unsettling and creates unhealthy stress for those who like regular routines and stability. (More on this in Resource Material 13.) While it is important to create an organizational culture in which change, adaptation, and improvement are welcomed rather than frightening, basic stability and predictability must also be maintained.

Approaches to change

In any changing situation, it must be clear from the outset how decisions will be made. Situations requiring immediate action will almost certainly require top-down imposition of change, with little opportunity for consultation or discussion. At the other extreme, change that can be anticipated and planned for, especially if positive, can be undertaken through a relatively extended process of consensus building.

In the meantime, there are different levels of consultation and involvement in decisions on how to proceed.

Change is more difficult to manage if there is a mismatch between the decision-making process and the demands of the situation, for example, if the manager spends time in endless consultation about situations requiring immediate response, or if he or she hastily imposes a decision that it would have been better to have at least discussed with the people it concerns, and perhaps to have involved them directly in the decision-making.

Dealing with unexpected events

Two of the four team members apply to leave within a week of each other; an employee is diagnosed with cancer and will be absent for six months; the organisation receives a bequest for 400,000 leva; a window is left open and the office is ransacked, and it has rained torrential rain and everything is submerged in water; a media outlet publishes the company's details, the phone doesn't stop ringing for three days and thousands of letters and emails pour in.

These are real situations requiring immediate change. Current work, priorities and schedules are disrupted, important decisions need to be made about short and long-term work, and staff and users need emotional and/or practical support.

Personal reactions to unexpected events

When the unexpected happens, the first reactions are often discouragement and denial. This can last very briefly or for months. During the period of denial, people need to be informed of events, but should not be pressured to make decisions unless it is unavoidable.

Another reaction to unexpected positive events can be jubilation and elation followed by feelings of anxiety, as even happy events are often surprisingly stressful. With negative events, discouragement and denial are usually followed by anger, then fear and anxiety.

In the phases of strong emotions (exultation, anger) and uncertainty (fear, anxiety), everything can seem quite rosy or quite gloomy. People may not think soberly about the future and look for opportunities to talk about their hopes and fears.

With negative events, people may start to blame or feel betrayed, „How can they apply for another job without letting us know?“ „Why didn't she go to the doctor as soon as she noticed the lump?“ „Who left the window open?“ These feelings need to be contained, not allowed to build up and undermine personal relationships or the work of the organization.

Long-term situations

With time, people are able to accept the situation and begin to look for options for the future. The clearer the organisation and its people are about priorities, the easier it will be to deal with unexpected events that have long-term consequences.

In addition to getting a sense of what people might be feeling, these types of events require:

- good communication channels to let people know what is happening and how decisions will be made about further action;
- time to develop and evaluate the options;
- support for the people most affected by the changes.

Situations requiring immediate response

The more confident and respected a supervisor is, the easier it will be to make quick decisions when needed, such as in the event of a robbery and flood, or when employees need to quickly take on other duties to handle the phones. In this situation, there is no time to develop and evaluate options; quick action is needed.

These situations require:

- determination on the part of the leader and a willingness to take on the leadership role;
- a comprehensive risk management framework that has procedures in place for this type or similar events;
- clarity about the limits of the supervisor's authority and what needs to be approved by someone higher in the hierarchy (can the supervisor, on his/her own initiative, hire temporary staff for a week to handle the phone and email?)
- clarity on the core services or activities that need to continue regardless of what else is going on;
- excellent communication channels within the organisation so that everyone knows what is happening and what is expected of them.

The negative impact of the unexpected can be limited by a general culture of good leadership and by creating a sense that things are under control. Panic, on the other hand, is likely to lead to frustration, lack of control, individual and organizational stress, and poor decisions.

Anticipating change

Most changes are not unexpected. To a large or small extent, they can be anticipated and planned for with time to develop and consideration of possible responses.

One of the advantages of strategic or long-term planning, especially if rooted in a thorough analysis of the political, social and economic context, is that organizations can largely take control of their future. They may not get all the funding or support they need, but at least they will be working for what they want rather than waiting for what happens.

Even if strategic goals cannot be achieved, people, at least, should have a starting point from which to begin the adaptation process: „We are clear about what we want to achieve. If we can't do it the way we want, what's the next best way to achieve those goals?“

The same applies to short-term or minor changes. Change planning makes individuals think carefully about the organisation and their place in it. For some this can be exciting and challenging, for others it can be terrifying. It opens up opportunities for significant or obvious success or for significant and perhaps, even more obvious failure. Successful implementation of planned change requires real empathy for the concerns of staff, users, councillors and others; time to listen and explain, time to help people overcome their fears and, perhaps, tame their enthusiasm.

Planned change is more likely to succeed if it is implemented alongside a structured approach to risk management (see Resource Material 15) and there is clarity about consultation and decision-making processes, where everyone directly affected by the changes is able to participate in some way.

