

Thought Leadership

Employee engagement in a change environment

Change is inevitable for people and organisations and, even though managing change is a core skill for HR professionals, there are numerous academic studies that indicate that 70 per cent of change programs reportedly fail (Rune Todnem, 2005). This article discusses the dynamics of change within organisations, presents a rigorous approach to managing it that is based on a model of sustained behavioural development and illustrates how in today's organisation lasting and successful organisational change will best be achieved through engagement in behavioural change. The five-stage model applies "Precision Business Psychology," which was developed by Crelos and combines the latest knowledge from the psychological sciences with years of experience of working with both private and public sector organisations to deliver lasting change.

Understanding the dynamics of change

Too often, when tackling change, leaders focus on communicating the vision and the behavioural change they need to deliver the new organisation, then focus resources and support on designing new processes, structures and systems. This leaves the behavioural, cognitive and affective components, the factors that most influence the degree and speed of successful change, ill-defined and low in priority (LaClair and Rao, 2002). It also can result in what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance," where the message communicated is contrary to the evidence of what is seen to happen for real. When this happens, the organisation struggles to engage employees in change and ambiguity prevails.

How we think (cognition) and how we feel (emotion) influence how we act. Increasingly sophisticated technology, such as computer modelling and brain scanning, is driving new findings in areas such as cognition, behaviour, perception and creativity, as well as the behaviour of people in social and organisational situations. We increasingly understand how specific mental processes relate to the physical architecture of the brain and how those physical structures are changed by new learning and experiences. Better information about how the brain works underpins our increasingly sophisticated accounts of how people actually behave and helps our models to become more sophisticated and predictive of behaviour. This means that increasingly change can be managed more effectively by predicting the type and flow of interventions required to ensure that behavioural change is lasting and engaging – not temporary and disruptive.

The Precision Business Psychology approach

Crelos has developed a five-stage model of changing behavior that uses Precision Business Psychology to deliver effective and appropriately timed interventions to manage organisational change – see Figure 1. It is derived from the trans-theoretical model of behavioral change (the sequence of stages that everyone must go through in order to adapt behavior) combined with the Kubler-Ross change curve, originally used to model grief (a significant personal change), but now a familiar and much-used image for illustrating many change narratives. It is not a substitute for the usual good practice of creating a vision, involving stakeholders and building leadership and governance teams to deliver change. It is, however, a guide that helps us to map activities against our increasing understanding of how an individual experiences change. It is also critically important in showing us how the components of the brain and emotions work in close combination to adapt and learn to operate effectively in a changing environment. Managing these stages tightly through psychological preparation and planning will help to move an organisation through the stages of change and achieve the benefits of the change more quickly and more reliably.

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The five-stage model consists of the following:

1. Status quo – defining precisely the current and future state and what the journey will look like to get there.
2. Building awareness – assessment of the gap in terms of behaviours, attitudes and skills and the key stages of change required.
3. Preparation – personalizing the journey and understanding what needs to happen for the change to take place, which mental models need to be redesigned, how success will be measured and who will be involved.
4. Action – teaching, learning, developing and celebrating success.
5. Maintenance – recognizing change, engaging others in mentoring the change and continuing to celebrate success.

