

COMMUNITY RISK REDUCTION GUIDANCE NOTE No.4

MANAGING CHANGE PROGRAMS

The Acuity approach to Community Risk Reduction is clear that, if they're done right, CRR Programs have the power to transform organizations – to change many of the assumptions that underpin what they do and how they do it.

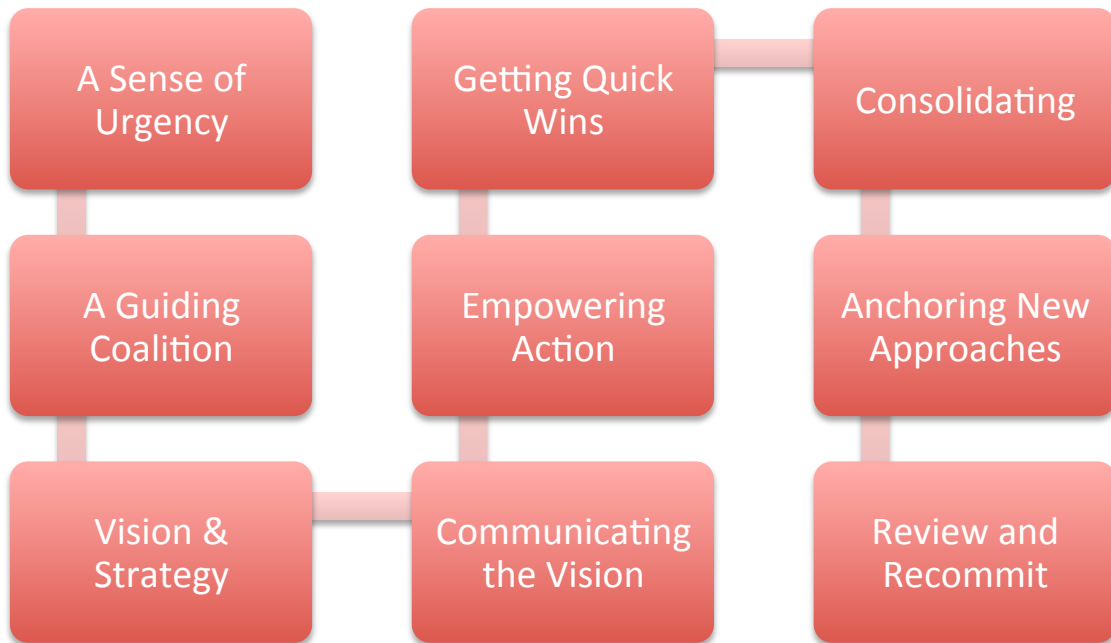
Of course, most respectable business books take great delight in highlighting the fact that the vast majority of change programs or projects fail to deliver on expectations. Obviously, organizations don't set out deliberately to fail but many overlook the key elements of what can make change "stick".

So a critical part of successful implementation of CRR approaches depends upon paying attention to how the change process is actually led and managed. Many people will remember the problems of, for example, Coca Cola who launched "New Coke" on an unsuspecting public only to withdraw rapidly soon afterwards as complaints from loyal consumers soared. Change programs in the business sector are often dictated by changing markets or consumer needs and preferences, raw material availability and so on. Although change is always a complex challenge, business has the "luxury" of being able to focus on a relatively limited range of interested parties - consumers, stockholders, supply chains and staff in considering how to manage change.

Managing change programs and projects in public service is even more complex – due principally to the number of different stakeholders or interested parties who need to be satisfied (or reassured). Apart from the variety of partners in any given governance model, public services rarely, if ever, get to choose their "customers" (unlike business). Managing public expectations in times of change is therefore one of the most difficult and sensitive elements of a change program.

Kotter's Model of Leading Change

John Kotter's 8 Step model of leading change has been remarkably durable. It's a relatively simple systems model designed to get organizations to think through, in advance, how to plan for success in getting change to work. We have added a ninth step – Review & Recommit – but the basic model is unaffected.



1. Establishing A Sense of Urgency

Organizations that have been around for a time are often characterized by a degree of “inertia” – an unwillingness to change tried and trusted ways of working. People usually need a reason for changing something they’ve been used to for a while, especially when you consider that, in psychological terms, most people usually experience change as “loss” rather than “win”. To gain traction for a change program, leaders must provide a compelling reason (sometimes referred to as a “burning platform”) for change to happen. This may be due to real or anticipated changes in the environment, a reduction in revenue funding, or a rise in demand for services. However once the leader has chosen to interpret the threat (or opportunity), it is their first job to create and establish a sense of urgency about the need to make changes.

In the UK fire sector, despite various advances in equipment and procedures for operational response, and improved funding and training, the statistics for deaths in fires remained stubbornly high and unresponsive. A more fundamental change was

needed and those Chiefs in the vanguard began a steady campaign of highlighting the need for a rethink. They were vocal, inside and outside their organizations, in arguing for a big change in approach. And they convinced their political masters, secured funding, and engaged organized labor.