If people have not been involved in the planning process and do not understand what has been proposed and why, the initial reaction to new ideas is likely to be denial. This can be overcome by:

- explaining the proposals, the background and why these key decisions were taken;
- explaining the decision-making process, and why some people were not involved in it;
- listening carefully to people's comments;
- refraining from defensive positions;
- request for suggestions on how best to implement the suggestions;
- real consideration of proposals and negotiation of new options;
- keeping people regularly informed.

Anticipating the need for change

Some changes that should have been predictable seem to be slipping away, such as the sudden realisation that the recruitment campaign has attracted so many new members that the part-time administrative officer cannot cope. Some changes are less predictable, such as a war that sends many more refugees to a location or a key staffer who leaves. Even those, though, can often be foreseen as part of the organization's strategic planning and risk management processes, or through an exercise of common sense.

For many organisations, the first reaction to such pressures is to hastily develop new activities or hire new staff. In periods of easy fundraising this may be appropriate, but in a more difficult economic and political climate, it is important to assess the relative importance of any change in relation to the organisation's core aims, objectives and activities.

Developing new activities in response to changing needs, new sources of funds or other external factors may be the best way to ensure survival. But people need to understand the possible consequences, positive and negative, on current activities and on employees and users. Anticipating the need for possible change gives people the opportunity to consider and evaluate these consequences.

Taking action

Personal reactions to major changes are likely to follow the same pattern of response as to the unexpected. These strong emotions should not be denied, but good managers will help people to overcome them to the stage of implementing the agreed plan or risk response strategy (if one has been agreed in advance) or developing an action plan. The pre-agreed plan should be reviewed: is it still relevant? If a new plan is to be developed, the process should be as delicate as possible, giving people opportunities to explore possible alternatives before they or the organisation embarks on it.

During this period, board members may have to make very difficult decisions and rely on a manager for accurate information and possibly for recommendations for action. Employees and beneficiaries may express frustration, despair, anger or fear in unhelpful ways and may need a great deal of support.

This can put the manager in an isolated position, squeezed between the demands and needs of the council and those of the employees, having to support everyone else but without receiving support themselves. It is helpful if the manager has built professional support networks (with colleagues in other organisations) as well as personal support networks (family, friends). Obvious measures (get enough sleep, eat properly, take a lunch break, don't work evenings and weekends, get enough exercise) need to be taken.

Whether the situation is objectively terrible or wonderful, the supervisor must be able to look at it rationally without getting too emotionally tied up with what is happening. Ultimately people will be helped through a period of major change by:

- getting the opportunity to express their feelings;
- getting opportunities to suggest ways of dealing with the situation, understanding that their suggestions are being taken into account;
- understanding why certain decisions, even unpopular ones, were made and respecting the authority of the person or group who made that decision;
- information that something is being done;
- the feeling that they can rely on the board, on the supervisor, on colleagues and the organization as a whole will not fall apart.

It is not possible for big change to happen easily, especially when it is negative. But it can be made a little easier.

The worst case

Even more difficult is dealing with the worst situations, such as a layoff, a firing, a company closure, a serious accident caused by an employee, a violent incident with a social service recipient, a discovery of abuse. The range of emotions will be the same as with any unexpected event, but stronger.

The most important guidelines for dealing with these situations are:

- keep as calm and sane as is in one's power;
- clarify who should make the decisions and take action and make sure others understand this;
- avoid making unnecessary rash decisions or pushing other people to make rash decisions, especially when you or they are still reacting very emotionally;
- try to give employees the support they need (see the section on support in Resource Material 10);
- give people opportunities to talk about the situation, but try to prevent it from dominating the organisation and mixing with the main work;
- Do not keep unnecessary secrets, because this will only help to spread rumors and gossip;

- Familiarize yourself with confidential matters, especially in situations involving employee or service users disciplinary issues;
- be fully aware and make sure that everyone else is aware of who is allowed to contact the media or police and under what circumstances;
- if situations suggest a dispute, try to prevent them from becoming a confrontation (see Resource Material 12, on management disagreements and conflicts);
- Before taking any action, try to assess the options and consequences, and if possible discuss them with someone who is not directly involved in the organisation or situation;
- eat right and get enough sleep. The situation may be dire, but it will seem even more dire (and you may be contributing to it yourself) if you are exhausted and living on caffeine, donuts and alcohol.

List of Questions for Effective Change Management

- Do the board and managers, as well as employees, regularly take time to discuss potential changes and what steps should be taken to prepare for them?
- Are these discussions linked to the organization's strategic plan and risk management processes?
- Are there good communication procedures in the organization: staff meetings, formal supervision, opportunities for informal discussion?
- Are key staff - the board chair, manager, team or project managers - able to keep calm in difficult situations, or at least visibly achieve it?
- Are these key people willing and able to accept that there is (or may be) a problem and they need to make immediate decisions if necessary, involve people in discussions if there is enough time, and make sure that decisions reached, no matter how difficult, are made and implemented?
- Are procedures and systems clear enough that essential work continues even in moments of major crisis? Is there more than one person who knows how to manage basic procedures and systems?