



Business Perspectives

Project Management Perspective

I started managing projects and change initiatives part way through my career when I was already established as a supervisor in an operations department. At that stage I'd only experienced being on the receiving end of this type of work or being part of a project or change team, and my early attempts at managing were quite naïve. Like many managers I was put in 'at the deep end' and asked to manage my first project with no training. As I've gained experience and undergone various forms of training my skills have improved however some early lessons have stuck with me.

It's almost impossible to successfully manage a change initiative or project if you and your team don't know what you are trying to achieve

This sounds like an obvious statement, however in so many change or project initiatives that I experience it's less than clear. All too often a senior manager will know what they want to be achieved and issue what they see as a clear brief. The project manager then interprets the brief in his or her own way and translates this to the project team, who in turn translate the brief as something slightly different. This was an early (and costly) lesson I learnt and as a consultant I now spend much of my time clarifying what exactly needed to be achieved.

Many projects or change initiatives are not labelled as such and many pieces of work undertaken in organisations are included in the everyday workload of teams. This means that they often lack the structure and resources they would gain as a project or change initiative. Sometimes, for small changes in particular, this is a useful approach but for many large pieces of work using project or change techniques will help to clarify how much resource is required to make it happen. The likelihood that a project or change initiative will be labelled as such can depend on the type of organisation – for example an engineering firm is more likely to use project terminology than a publishing firm. This means that what is labelled as a project for some may just be seen as management for others.

Change initiatives and project management overlap and are often messy. When does a change management initiative become a project? Why are these defined as separate things? The reality of most organisations is that what is labelled as a change initiative or a project is rarely the same between one organisation (or even department) and another. Many projects include some elements of change management, for instance, an IT project which is implementing a new system could use some change management tools and techniques to roll out the system. Similarly most change initiatives are at some point broken down into individual projects that have defined objectives and timescales. Change and project management offer a variety of tools and techniques for managers and the skill is in knowing when to use each.

There's always a limit to what can be achieved with the resources that you have. Again this seems like an obvious statement. After all if you have a tank of petrol in your car and that will allow you to drive for around 500 miles most people wouldn't expect to be able to drive their car for 1000 miles on one tank of petrol. Despite this it's very common to expect a group of people to achieve more than is possible with their available time. This often leads to objectives not being met or work being carried out in a hurried or sub-standard way. With change initiatives this often means that they're not properly embedded and an organisation will need to return to them again in the future. With projects in particular time, quality and resources are all interconnected and fixing one is bound to have an impact on the others. As a project or change manager one of my roles has been to clearly set out what can be achieved within the constraints set down. It is also important to recognise what is within your

control and what is controlled by others but is still critical to your project and could affect when it can be delivered

The impact of change is usually vastly underestimated.

Whilst to some extent lower level change happens all the time in organisations, for example two people agree between themselves to work differently together, most of what is labelled as change in organisations takes place at a macro rather than a micro level. These larger changes can impact upon many people – for instance one change of procedure in a call centre can affect dozens of people. If you then add the complication of not just changing what individuals do but of changing their interactions with others then the impact of even a relatively small change starts to look quite big. If you then think about the ambitions of some organisations to change their whole culture and of all the different ways that this affects what people do at work then it is easy to see that change is a very complex process. Because the individual proposing the change will usually see it as a necessity and to some extent 'obvious' does not necessarily make it so. Having said this it is important to remember that not all of the impact of change will be bad, and I have found that my experience of project and change management has proved to be invaluable in a variety of other roles, and even outside of the workplace.