2. Forming A Guiding Coalition

Change is not a one-person job. You need a group of willing and committed partners who believe in the case for change, who will work tirelessly to make it happen, and who will engage others in the cause. Depending upon the nature of the change, you may need to engage or secure specialist expertise as part of this coalition, although the more you can achieve this internally, the more it will be accepted. Rarely is a Fire Chief the master of his or her own destiny and often will serve, either directly or indirectly a political board. Recognizing the political drivers of the board and how these might align with the change the Chief is committed to requires judgment and political acuity.

3. Developing A Vision & Strategy

The Guidance Note on Strategy offers advice on the importance of a clear and positive view of the future in terms of what life will be like on the other side of change. The simpler and more compelling this vision is, the more likely it is to be understood and accepted. In the more successful UK strategies, simple straplines like “Making Kent Safer” or “We make life safer” were easy to remember and made it abundantly clear what they were about.

Remember that strategy is more than “what” you are going to do; it’s also the “how” you are going to do it. Time spent on refining this at the outset of a change program is vital to success. As well as a clear vision that people can hang on to, a clear program of action with milestones and success criteria will get the change off to a flying start.

4. Communicating The Vision

Leaders and their teams must be relentless advocates for the change they want to see. The commitment becomes almost “evangelical” in its intensity and consistency. You need to understand how opinions are formed in your organization – where are the informal channels that often work better than the official ones, and how can you tap into them? Who are the opinion-formers in your outfit? How can you get them on board?

It’s impossible to overstate the requirement to keep communicating. There will be times when you are almost sick of hearing yourself saying the same things over and

over again. Keep going – you can never do enough of it. People have to believe that you're serious and committed. Stories that illustrate the idea and the outcome you seek are incredibly important. Fire Departments, like many organizations, have strong folklore traditions so you need to create folklore about CRR. During periods of change, many will opt to “keep their heads down” in the belief that the storm will pass and things will return to normal eventually. Your job as leaders and change agents is to convince them that the change is here to stay.

5. Empowering Broad-Based Action

Existing ways of operating are based on established systems, processes and behaviors which together make up the culture of an organization. If any of these are real or potential obstacles to change, they need to be tackled and removed. If your change strategy has been worked out properly, you should have a good idea of where systems and processes need to be aligned differently to support the program. Tackling these sometimes takes courage. In the UK, it often entailed dismantling shift patterns and rostering arrangements that people had been happy with for decades. It involved challenging the primary purpose of fire departments – from response to prevention.

Don't expect everyone to be happy about this. Leadership isn't a popularity contest and it takes courage and determination to overcome resistance. But with data and facts on your side, a coalition committed to the idea, together with a compelling vision of a better future for those who benefit from your service, it is possible to make huge strides.

6. Generating Short-Term Wins

This is more than opportunism. Building in visible markers of progress and achievement in the early stages of your change program not only provides encouragement to those who are actively engaged; it also demonstrates to the doubters that it can work. It also provides important “stories” to explain the idea and its impact. The early stages of CRR in the UK benefited from some quite startling results, in terms of reducing numbers of deaths in the home, in the first year. Consequently, more people wanted to be associated with success and it became all but impossible for the cynics to get a hearing.

7. Consolidating Gains and Moving On

Quick wins lead to more wins. Success can breed success. The early stages of change programs are often characterized by “pilot exercises” which will usually provide limited markers of success. But if you can get the early wins you can build the

momentum to commit more resources that usually yield even better results. Consolidation is often concerned with achieving a “critical mass” of resources and effort to ensure that the program you are engaged in become the new way of doing business – you achieve permanent and sustainable change.

8. Anchoring New Approaches In The Culture

Gradually, with effort and persistence, people come to see that the organization has changed and is not going back. Indeed in the UK in a number of Fire Services the enthusiasm and initiative of staff created its own momentum to try new ideas around education and prevention. This is how you now do business. Anchoring it in the culture involves many aspects but will certainly include every aspect of human resource management from recruitment and retention to recognition and reward. Publicity and communications continually reinforce the new expectations, structures evolve and change to reflect new priorities and ways of working, and new people join. Gradually, people cease to yearn for what they once had and get on with the new work. You have changed the organization for good.

9. Review & Recommit

To avoid getting stuck in a “new status quo”, you will need to review the program and see what you can learn about what worked well and what could have been done better. You will certainly need to undergo change again, given the increasing pace of change in the world around us (The Acuity Model has a never ending process of review and change). Assuming that at least some of your desired outcomes have been realized, this is also the time to re-dedicate or re-commit to the vision and strategy and, if necessary to refresh or enliven it; to keep it current and relevant.

Some Final Reflections on Experience

It’s hard work. Don’t set out on a major change program unless you have the stamina and determination to see it through. The importance of visible and consistent advocacy from the leadership cannot be overstated. So it’s also important that you yourself genuinely believe in what you’re doing; that belief will help to sustain you and your team when the going gets tough, as it inevitably will from time to time.

Develop flexibility in how you choose to present your vision, and the anticipated benefits you can deliver, depending upon your audience. Politicians, citizens, staff, labor, partner agencies – these will all have slightly different concerns and

expectations so a degree of empathy is called for. Ask yourself “what does this mean for them?”

Take the time at the beginning to get the thinking and the strategy right; it will repay a hundredfold later on. Change programs that involve false starts and mis-steps usually fail. Focus on getting as much right first time as you can.