

Involvement and Change – leadership dilemmas and myths

This article takes a “story-based” style and explores the importance of involvement and participation as a critical and often neglected ingredient in implementing change successfully and sustainably. The organisation that is featured is undertaking a major change agenda if it is to survive, the like of which it has never previously faced.

The topic is seen through the perspectives of two characters. Sunil is a seasoned executive, recently appointed from outside to lead a struggling division, and sees himself as a more than competent leader of change and people, and is recognised by his peers to be just that. Lucy is an internal consultant and change practitioner and leads a small team whose brief includes providing change support for major change projects across the whole organisation.

The article describes how Lucy and her team grapple with putting together a business-based argument to convince Sunil why he might adopt a much more visible and participative change leadership style. It explores how different involvement strategies and tactics will be necessary, dependant on the nature and status of various changes.

As a leader Sunil has to confront some of his change leadership principles and shortcomings whilst Lucy has to balance every different styles and attitudes to change within her team and yet remain focussed on what is best and necessary for the business (and her client) to be successful. Lucy also considers how she might build a relationship with a new and important client.

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Sunil Joshi, the recently appointed senior vice-president has, as usual, got into the office before 7.00am and is using quiet-time to catch up with e-mails and think about some key challenges his once profitable division is facing. Looking at his schedule for the day he sees an hour has been set aside for a conversation with Lucy Fairburn, the Head of Organisational Development and Change, someone he has not met before. No agenda has been agreed other than that they both wanted to talk about the change agenda and how as an internal change consultant, Lucy might be able to help.

Later that day.....

Driving home Sunil reflected on this conversationhe had long considered himself as a progressive change and people leader but Lucy had pushed hard on a specific issue and made him ponder deeply about his capability as a leader of change. He had outlined what he thought was a very clear and well – thought through change agenda, one supported in principle by the board, which was based on three specific initiatives. A major investment in a CRM (Client relationship Management) system to radically improve sales force productivity, a range of customer improvement actions to protect a vulnerable market-share position and finally a very new venture to offer a new proposition to the market which could capitalise on the growing demand for sustainable or “green” products.

Sunil was convinced the CRM he had introduced in his last organisation was “fit for purpose”, he would hire his erstwhile Project Manager and deploy the same system house to provide technical resource. He had also already agreed with a niche (and extremely expensive) consultancy what the go-to-market strategy and new product offering should be. Another consultant had conducted a series of internal interviews, analysed a vast amount of data and had submitted a preliminary series of actions to transform customer service in the next 12 months.

“I thought I had everything covered in my change plans.....and know how to lead change better than most.”

What had really got under Sunil’s skin was Lucy’s challenge that his well-intentioned plans to transform his business lacked any coherent involvement strategy or tactical plans to engage both front-line managers and the workforce as a whole. In the absence of these the risk of failure was much greater, and even likely, she had argued. He had been expecting her to take the moral high-ground and argue for democracy in the workplace, to suggest he take what constituted an ethical leadership stance but not at all, her advocacy was all based on assessing business risk!

He had long-thought people and specifically change leadership was one of his great strengths. He had already made financial and headcount provision to ensure each of the three major change initiatives would have a comprehensive communications plan and key stakeholder actions embedded within the project plans. If his business was to survive and prosper, urgency was a necessity and he was facing a dilemma. If she was right, then surely to deliberately plan for a high-degree of involvement across the organisation would mean more cost, delay the onset of implementation, and was there not also a danger that such involvement would lead his people to make recommendations very different to the decisions he had already largely taken, at least in his own mind? They had agreed to get back together in 3 days when Lucy would provide a more substantive argument and offer some change approaches and some specific recommendations which she insisted would improve the likelihood of success.

That same evening.....

Lucy recognised that the success of Sunil's division was critical to the overall success of the organisation. The aggressive change agenda he had outlined meant that his needs should go to the very top of her own priority list, so she had decided to bring together her two colleagues from OD and Change the following day. Hans was a superb change consultant, her change implementation methodology expert, who could be relied upon to support Sean in ensuring documented people plans were integrated into overall project plans for the three changes he had outlined. Hans was all about "doing and delivery" and had a reputation for joining project teams and arguing persuasively for the creation of thorough people plans, then guiding them through to execution. Frederique had a very different view of the change process, was somewhat sceptical about the value and time required to create documented change plans and saw change as much more of an organic and emergent process. She was passionate about finding ways to energise and involve front-line staff in the change process and in just 15 months in the company, had already built a reputation for the design and facilitation of what she described as engagement events involving in some cases between 100- 150 people. This radically different approach went down very well with some leaders whilst with others she received a polite hearing or in extreme cases some hostility! To Lucy, both responses represented resistance.

