



Culture Shock

EOWA Employers of Choice have long demonstrated the link between positive work/life balance and business success, but reforming your workplace culture requires a polished strategy and steady leadership.

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Open the briefcase on business

consultant buzzwords and what do you find? Phrases like "change or perish", "move or lose" and "evolve or evaporate" for a start. In the opinion of figures such as Charles Darwin, or more local luminaries like Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward, adapting to change is imperative to survival. Whether it's pursuing a new goal, executing an existing strategy or altering workplace culture, as Harvard Business School professor John Kotter puts it, navigating change is the most important challenge for businesses competing in a turbulent world.

Let's take the magnifying glass to just one of these scenarios, changing workplace culture, a trend gaining pace among many forward-looking managers. Though a great smattering of firms still fail to see the positive side of these policies, positive, family-friendly workplaces are serious bait for competitive industries seeking to recruit and maintain talented staff. Cave-dwelling, inaccessible CEOs are out, as are inflexible hours and valuing "face time" over performance. As Anna McPhae, director of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA), observes, "Women leave a company because of family, but don't come back because of culture." The other key benefit in changing culture lies in bolstering the bottom line, notes Barbara Holmes, director of consultancy firm Managing Work/Life Balance. "Effective work/life strategies are vital to maintain a competitive edge. They increase productivity by better managing stress, health and wellbeing issues, reducing sick leave and absenteeism, increasing motivation, and maintaining corporate memory," she says. Among other state agencies, Queensland's Department of Industrial Relations (QDIR) agrees. Its website points out that supportive workplace cultures foster higher levels of job satisfaction, not to mention greater overall commitment to organisations.

But for a principle so rich in benefits, why is changing workplace culture so hard to achieve? Change, it has been said, is one of life's constants – surely it comes as naturally as learning to walk and talk? Think again. According to Anne Riches, change strategist and

executive director of consulting firm The Riches Group, only one in five change projects succeed. That's because many top-down approaches – diligence only as far as ticking boxes and installing policies is concerned – fail to understand the importance of people, communication and leadership in engendering change. 'Drink up, this is good for you' tactics are destined to slump and sink, she believes.

"I would divide the barriers to change as being both structural and attitudinal," says Russell Lansbury, Professor of Work and Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney. "Managers often blame governments and unions for impeding change by imposing structural barriers. But the key impediments tend to be attitudinal." Effective change relies upon management's willingness and ability to engage employees in the process, in other words, seeking their ideas and involvement, he says. "Those wanting to achieve change also need a vision and must be willing to follow this through in collaboration with others and with a view to building support for change."

Side stepping into the domain of healthcare, a recent example from the United States illustrates his point. Addressing the issue of changing attitudes, *Fast Company* magazine cites a report on the behaviour of heart disease patients at the Johns Hopkins University. This study found that, when instructed to change their behaviour or face painful repeat surgery, 90 percent of patients were unable to do so. However, when the hospital produced a year-long consultative program involving twice-weekly support sessions and instruction in health and relaxation pursuits, 77 percent had stuck to lifestyle changes two years after the program ended. In explanation, trial director Professor Dean Ornish was quoted: "Providing health information is important but not always sufficient. We also need to bring in the psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that are so often ignored."

Psychology can also help managers understand the various stages employees experience when faced with change. The adaptation process normally involves four main "levels of readiness", says Riches. Stage one is "comfortable oblivion" where people deny the need to change. In the case of work/life balance strategies, this could appear as failure to see benefits – male staff, for example, may view the change

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CHAMPIONING CHANGE: HOW TO MAKE CHANGE WORK FROM THE TOP DOWN

How can CEOs or senior management bring about new ways of doing business? Change specialist, and executive director of consulting firm The Riches Group, Anne Riches, offers the following tips:

- Communicate the business' reasons for change and why change is necessary
- Create the urgency: explain the external pressures to change (for example, remaining competitive)
- Explain the impact of not changing
- Validate the way the organisation has been to date; don't blame people or the past
- Describe the new vision and scope: "what will the organisation be like after change?"
- Identify what is not changing
- Explain the change process, including initiatives and timelines
- Let staff know what can be expected and when
- Outline the problems staff might experience
- Answer the WIFM question: "what is in it for me?" Also address questions like "how will this affect me?" and "what am I expected to do"?

as a "women's-only" issue. "Mild contemplation" is stage two. Here, employees begin to vaguely consider the proposal, but procrastinate rather than act. For stage three, "preparation" takes over - people realise that change is necessary and begin to contemplate solutions. This can often be triggered by an event, says Riches, such as someone quitting when carer or parental leave is refused, or having a car accident due to work-induced fatigue. "Action" comprises the final stage: practice kicks in and change starts to filter through. "People change to the degree to which they are motivated by the 'I can do it' factor," explains Riches. "CEOs and managers need to think about how they are going to move people through these stages of readiness."

