

How to make change stick

In the last of three articles looking at change, **Mark Eaton** discovers why some organisations can implement and embed improvements successfully while others can't

Having invested in making improvements to the processes and systems within your organisation, is it likely that there will be problems ensuring they remain in place?

With 83 per cent¹ of organisations reporting that they face substantial change in the near future and only 61 per cent of organisations reporting that they have successfully introduced improvements that have lasted, at least 22 per cent will experience problems with their implementation.

This problem is compounded further by the fact that outperformers (organisations that are effective at implementing improvements) report an 80 per cent success rate for embedding change, but the underperformers report a success rate as low as 8 per cent. This means that the real performance gap may be much greater for some organisations.

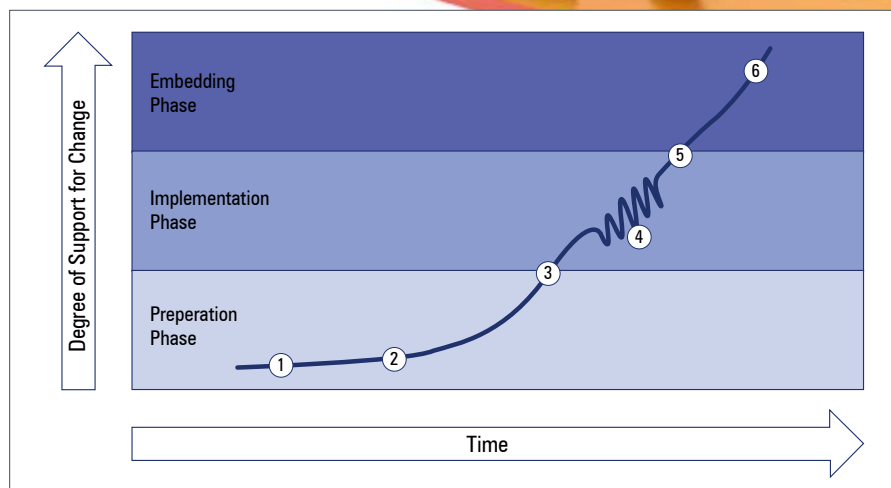


Figure 1: The Journey to Improved Performance³

Effective preparation for improvement programmes will ensure that implementation occurs seamlessly, but ensuring that the improvements made stay put requires a different set of skills. In particular, these need to deal with the fact that “every day we are faced with a peculiar paradox – that we live in a state of constant flux yet we abhor the process of change”².

Understanding the journey

Figure 1 (*left*) shows a typical improvement journey and illustrates what issues may arise. It shows that there are three main phases:

- **Preparation** Getting the organisation ready for improvement, setting down the objectives of the improvement programme and putting in place the resources to implement the changes
- **Implementation** The physical processes of implementing the change and obtaining the initial improvements
- **Embedding** The transition phase from ‘this is a new way of doing things’ to ‘have we ever done it any other way?’ This is otherwise known as the transition from having changed processes to the point of changing behaviours.

The ‘Y’ axis within Figure 1 shows the degree of support within the organisation for the change, noting that at no point will it ever achieve 100 per cent acceptance by all the team, and the ‘X’ axis shows the elapse of time.

Within Figure 1 are six key transition, or crisis, points. Each of these points represents a critical stage in the process of implementing improvements. They are summarised in Table 1 (*right*).

Experiencing reactionary forces

There are four things that hold back human progress: ignorance, lethargy, committees and inflexibility⁴.