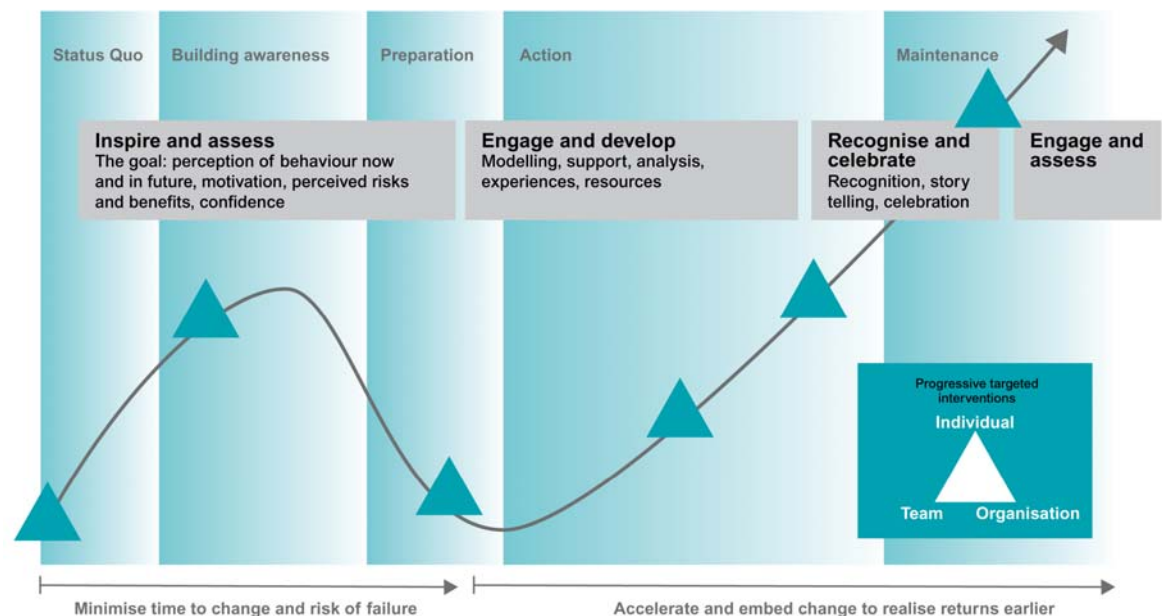


Figure 1. The Crelos five-stage model of behavioral change

Stage 1: The status quo

The first of these stages is the status quo – focusing on what things really look like now by forming a full and accurate picture of your current position. It is important to be able to define precisely what success looks like and be able to articulate inspirationally what needs to change and why in order to succeed. It's about inspiring people – for example, for an aspiring Olympic athlete it's about knowing the percentage improvement required to be the next record breaker and precisely what that means in training times, strength and mental conditioning. In commercial terms this could be identifying that clients' needs are changing and a complete new innovation is needed to address their needs. To articulate what attitudes, behaviours and skills are required to deliver this, why it is important and how these skills will be developed demands precision.

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Stage 2: Building awareness

Assessment and personal communication are crucial to building awareness. Armed with full knowledge of the status quo – where an individual or organisation is starting from in terms of attitudes, knowledge or competence, for example – the gap must be clearly evaluated and the challenge of what to change needs to be clearly articulated at a personal and organisational level. At this stage it is detailed evaluation of people that is crucial to success.

Stage 3: Preparation

This is when people start thinking about what they must do to make the required change. At this point the pivotal activity is to engage people to explore the risks of failure and the positives of success. To change behaviour requires the neural pathways in the brain to reorganize, and for old connections to be broken and new pathways formed. Positive emotional experiences help this to happen. For an aspiring non-smoker, for example, it's vital that the new behavior, frequently wrongly articulated as not smoking, is translated to positive actions such as "spending more time enjoying being outside in the fresh air." Actions that are associated with positive and memorable experiences are more likely to be repeated. For these new actions to be associated with positive and memorable experiences shouldn't be left to chance but should be planned carefully. Events where individuals and groups formulate their own solutions about what they will do differently, how they want this to feel and what will make this happen are critical to success at this stage.

In our model it is only at this stage in people's behavioural "journey" that change can begin. Unfortunately, however, this stage is the usual starting point for many organisations and, without prior investment in inspiring, assessing and engaging your people, explains why so many change programs fail. For the later two stages we adopt the same precision in planning and use of psychology. This enables change to happen sooner, for instance generating the required commercial benefits more quickly. Through the previous stages of the model, organisations come to understand the different contexts in which their people are making change and so gain an insight into each person's likely psychological journey. Because each person's experience of the same transition can be so different it is critical to be able to precisely measure the smallest changes, in order to identify when they occur, reinforce them and celebrate them. This is precise work and requires the most successful assessment and engagement tools, reinforcing the success of change so far and helping to measure its success.

Stage 4: Taking action

This is when an organisation's focus should turn to developing its people. In order for any change to be lasting and effective, it should be reinforced with the right learning and development experiences, delivered at the right time. Our Precision Business Psychology approach builds on insights from the latest neuroscientific research, identifying the strategies and behaviours that best promote long-term learning. For example, there are five known major promoters of learning: innate learning devices (Gallistel, 1990, 2004) (such as imitation and obligation computation – what we owe others and what they owe us), repetition (Squire and Kandel, 2000), excitement at the time of learning (Cahill et al., 2003; LeDoux, 2002), eating carbohydrates at the time of learning (Gold et al., 2002) and eight to nine hours sleep after learning (Kuriyama et al., 2004). While some of these are harder to control in organisations than others, this knowledge can be used to create effective training and development programs and enhance the likelihood that investment in learning has the desired effect. In this way a full range of targeted interventions can be developed, from classroom training, inspirational events and group facilitation to individual and team coaching, setting up networking groups and putting in place support mechanisms such as mentoring schemes.

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Stage 5: Maintenance

At this stage the onus turns to sustaining change. This is a time to celebrate all that has been achieved but it is not the end. To thoroughly embed the new status quo requires re-assessment of your success to date and learning from the process to inform people change management in the future. This is also a time to reassess business aims and strategy in light of the changed situation. It's an opportunity to make the most of the learning experience the organisation has been through to sustain its ability to adapt and meet future challenges.

