

Change fatigue: myth or reality?

Produced by Elizabeth Ferguson, as part of the Crelos Change Mastery Series

Abstract



In this, the first article of the Crelos Change Mastery Series, Elizabeth Ferguson explores the concept of 'change fatigue'. We live in a time when change has become a constant part of UK plc. If change is a constant to what extent is change fatigue evident too?

Crelos have supported business leaders across a range of strategic change challenges including M&A, business turnaround, organisational restructuring, cultural change and operational efficiency drives. This experience, together with interviews conducted with ten senior executives with responsibility for strategic change, has enabled us to develop this research.

The research demonstrates that the way that change is managed has a direct impact on the extent to which change fatigue takes a hold. With the pace of change set to continue, we examine what leaders, managers, HR and consultants should be doing to minimise the effects on their organisations.

Introduction

There can be no disagreement that we are working in a rapidly changing world. Over the last few years the UK has suffered from the effects of a global banking crisis and subsequent economic recession. Following the 2010 general election we have in power the first coalition government since 1940, along with talk of a "Big Society" and the reality of a public spending review. Overseas the first African-American President moved in to the White House with an agenda of social reform and more recently the groundswell of revolution in many Arab nations has altered the face of global politics and brought a new meaning to the phrase "power to the people".

With all this as a backdrop and with a personal interest in the subject as a consultant working at organisational development and change consultancy Crelos, I felt that it was an opportune time to explore the concept of change fatigue. The pace of change over the last decade is perceived to have shifted dramatically, buzz phrases such as 'change is the new constant' and 'the pace of change is accelerating' have become parlance. This research explores to what extent is change fatigue evident throughout the UK, what is the impact on business people and what are leaders, managers and other groups doing to minimise the effects of change fatigue within their organisations?

In writing this article I interviewed ten senior business people all with responsibility for implementing strategic change across their function or organisation. Roles held by these individuals include; Chief Change Officer for Everything Everywhere, Group HR Director for TUI Travel, Head of HR for Transformation within EDF Energy, Balfour Beatty Services Strategy Director, Executive Director of Duke Corporate Education, Head of Business Programmes for O2, COO of Great Britain Hockey Ltd, Programme Director for a global, high street bank and Global Lead for Strategic Change and Transformation for a large consulting firm. These individuals were chosen for their extensive experiences of leading large-scale, complex organisational transitions.

Examples of the change that they have been involved in and led includes joint venture, down-sizing, re-structure from a local to global operating model, re-structure from a federated to centralised model,

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introduction of new companywide IT systems and change in strategy following bankruptcy. The research method used during this study was that of semi-structured, in depth interview with each participant, with questioning in three parts to evoke memories, explore current realities and expand on their predictions of the future.

What is change fatigue and how is it exhibited in UK organisations?



In the article titled "Do you have Change Fatigue?" published in the Harvard Business Review in 2001, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Ernest L. Arbuckle Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School (i), likened the typical change effort to "putting lipstick on a bulldog". She described the situation of the business leader spotting something that needs improving like a process or product, and deciding to superficially make it look better before quickly moving on to something else. The result is, said Kanter that "the bulldog's appearance hasn't improved, but

now it's really angry".

Change Fatigue as a concept has been around since the late 1990s, although over recent years the topic, while recognised, has been little written or talked about. Seemingly superseded by the paradigm of "Change as a Constant", tiredness, cynicism and disengagement are still widely seen in organisations as a reaction to regular, constant change.

When contributors to this research were questioned about their experience of "change fatigue" in their organisations and in some cases client organisations, there was a mixed response, including statements such as "I'm not familiar with the phrase Change Fatigue, but I see it all the time", "Yes, I've heard of Change Fatigue, but haven't really seen it in my organisation", "Is it fatigue?", "We don't use that phrase in this organisation, but I see cynicism when yet another change programme is announced."

There was a general acceptance that change in itself is tiring. Linda Kennedy, Chief Change Officer of Everything Everywhere, described how she saw fatigue set in amongst managers during the merger of Orange and T-mobile when they were expected to run change activity at the same time as maintaining business as usual. When being asked to deliver more than usual, strong line management and support and leadership was required to keep people engaged throughout.

Fatigue can also be the result of not only the quantity of work given to employees, but also the type of work, with individuals being expected to adopt new working patterns, roles, skills and behaviours. For example, one interviewee described the adoption of a new HR management system which required everyone in the business to work in a slightly different way. We can all recognise that learning something new takes energy and focus. Matthew Syed, in his book "Bounce, How Champions Are Made" (ii), uses famous names including Picasso and the Beatles to show the length of time it takes to reach peak performance. Syed holds the view that it takes 10,000 hours of "purposeful practice" to develop high performance in a new skill. Purposeful practice requires very specific goal directed learning but within organisations, unlike in other walks of life such as sport, learning can in fact be undirected, not linked to specific goals and with inadequate support. This can result in individuals being unsuccessful in adopting new ways of working and therefore either becoming disillusioned with work, or been seen as "trouble makers" or incapable of performing to the required standard in the "new world".

The third main reason for fatigue described during the interviews was as a result of the amount of change that is kicked off, but not necessarily seen through to realisation of the intended benefits. Sarah Craig,

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interim Head of Business Programmes at O2 Technology has seen this through-out her career, but more so recently. "Organisations seem to start off a lot of change and sometimes it doesn't get finished. In the future there needs to be more focussed execution to ensure that things actually change". A lack of actual change resulting from a lot of activity can cause cynicism and disillusionment; negative emotions that when held over an extended period of time may lead to fatigue. A lack of seeing things through to completion can be put down to a number of reasons, such as leaders being moved on to new positions every couple of years, the "next big thing" replacing the present programme, a need to respond to the ever-changing external environment and the fact that leaders' preferences are often not that of "completer-finisher" and therefore they simply lose interest.