POINT	DESCRIPTION OF TRANSITION POINT	TYPICAL ACTIONS AND REACTIONS
1	Decision to improve	<p>Actions Normally this stage is triggered by a realisation within the ‘guiding influence’ within the organisation (normally the board) that current standards and activities are unacceptable and that things need to change.</p> <p>Reactions The typical reaction to this phase are that ‘this is not the right time’ as well as confusion about what needs to be done and therefore mixed messages from leaders, often leading to a drop in productivity.</p>
2	Strategic planning	<p>Actions This is about determining what needs to be done (and who will do it), how the work links to the organisational strategy (or whether the strategy needs to be amended). There will also normally be a ‘go/no go’ decision at this point made by the senior leaders.</p> <p>Reactions Some managers will attempt to derail the process and move the focus from their own areas to others. There will be a lot of disagreement about the content of the strategy and attempts to downgrade (or, less likely, upgrade) the scope and duration of the improvement programme will be commonplace, particularly if the senior leaders have a crisis of confidence.</p>
3	Preparation to implement	<p>Actions There will then be a series of activities such as communicating what is going on, training, gathering data and preparing the team for the implementation phase.</p> <p>Reactions Concern will grow within the organisation, although this will be partly balanced by some excitement about the change process ahead.</p>
4	The noise of implementation	<p>Actions This is when the physical changes are implemented using a variety of different mechanisms.</p> <p>Reactions Some things will go well and others not so well. The ‘nay sayers’ will focus on the failures and managers will often have a crisis of confidence that may lead to early termination of the programme.</p>
5	Adoption of improvements	<p>Actions The excitement of implementation events and activities has started to die down and, at this point, the team are left to work with the new processes and systems.</p> <p>Reactions Those not involved, or not positive about the implementation approach used, will try to undo the work done. Bad habits that existed before will still be there and will further degrade the achievements made if not effectively managed.</p>
6	Improvements embedded	<p>Actions At this point people forget that there was a different way of doing things and the culture has therefore changed (given that culture is best defined simply as ‘the way things are done here’). This is when the process change achieved at point four becomes behaviour change.</p> <p>Reactions Occasional snipes by ‘nay sayers’ occur but broadly there is neither the will nor often the ability to go back to the old ways of working.</p>

All four issues will be encountered throughout the journey shown in Figure 1 but will be especially damaging post-implementation, as they are the underlying reasons why improvements fail to embed

Table 1: Six transition points in change programmes

themselves within organisations. Table 2 (*overleaf*) provides a commentary on each of them. Remembering that improvement is more about people than about the process, you need to bear in mind that,

THE FOUR ISSUES

Ignorance	Ignorance is often accompanied by fear of the unknown. It can be tackled through effective (and on-going) communications, involving people in the process of improvement and giving them the skills to know how to embed the improvements after they have been put in place
Lethargy	Improvement programmes run out of steam very quickly if there is not an effective 'pace' put on the programme. A lack of pace is normally indicative of unclear objectives for the programme and a lack of a sense of urgency from the senior team. In the words of Will Rogers, "even if you're on the right track you'll get run over if you just stand there"
Committees	Encouraging individual initiative and empowering leaders to make decisions and deal with issues (and then supporting them when they do) will avoid the dominance of committee or group thinking within organisations. If individuals feel threatened or at risk, they will not support it
Inflexibility	The strategy and approach you start with may not be the most appropriate six months or two years later and, being blunt, there is no one single approach to making improvements work. Being prepared to experiment, learn from experience and broadly keep going is the key to success.

throughout the process of making improvements, individuals will be thinking about 'WIIFM' (what's in it for me). This doesn't mean solely the financial impact of the change. It can include⁵:

1. Will I gain or lose something I value?
2. Do I understand the nature of the change?
3. Do I trust those who are initiating the change?
4. Do I agree with the change?
5. How do I feel about this change?

Any concerns in these areas are unlikely to manifest themselves in a direct 'will I lose my job through this process?' Instead, you will encounter inertia and resistance that, when challenged, leads to comments such as 'I'm too busy', 'now is not the time', 'if we recruit more people, the problems will go away'. In reality, these reactions are fed by fear and ignorance: fear of what might happen and ignorance of either how to do it or why it is needed.

The way leaders at all levels behave will significantly affect how teams react to the changes that have been implemented. Leaders who show no interest in the new ways of working, who actively push the team to work in the old way or who, through words or actions, show that they disagree with the vision and

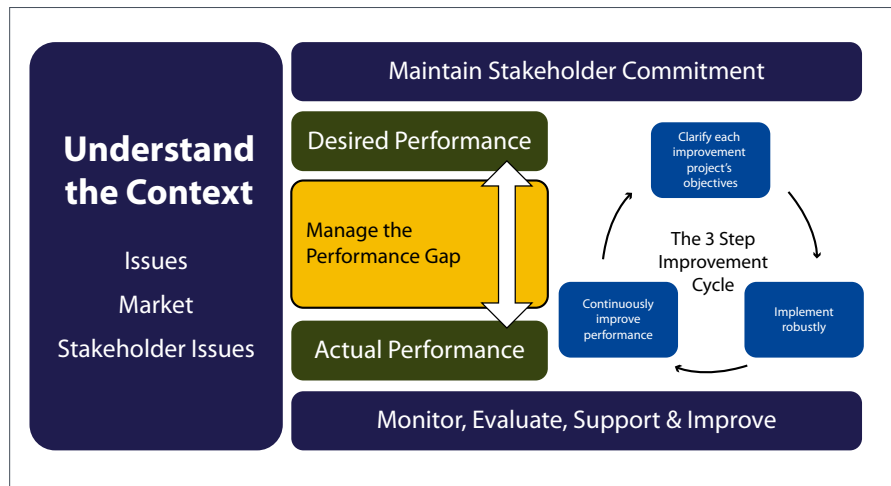
Table 2: The four main issues facing improvement programmes

objectives for the improvement programme are likely to lead to improvements that just slip away.

