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“Simply, improvement...”



Using TalkFreely to address the challenge of
change and staff engagement

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“People only implement things they believe in. People only believe in things they have been engaged in.”

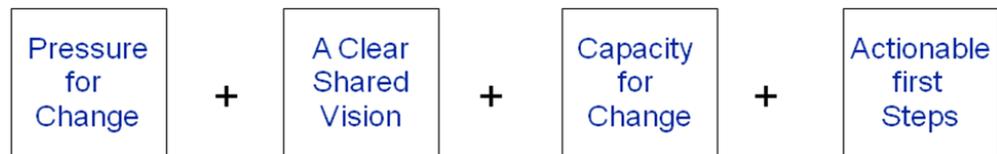
Time after time, surveys of senior managers in both the private and public sectors report that Change Management continues to be one of their biggest challenges. And, when managers say that, what they often mean is “how do we get our people to engage with proposed changes and buy-in to them?”.

It’s also true to say that, for companies to succeed, continuous improvement is essential, with its aims of meeting agreed customer requirements, driving out waste and doing both those through the active involvement of all staff.

In this article, we want to remind you about some of the fundamental requirements for change to be successful and how an innovative software tool, TalkFreely, can be used to help through staff engagement.

Four requirements for successful change

The well-known Transformational Change Model identifies four requirements for successful change...



Pressure for change

This element highlights the need for a compelling reason to make change happen. It may be the threat of defecting customers, damage to reputation, loss of business or competitors out-performing you. Your organisation may be losing staff, suffering from low morale and poor productivity, or simply lacking innovation. For many in the public sector, there are challenges to demonstrate Best Value (or Value for Money), or risk being outsourced or privatised.

Without “Pressure”, the proposed changes will not be important enough for people to devote time to; they are likely to become a “Friday afternoon activity” that nobody ever gets round to (does that sound like any of your current improvement initiatives?).

Vision for change

The Model makes it clear that, for change to be successful, people have to have an understanding of what they are aiming for; a definition of what the future will look like as a result of the proposed change.

In many cases this will need to be more specific than a “Vision Statement”; it’s more likely to be a set of well-defined goals or objectives that describe the new levels of performance required (to address the “pressures”).

It may also be a well-articulated description of what working in the new world will be like: what the processes will be like, what the technology and systems will do, who people will be working with etc.

Without a clear, shared “Vision”, people won’t know what the change is trying to achieve. They will either go off in their own direction, or not bother going off at all.

Capacity for change

This includes the knowledge, skills and the time required to implement change. Despite years of experience of trying to “do change” many organisations still haven’t equipped their people with the basic skills of continuous improvement. So, when (if) they ask staff to get involved in coming up with improved ways of doing things, the staff may not know how to do this in a way that develops viable solutions to address the root causes of performance problems. Putting people together in a team and asking them to “brainstorm some improvement ideas” is just not good enough.

Some organisations are also feeling “change fatigue” and may simply not have the capacity for more change because of people’s weariness over previous (successful or unsuccessful) attempts.

Without the skills and the time, people will become very frustrated in their attempts to implement change, however motivated they might be by the pressure and vision.

Actionable first steps

The fourth thing you need for change to be successful is a workable plan: a definition of what people need to do tomorrow, next week, next month. First steps are important to build momentum and get quick wins. These early successes can be used for positive communications about achievements and progress towards the vision and in addressing the pressures for change.

If there are no simple, clear first steps to take, nothing much will happen. Everyone will be sitting around “waiting for it to happen”, as if by magic. People need to know “what do I have to do tomorrow?” and understand what the plans and actions are that will turn the vision into reality.

If any one of the four elements in the model is missing, change cannot be implemented successfully.

Some versions of the model add a fifth element; the requirement for reward, recognition and reinforcement. These, it is argued, are needed to ensure positive behaviours are encouraged and there is an incentive for supporting the change.

What it means in practice

For many organisations trying to implement successful change, they typically have to get the answers to four questions, aligned to the model:

-  What are the opportunities for improvement? – the things we need to do better because where we are today isn’t good enough
-  What are the priorities we want to focus on? – the things that we have to achieve to make a real difference
-  How do we get people working on improvement? – giving people the skills to work in teams to generate improvements
-  How do we ensure successful implementation? – identifying potential risks, defining actions and measuring achievements

There’s a common theme running through all these: staff engagement.