It was difficult to judge where Sunil would land on this one so Lucy wanted to take a good half day with her team, scoping the opportunity and identifying some options to help him which, intuitively, she felt would be a blend of Frederique's and Hans' very different styles.

Two days later.....

Lucy always liked to capture her thoughts after a long meeting. These ranged from setting out a draft of what she intends to cover with Sunil in their next critical meeting, but also reflections about her own role and relationships with her team and a new client.

Her session with Frederique and Hans had been difficult, though eventually hugely productive. She now felt confident she had the makings of a compelling change proposal to run by Sunil. As usual, and before she put a handful of slides together she wanted to capture the essence of their debate and record her own reflections. Working with these two was always a challenge, that is why she had recruited them after all. She had to find a way for the three of them to agree a way forward that balanced the arch-pragmatist Hans with the passionate almost evangelical Frederique.

Frederique has introduced us to a way of looking at change situations which really unlocked our thinking on what we agreed were very different change initiatives as described by Sunil. The model had been developed by Ralph Stacey (a complexity guru) and looks at change from two perspectives. To what extent is there agreement in and across the organisation regarding the change, and to what extent is there a degree of certainty?

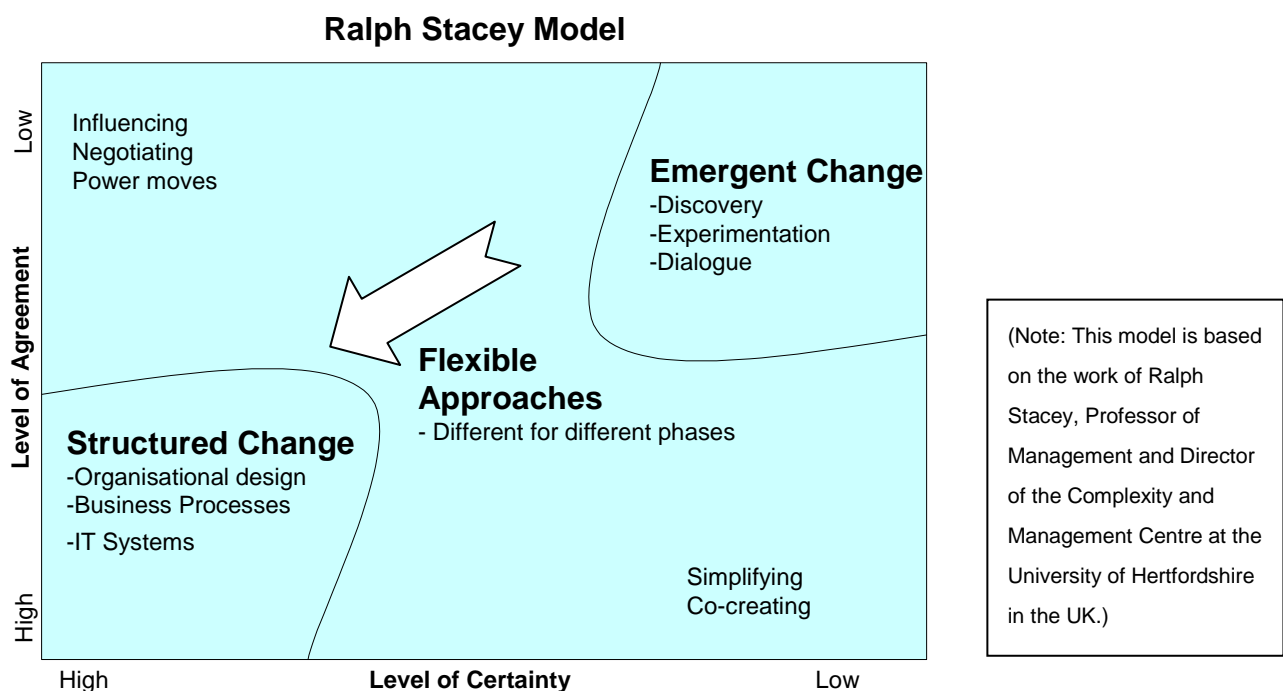
As we discussed the new venture, our own perspectives as internal change consultants had been drawn from picking up comments and reactions around the organisation. Our conclusion was that this change was in its formative stages, that there were opposing views as to whether it was the right market in which to invest, it was too great a risk, an area where we have little expertise or track-record. Others argued that our growth aspirations could only be met through such an investment. We were absolutely clear as a team that it was far too early to predict where this change might get to and thus anything but

certain in terms of outcomes. This positioned the change firmly in the top-right hand area of the model as depicted below (low agreement and low certainty). Frederique argued persuasively that the right approach, and therefore our support as an OD team would be to encourage experimentation (perhaps innovation and creativity interventions?), lots of dialogue and discovery across the organisation with high levels of participation to enable the best solutions to evolve organically over an indeterminate time-period.