The model in action at Costain

Costain operates in the UK construction industry, which is worth in excess of £80 billion and is forecast to grow at 3 percent per year until 2010. The "Blueprint for UK Construction 2006-2010" report from ConstructionSkills, a UK government Sector Skills Council, forecasts that this growth will require upwards of 88,000 recruits into the sector per year. While migrant workers from Eastern Europe provide a much needed talent pipeline, there is little evidence that this pipeline will provide sufficiently skilled workers to lead on middle and senior management roles. This represents a significant talent management challenge for organisations such as Costain that seek to deliver excellence.

The ability to resource projects with sufficiently skilled project managers is critical to maximizing project performance. In construction and civil engineering projects, most of which last for a number of years, it is the ability of the project manager to get the best from a complex web of stakeholders, including planners, designers, engineers and clients, that can make the single biggest difference to project success or failure. To tackle this challenge, in 2006 Costain set up, with Crelos and other partners, a highly targeted Project Management Academy using the Crelos five-stage model of behavioural change to build skills and engage employees in the changes required to succeed.

Costain's Project Management Academy: Stage one

To inspire the need for change, a number of Costain's industry-leading project managers were profiled to identify the precise combination of technical knowledge, competence and behaviours behind their success, as well as the optimum stages of career progression. By employing a combination of psychometric assessments, technical skill assessments and observation using a technique known as ORCE – observe, record, classify and evaluate – a robust profile was generated showing what excellence looks like and how to develop it. The precision with which this was defined ensures that all staff are clear of the goal, what they can do to progress towards it and the contribution that excellence in project management will make to the business strategy to "Be number one." Considerable emphasis is placed on enrolment in the Academy, with all nominations supported by the board. This helps to create a sense of anticipation and inspiration about the journey ahead.

Costain's Project Management Academy: Stage two

Once on board, delegates are first evaluated for their career aspirations, current technical abilities and project management knowledge and experience. This is followed by rigorous assessment against a newly-defined role profile to identify learning needs, using key behaviours based on the Schroder high-performance behavioural framework – such as conceptual agility, enabling openness, forming concepts and empowering action. Assessment tools include one-to-one interviews, 360 degree feedback and a development centre. Because project managers lead in highly complex dynamic environments with multiple stakeholders, the development centre was created to assess behaviour through a fast-moving

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civil emergency simulation that showcases high performance behaviours. Numerical and verbal reasoning are measured through psychometric tests.

Costain's Project Management Academy: Stage three

When using the Crelos model of behavioural change, significant time should be given to preparing for development. Irrespective of the level at which the employee has entered the Academy (there are nine levels, from graduate to project director), he or she is supported to create a personalized development plan with a pathway trigger to get to the next level. Most importantly, the feedback and planning phase is carefully managed and supported to ensure that the correct mental preparation for change happens. Particular attention is paid to helping individuals unpick their mental model of how they operate now, what will need to change to support their development and how success will be measured. Measures include targeted professional qualifications through the Association of Project Managers, behavioural change measured by 360 degree feedback and project level metrics, such as project profitability, customer service, quality and accident frequency rate.

Costain's Project Management Academy: Stage four

The fourth stage, development, is unique for each person and includes specific on-the-job assignments as well as coaching, mentoring and off-site development workshops. A full learning cycle model is used and as much emphasis is placed on behavioural development as is placed on gaining appropriate experience and technical skills.

Costain's Project Management Academy: Stage five

Stage five of the model is sustaining behavioural change through celebration, self-management, measurement and recognition. In Costain, a project manager-run forum with 220 members has already organized its own annual conference and some of the Academy's first project managers are acting as mentors for the next enrolment.

The application of clear progression through the Academy in combination with project metrics and behavioural change monitoring provides powerful data to motivate continuous improvement and continuous motivation to strive for change. Other Academy programs run by Crelos have demonstrated that those individuals who develop the fastest outperform their peers by as much as 20 percent. The Costain Academy is addressing a key business need by driving change through engagement in skill development and praise comes from outside Costain as well as within. ConstructionSkills is a supporter of this approach and described the Academy at a ConstructionSkills forum as "a model of best practice project management development in construction." Internal support for the Academy is demonstrated by continued investment and by feedback from participants who describe the Academy as "critical to their current development and achieving future career goals."

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Alison Gill is the co-founder and CEO of Crelos, a change management consultancy that specialises in using psychology precisely to improve business performance.. After graduating from Oxford University in Psychology, Gill developed her particular interest and expertise in the psychology of change and performance both through her professional career as a business psychologist and in her personal life – she is an entrepreneur, an adventurer and a triple Olympian in rowing.

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