

How to implement change in the public sector without your best people leaving

David Jarrett, 05 May 2010

For many leaders in the public sector it isn't difficult to demonstrate a convincing rationale for change, show the graphs and numbers that justify your proposed strategy, draw up a new structure and win a mandate to make change. Yet this is only half the job. The other - perhaps most challenging half - is implementing this new way of working without your best people leaving, morale crashing, performance falling through the floor and dissatisfaction erupting among your customers.

In light of the public-sector cuts many people anticipate will be announced following the General Election, now, it seems, is the time to question if the public sector is fit for the challenge that change on this scale represents?

Given that the change demanded from the public sector is so radical, it certainly needs to be change that cascades and engages beyond the formal organisation structure to incorporate other stakeholders, including politicians, partners and service users. It is not an easy or enviable task.

Yet alongside this need for stakeholder engagement, the public sector needs to look internally and start its journey to sustainable, long-term change by reviewing its fitness for the task in hand and assessing its capability and capacity for change on an organisational, departmental and individual employee level. Without attention to this type of detail, the public sector simply won't get the return or change that it expects to see.

The sector also needs to be aware of the most common causes of failure when it comes to change. Bath's experience suggests the most common reasons for failure are: front-line people are not sufficiently involved in designing the details of the change - after all, the devil's in the detail; that the change programme itself is not synchronised and integrated, with the result that critical gateways are missed; and, most common of all, that people see the change primarily as a structural one, not one that's holistic and underpinned by a new mind set. Ultimately, the practical challenges of cutting costs, in terms of services, headcount and overheads are huge in a public-sector culture where change may simply be resisted by 'following the rules'.

Change of the magnitude that the public sector needs to deliver really must be led from the top. Leaders need to take the initiative and demonstrate to their people that they are the change they want to see within their organisation and to be the catalyst for this change.

However, for many leaders and managers - whether public or private sector - changing the way your people think and behave is too frequently assigned to the 'too difficult' box and passed over for another day.

It's surprising, for example, how more attention often seems to be paid to enabling leavers to have a smooth exit than it is for survivors to be assisted to take on new responsibilities and adapt to working in a new organisational culture. The public sector must learn from their private-sector counterparts that by identifying their best talent early on and giving priority to a dialogue that motivates and supports managers, they can see their new structure and strategy succeed.

Support to understand the strategy of change is essential, but so too is the practical support that public-sector organisations will require as they undergo a transition to a new way of thinking and working.

This includes investing time and resources to, for example, facilitate sessions with stakeholders where managers need to listen to or respond to difficult messages, implementing transition and team coaching to help managers stand back and focus on priorities as well as process what the change means for them personally. Extra capacity for communication, engagement and rapid problem-solving so all stakeholders are actively involved in finding solutions will also be required. These are all ways that the sector can ensure that the difficult change they are expected to undergo happens as smoothly as possible.

Change for the public sector isn't rocket science, but it is highly skilled work that needs commitment, courage and consistency to deliver the results that both the sector and its stakeholders expect. The sector will need support from its peers in the private realm - whether acting as partners or mentors - to make change a success. But the benefits of this endeavour are surely worth it, as with a stronger public sector we can build stronger foundations for the future economic and business environment.

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<http://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/news/1001216/implement-change-public-sector-without-best-people-leaving/>