In stark comparison the proposed CRM project was in fact a decision already taken. Leadership and the customer-facing workforce were agreed we needed to invest in such a system. Sunil was suggesting a proven offering, and we have dramatically improved our capability to introduce this kind of technology in the last 3 years. Given these factors, a highly structured approach to the change process makes absolute sense, we should therefore apply our existing change implementation framework in alignment with our project management methodology. None of this means involvement is any less important, but its focus will be in putting together implementation plans including support for communications and training roll-out.

The efforts to strengthen customer service were much harder to position on the model, most agreed something needed to be done but there is disagreement over tactical actions to achieve this improvement. Some of the proposals were already underway and early indications were that they would be successful and well-received whereas others were very much embryonic. We could only argue for an approach which led somewhere between detailed change planning and structure versus a more emergent approach. The tension between Hans and Frederique's different styles had bubbled up at this point, though surprisingly it was Frederique who had offered a way forward by acknowledging that the typical path for a change to follow is from emergent to structured (as depicted by the arrow on the chart) and therefore a balanced of different approaches is appropriate.

A situational model for change:



Lucy was beginning to see a way forward for her session with Sunil. The model would help him to understand how each of his three key changes needed a different approach but she was worried this stuff was too theoretical for him. How best to translate this into practical strategies and tactics for involvement which could improve the probability of success and reduce the risk of failure.

Once again her team meeting offered a way forward which she felt would serve to convince Sunil. Hans had reminded us that involvement in conjunction with effective change leadership, much more than good training and communications, served to build engagement and commitment amongst those affected by the change. It enabled them to feel part of the change process and have a degree of control. Of course there are legitimate and understandable reasons why leaders have reservations about committing to genuine involvement actions, but the benefits usually outweighed the risks .

Hans had listed a number:-

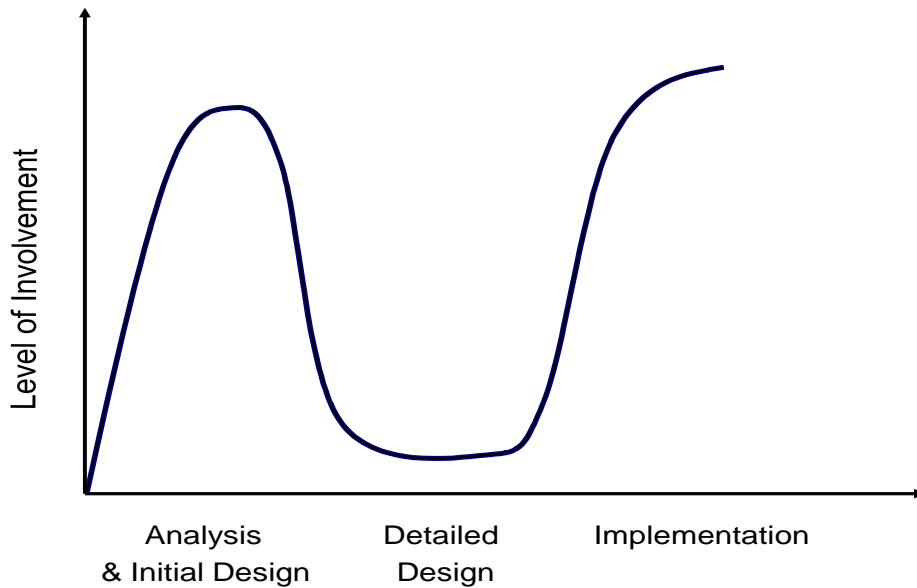
- makes people part of the change
- contributes to improved definition of issues driving change
- improves quality of change solutions
- increases support and ownership of the change within a controlled framework
- generates a greater sense of personal control over the change
- leads to faster overall implementation time when appropriately utilised.

..... and increases the probability of successful implementation.

Lucy continued to be troubled by what she saw as a reality in Sunil`s mind that these three change initiatives are already underway, and definitive decisions have been made for the CRM initiative. Lucy acknowledged that this was the case. How could we rein him back and convince him of the benefit of adopting a high-involvement strategy for the other two projects?

Hans highlighted some research which had demonstrated a typical pattern of involvement for change projects which had achieved their stated objectives. This involvement curve (as below) offered a surprising result in that the highest levels of involvement should be taking place in the formative stages of the change process (analysis and high-level design), and not to this extent again until local implementation planning is required. Our collective experience was that in most organisations, leaders as demonstrated by Sunil, preferred to determine the strategy and high-level-design at the leadership team level, often supported by expensive external expert consultants rather than risk lose control and authority by giving the front-line a meaningful role at this stage.