In addition, in environments that do not allow people to comment constructively on the changes going on around them, or where teams operate along tribal lines with poor communication between them, the probability of success is very low. Both of these issues are directly related to the management environment that the organisational leaders have established.

Another question to consider is whether you have an environment that encourages people to get involved in improving performance. In one study⁶, more than 80 per cent of clinicians and more than 60 per cent of

Figure 2: An outline improvement framework⁹



nurses reported having witnessed colleagues doing things that concerned them about the safety of patients, yet only 10 per cent had felt able to speak to the colleague about it.

Lastly, where you might feel the desire to by-pass difficult people and teams and, perhaps, implement the improvements without involving such people, remember the following piece of advice from Stephen Covey: "Without involvement, there is no commitment. Mark it down, asterisk it, circle it and underline it. No involvement, no commitment."⁷

Here are two interventions by leaders that had a negative effect on their teams. The first is a leader giving a team talk prior to implementing some changes to a clinical process and the second is from a senior leader who was following up with a team who had made some major improvements in the way they managed their new product development process:

1. "Right, guys. I'm not sure what we've been asked to do or why they've picked on us but I've been told we have to make a big improvement in our department. I'm not sure what we can really do given how hard everyone is already working."
2. "I thought we were already doing this? Wasn't there anything innovative that you managed to do?"

Not unsurprisingly, in the first case the team achieved nothing and, in the second, the benefits that the organisation could have had slipped quickly away.

Failing to follow up on post-implementation action plans or deal with issues and problems that arise creates a further set of reactions that, if handled well, will enhance the embedding process and vice versa.

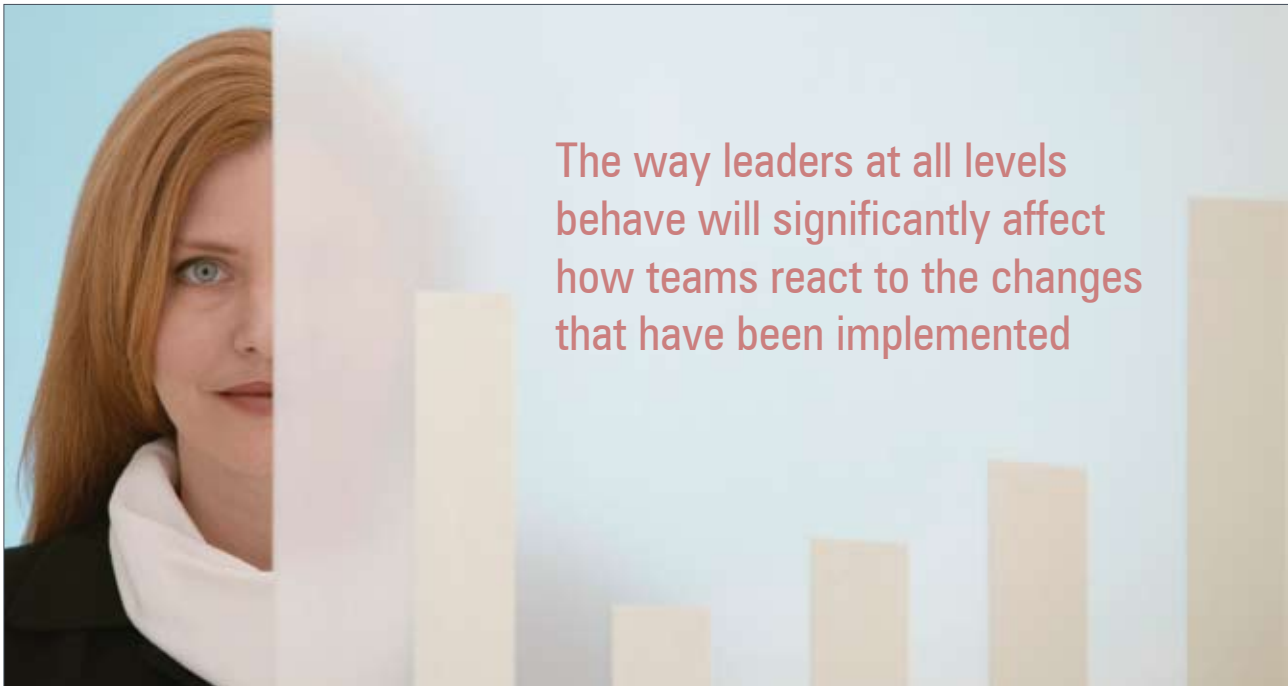
In terms of to-do lists, most improvement programmes or events end up with a long list of post-implementation actions that need to be owned and implemented. If there is no visible progress on dealing with these actions, it will reinforce the messages the team have heard unofficially from the “hard core resisters”⁸: that their efforts are being wasted and it will not lead to any real improvement.