Most staff will have ideas about how things could be improved and some may have spotted new opportunities to add value or differentiate products and services from others. Some may not be ready to change and need to understand what the real “pressure” is.

Inevitably, whenever there is a range of ideas for improvement there will be a similar range of views on which ones are, or should be, priorities. Getting consensus on what the organisation actually needs to be doing in the future isn’t always easy. There is a real danger of senior managers ending up picking their own “pet priorities” and not engaging with staff to get their views.

When it comes to improvement, it’s well-established in most organisations that team-based improvement projects are a powerful way to ensure staff involvement. However, individual teams are only a sub-set of the staff and there is a need to ensure their ideas are tested more widely, both for acceptability and for viability. Teams can become overly focussed on their own ideas and assume that they have come up with the best solutions. A sense-check, through wider staff engagement,

almost always adds real value and improves the quality and acceptability of the proposed changes.

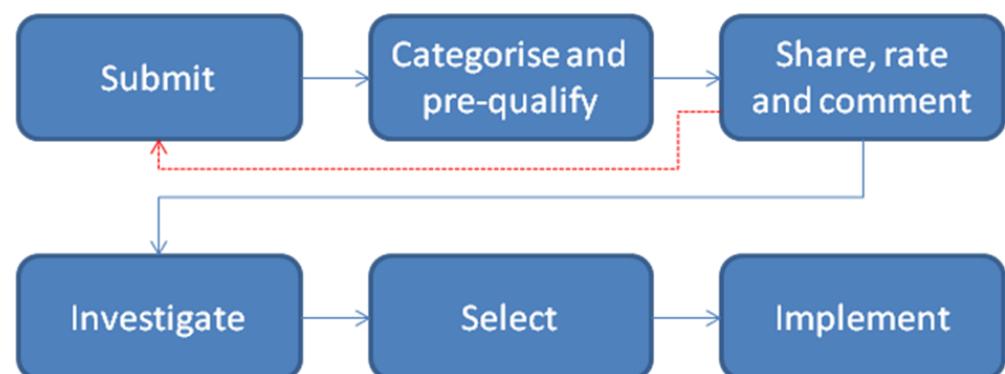
Finally, once teams have come up with improvements, the challenge is deployment and adoption. Viable implementation plans are needed and you have to measure whether or not the new ways of working are being used and are actually delivering the desired benefits.

Meeting these challenges

All of the above sounds like a huge and time-consuming emphasis on engaging with staff is required. It's true that effort is needed, but a few organisations are making use of creative new technologies to reduce the time required, improve the quality of engagement and increase the likelihood of improvement ideas being implemented successfully.

One of these new technologies, TalkFreely, helps particularly in the “Vision” and “Capacity” boxes of the transformational change model.

TalkFreely utilises social networking techniques to help organisations engage employees in change initiatives by managing the innovation process from the point when ideas are submitted, through to implementation of those that are likely to be “winners” (shown below).



TalkFreely provides a process whereby staff can be engaged in creating the vision for change by submitting ideas, sharing them with colleagues and getting valuable feedback on them. The use of technology speeds up the process but, more importantly, enables everyone in an organisation to contribute, rate and comment.

When it comes to “Capacity for change”, TalkFreely helps an organisation in two ways; firstly in sense-checking the quality of proposed ideas and secondly in gauging strength of feeling about those ideas. It therefore helps de-risk proposed changes by sharing ideas in a way that people can comment on and build upon.

TalkFreely won't create successful change for you! You still need to understand and address all four elements of the change model. But, it can give employees a

voice and helps identify areas for improvement. It provides approaches to ensure the best ideas are identified and promotes buy-in to change through active staff engagement.

TalkFreely is a partner of Improvement Skills Consulting. Visit their website at www.talkfreely.com

Our track record

Our consultants have been helping organisations in the private and public sectors to manage and improve their performance for nearly two decades. We have supported European Quality Award winners in their improvement processes.

We are not wedded to a particular methodology, but we do understand what makes change successful and the importance of engaging staff at all stages of an improvement process. We help clients identify their improvement goals and then develop an approach to achieve these; invariably ensuring their people develop the skills to make further improvements themselves.

Please contact us for more information about how we can help you to manage change through effective staff engagement.

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