In approaching this aim, the QDIR advises organisations keep three main strategies in mind: providing education and promoting communication; getting management behind the culture change; and changing key values and norms. "Build consensus for culture change from the top down as well as the bottom up," the department says.

To kick-start the first of these strategies (offering education) begin by teaching staff the importance of work/life balance policies and a supportive work/life balance culture. Discussion is critical: talking through the issues thrown up by change increases employees' understanding of mutual expectations, provides a forum for brainstorming

solutions, and gives staff a feeling of ownership over the problem-solving process. As Sharon Parker, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the Australian Graduate School of Management, asserts, "Successful change in organisations happens where there is trust between senior management and employees, and where there is open communication between all levels of the organisation."

Education also plays a role in securing management's support. "Attitudes and resistance of middle management can create significant barriers to employees use and effectiveness of policies," the QDIR says. "A gap may exist between what head office believe is happening and what's taking place on the ground," Parker adds. "Managers need to be trained and given the confidence and skills to support these policies. They may not be used to managing staff who work on a part-time or job share basis, for example, and may not know how to provide employees with the support they need."

Then there's the issue of managers as role models. As Goward says, "Leadership from the top and middle levels is very important. Bosses need to not only talk about the importance of these policies, but should demonstrate it, rather than replying to emails at three in the morning." Barbara Holmes, of Managing Work/Life Balance, confirms this point. Her company's annual study into the values and practices of 377 Australian organisations, the *Work/Life Initiatives: The Way Ahead Report on the*

year 2005 Survey, reports that more senior executives are showing an increased commitment to improving culture, though generally aren't "good role models for work/life balance".

"In some cases, their inability to change their own attitudes about work/life issues and flexible work arrangements hinders progress within the organisation," Holmes says.

One example is management's use of leave entitlements. The federal Workplace Relations Act 1999 deems that employees may use up to 40 hours per year to care for ill family or household members - this is classified as "personal leave" and also encompasses sick and bereavement leave. If a manager takes annual rather than personal leave to look after an ill child, for instance, this behaviour sends the message that caring responsibilities should come at the cost of recreational time. "When leaders don't 'practice what they preach' or 'walk their talk', people don't trust them," says Riches. "When that happens people become cynical, unresponsive to change, and at worse, silent saboteurs."

Finally, there's the issue of changing values and norms, or as some consultants label them, 'cultural artefacts'. The most enduring artefacts revolve around rewards systems, which as you'd expect, often fail to complement work/life balance strategies.

“Ensure staff are judged on their outcomes rather than how many hours they spend on the job,” advises Goward.

One way to make this happen, the QDIR believes, is to introduce awards for supervisors nominated by employees for providing an environment which addresses and enhances both productivity and personal needs.

Another key cultural artefact is the idea that work and personal lives should remain separate. This notion can seriously undermine work/life balance policies and create unrealistic expectations upon employees.

Encourage people to rethink the relationship between work and personal life by inviting employees' family members to social functions (scheduled at suitable times for children), and as an extra measure, allow staff to have pictures or other personal objects in their work areas. “When changing workplace culture, change the existing cultural artefacts as well – new cultural artefacts can enhance the change process,” the department observes.

‘Change or perish’: truth or fiction? As is attributed to Charles Darwin, “It’s not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the most responsive to change.” Riches, for one, agrees. “Managers who invest time and resources in thinking through the human factor in change initiatives recognise that people are the only key difference they have. They and their organisations will not only survive, they’ll thrive.” ●

LEGAL EAGLES

Find out more information about Industrial Relations legislation in your state:

NSW

www.industrialrelations.nsw.gov.au

VIC

www.ir.vic.gov.au

QLD

www.dir.qld.gov.au

TAS

www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/irssm

NT

www.nt.gov.au/ntg/indrels.shtml

SA

www.eric.sa.gov.au

ACT

www.psm.act.gov.au

WA

www.wairc.wa.gov.au

THE FOUR STAGES OF CHANGE

The majority of employees progress through the following stages of readiness when faced with change. Anne Riches suggests managers develop a plan to best navigate staff through this process:

Comfortable oblivion

Employees deny the need to change. They don't see the point and resist attempts or overtures relating to change.

Mild contemplation

Employees are largely ambivalent about what is happening. They begin to recognise the need to act, but instead procrastinate.

Preparation

The fact that a problem exists becomes apparent to staff and they start to focus on solutions. A critical event often triggers this (for example, an over-worked parent suffers a car accident caused by extreme fatigue).

Action

Motivation levels reach a peak and employees take action. Change begins to filter through.