In addition, when problems arise there will be an immediate reaction that wants to drive the process back to the old way of doing things because ‘the old way used to work’. If this is not managed effectively, the team will dismantle everything it has achieved.



IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK ELEMENT	WHAT IT MEANS	HOW IT AFFECTS WHETHER IMPROVEMENTS EMBED THEMSELVES
Understand the context	Being clear about the where and why an organisation needs to improve based on analysis of the market forces, needs of stakeholders and current issues (such as new technology, regulation etc)	If the team cannot see why something has been done, they will not care about it and will prefer to stay as they were. This will lead to them going back to their old ways at every opportunity
Manage the gap	Understanding the actual performance and the required performance and then actively managing this gap	Recognition that things are getting better will help reinforce the new ways of doing things and encourage further improvement
Maintain stakeholder commitment	Gaining and maintaining stakeholder involvement in the process of change	Leaders need to maintain their interest in the improvement process until the team moves from process change to behaviour change
Monitor, evaluate, support and improve	Making improvement and progress a regular board matter, evaluating what has happened, support front-line teams and continuously improving the way the improvement process is working	Front-line teams who generally support the improvement process will get better results than those who don't. Leaders at all levels are responsible for supporting their teams in adopting the new ways of doing things and leading by example
Three-step improvement cycle	For each area that needs to improve, it is important to be clear about what needs to be done, implement it and then vigorously follow up and improve what has been done	The bit that people forget from these three is to follow up and improve on what has been done. Improvement is rarely a 'one-hit wonder' and often changed processes will throw out unexpected issues that need to be dealt with if you don't want the team to revert to the old ways of doing things.

Table 3: Analysing the improvement framework



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Structuring to ensure success

A structure for managing improvement programmes successfully is shown in Figure 2 (p48).

Table 3 (p49) outlines each of these aspects and explores how each element specifically affects the success of improvements becoming embedded.

So what are the outperformers doing?

A study with those who outperformed their peers in terms of implementing and embedding improvements to organisational processes and systems showed that the specific differences were in the following areas – in order of importance¹⁰:

- **Sponsorship** Having a top-level champion who supports and advocates the change
- **Engagement** Gaining and maintaining stakeholder engagement
- **Honest and timely communications** 'Honest' is the key word in this statement
- **Culture that promotes change** A long-term focus on changing the behaviour of the organisation
- **Change agents** Individuals with

the capability to lead the actual improvement process

- **Capability building** Continuing investment in building the internal capability of the organisation
- **Performance measures** Effective measures that are available to, and understood by, everyone
- **Effective structure** An effective and flexible structure for the improvement programme
- **Incentives** Robust financial and non-financial incentives.

Once, discussing the issues surrounding the journey an organisation I was working with had been through, one of its leaders said something like this: "Having got through the inertia that surrounded us at the start of the programme, I felt like we had got into the green fields beyond when we finished the implementation in my area. In reality, I now realise we hadn't even started the journey. While actually implementing the changes seemed, at first, to be the fun bit, all the work we have had to do since has been hard work – particularly dealing with concerns and issues. It is only now, when

people are forgetting that we used to have such poor performance, that I realise the value of the journey we have been through." ■

References

- 1 All statistics in this section are taken from the paper *Making Change Work* by IBM (2008)
- 2 Quote from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross
- 3 Adapted from the work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and adaptations thereof by Corvus Business Associates.
- 4 Adapted from Charles J C Lyall's "There are four things that hold back human progress; ignorance, stupidity, committees and accountants."
- 5 Gardener et al *Management and Organisational Behavior; An Integrated Perspective* South-Western College Publishing (2002)
- 6 Report from the Maryland Patient Safety Center 2009.
- 7 Quoted by Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*
- 8 Term quoted by Martin Charns in 'Implementing Organisational Change' *FORUM* (1994)
- 9 Adapted from that put forward by Anand Subramaniam of Consult 101 in his presentation *Performance Improvement Culture*
- 10 From the paper *Making Change Work* by IBM (2008)

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