Effective Process of Involvement



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What is very evident for all three change initiatives is that success will be dependent on managers and employees developing very different behaviours and skills, so the level of involvement needed to generate commitment will be correspondingly greater.

Sunil will want to translate this theory into practical activities which people will undertake and also make a difference to the project's likely success, he will quite rightly want to know who will take accountability and when, as well as the "how" of the actions.

The three of us had brainstormed some possibilities:-

- Engage a wide sample of the organisation in assessing the opportunities for the new venture
- Identify key influencers at all levels to contribute to the communication roll-out and / or join pilot roll-outs.
- Create a series of cross-functional and multi-level teams to produce high-level design for the yet to be invented customer service improvement actions
- Form a cross-functional task-team to deliver, with the external consultants, a detailed CRM design solution
- Create task teams to provide recommendations for the learning and communications plans for each project

As illustrative examples, these will hopefully bring the topic of involvement to life for Sunil.

Getting started

Lucy is gaining confidence and thinks she now has a means and a business case to shift Sunil's thinking. What he will want, and is entitled to given the precarious business situation and urgency of the change agenda (and Sunil's impatience) is some ideas on where to start to make an immediate difference and build his confidence (and ours!). However her contemplation takes her to another way of looking at this. "I need to challenge Sunil, to really help him understand that how he represents himself as a leader. Whether he authentically declares what he believes in, will impact how his boss, peers and subordinates perceive both Sunil and the change, and thus impact its implementation.

I am building a new relationship with Sunil. To what extent do I want to act as his change coach and does he want this support I wonder?"

Her thoughts return to other practicalities and Lucy decides she can suggest that:-

1. Sunil and I lead a session with the leadership team specifically to agree **involvement strategies** for each of the three change initiatives and agree how a detailed involvement plan will be produced for each of them, supported by one of the OD and Change Team.

It is also very evident that none of the three changes passes the test of having a short change description which would make sense to the front-line workforce, let alone be understandable to an outsider who is not an industry insider.

2. **CRM** – we should propose to facilitate a half-day session with the core project team (and follow-up support) to build a short slide presentation and / or 2 page summary of the change. This will be tested and modified as necessary with Sunil's leadership team as well as with a small sample of focus groups across the organisation.

3. **Customer Service Improvement & New Venture**: given the absence of an agreed description of the change both initiatives lend themselves to engaging large numbers of people in determining a set of change outcomes and possible road-map to achieve them.

We have the skills and experience to design and facilitate a series of conversations across the organisation and / or run a major engagement event over 2 days if necessary with up to 200 people in the room. Convincing Sunil of this will be the bigger challenge. What we know is that it is a fantastic way to energise the change process from the very outset and does not mean abdicating his leadership responsibilities, does not mean he will lose control of the decision-making process. We can run these within a couple of months, rather than slow the change process down it will accelerate the implementation process in the long-run! It is a way to generate stronger and more relevant proposals that people will believe in and commit to achieve. That has to be an example of outstanding leadership.

This is coming together, Lucy thinks, in fact I will not bother generating a slide presentation for Sunil, I will put a couple of the models we discussed on a flip chart and talk him through our recommended approach

Sunil on the way home reflecting on his second meeting with Lucy

There really something in this involvement thing which I have been missing. The meeting with Lucy has convinced me there are some things we have to do urgently before these changes go any further and get into real trouble. I will have failed to build the sufficient commitment and as a result be facing unintended resistance.

I have learnt from Lucy not to confuse communications, which we do well, with genuine involvement.

There are some techniques which these change folk can use to involve huge numbers of our people at relatively low cost and resource in the change process , including helping to define both strategy and the changes themselves.

Once we have decided a major change is likely then it is crucial at the earliest stage we determine our involvement approach as a leadership team, and then communicate our intentions to set expectations.

Dogma on this topic is very dangerous, we can vary our involvement approaches according to the individual change projects and whichever route we take does not mean I am less of a leader, I still have the same authority I had before , this way I am getting the best from my people who in truth know better than I ! It is not so much about right or wrong as about making the right choices.

I should also learn to listen to these change experts a bit more often! They have given good advice and offered practical proposals which can be taken on board quickly.

Most fundamentally these discussions with Lucy and specifically about involvement have triggered me to look at myself in the mirror long and hard. This is much more than a process to consider each change and assess how to build and deliver a change plan. I must think deeply about how I present myself as a leader to those above, around and who also work for me. What do I believe in, how do I communicate this and relate it to the change agenda? What are the implications therefore for business results and outcomes, and how will it affect my relationships with others who have very different attitudes and beliefs?

My ability as a leader, as a sponsor of change, and how people see me and decide whether or not to follow me is very much determined by how I tackle this tricky issue of involvement.

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February 2010

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