Liz Mellon, Executive Director of Duke C E, has also experienced the disruption that can be caused when "there are holes to plug in leadership positions, so leaders are plucked out and whirled around the business. This results in people landing in role, trying to get to grips with the new situation and then moving on again. It is difficult to pursue a pattern of constant change when this is happening". This results in the leader, often along with finances and resources having moved on, while middle management, HR or a pared down project team are left to "finish off" the change activities.

Over 80% of contributors described the affects of a lack of communication and resulting engagement of the workforce. Change in these situations is often something "done to" employees, rather than there being an involvement and engagement in the process. A lack of involvement and the commoditisation of people during the change process can result in all sorts of negative emotions including anger, disempowerment and disenfranchisement, which can ultimately lead to a sort of fatigue.

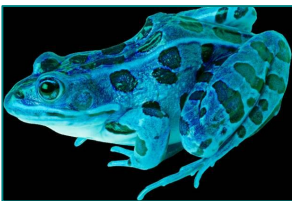
The final example of change fatigue was that of cynicism when a change programme is announced in a very positive light. As the contributor stated, "I'm not sure that change should always be regarded as positive. For the people that I had to make redundant, change was not a positive thing". Marc Barone of Balfour Beatty describes it as "**Change that causes anxiety – resulting in fatigue. There is also change that gives people energy**". All interviewees agreed that the word "change" has come to have negative connotations amongst business people. Over recent years change has more often than not included cost-saving, re-structuring and acquisition, often with a negative impact on individuals.

Although the description of "change fatigue" was not widely used amongst contributors, change fatigue was evident within groups and individuals across the organisations involved in this research. As the change fatigue manifested itself in a variety of different ways, this description may now be too simplistic for the complexities of the human impact of change.

In addition to describing a variety of examples of change fatigue, a common theme discussed was that the fatigue was caused by a "mis-management" of the change, rather than as a direct response to the change itself. Examples of mis-management included, but were not limited to; a lack of involvement, communication and engagement in the change, a lack of honest communication, change that is kicked off but not followed through to completion, achievements going unrecognised, a lack of understanding about the psychological response to change, and unclear goals, roles and responsibilities amongst the change team. However, if change fatigue is largely caused by mis-management, this can be improved by those leading and managing change such as business leaders, HR and consultants.

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How have traditional roles and responsibilities been affected by an increased requirement for change expertise?



Over half of contributors agreed that over the last few years the middle manager role has been impacted the greatest, with the management of change now being an accepted part of the line management role. Jacky Simmonds of TUI Travel has the view that “We are expecting far more from leadership and line management in terms of initiative and drive. It requires a fundamental shift in how we think about the line management role”. Historically managers have been asked to manage systems and processes in order to attain a desired level of output. More recently the role of managing people has been added to responsibilities, in particular that of performance management. Now, the manager is expected to translate the leader’s vision in to change activity. This not only means managing the skills and behaviours of the workforce, but increasingly the complexities of human emotions. Today the manager is required to manage, coach, facilitate, project manage and work cross-functionally, while all the time balancing business as usual activities with delivery of the change agenda. The manager, more so than the leader or consultant, also has to deal with the direct impact of the change, whether that is making redundancies, getting their team to adopt a new system and dealing with the change fatigue that may result. One contributor described the situation as **“managers will be expected to deal with the misery of change as they will be expected to run the change.”** These additions to their management responsibilities have led to personality traits such as resilience and behaviours including empathy and influencing becoming more important.

There is little doubt that leaders play an important role in business change. However it was recognised by contributors that there is variation in how well equipped the leaders of their organisations are to lead people through change and how knowledgeable they are in the psychology of change. In the main leaders still held the more traditional view of their role being that of rallying the troops, motivating and communicating the key messages, rather than in listening, understanding and involving. There were differing views about the roles and responsibilities of leaders, with one contributor from a professional services organisation suggesting that “Business leaders should be running the business to make money. If they have to run change in addition, what are they going to need to give up? Leaders should be good at leading and championing change, but not expert in change methodology”. Caroline Pear, Head of HR for Transformation within EDF Energy described two different types of leadership, requiring their own unique skill sets. “There is the leadership role of implementing change in to a business area and supporting managers and employees through the change. In my experience most leaders have some level of understanding about this. There is also the role of leading a change project and knowledge about this is patchier, particularly with regards to the different change roles required”.

Amongst contributors there was large variation in how well the HR function supported their business through change, with some HR departments still largely focused on process and procedure, while others operate increasingly as business partners. In practice, the most valuable HR functions will be able to do both, supporting and advising through the change and ensuring that all processes and systems are reviewed to allow them to effectively embed and promote the “new world”.

Caroline Pear suggests that **“in the future a core competence for an HR business partner will be to support businesses through change”**. The ability of HR to support business change came down largely to the skill of the individual practitioner and their formal training along with their past change experience. This might bring in to question whether existing HR professional development caters for today’s expectations of the HR function. For example, the CIPD HR Profession map (iii) that sets out what HR practitioners need

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to know, do and deliver at all stages in their career, does not mention change management as one of its Professional Areas. In addition, the structure and operating model of the HR department and its interfaces with the business are of increasing importance to enable HR to closely partner and provide credible and expert support to leaders and managers.

The final role discussed, that of the change consultant or internal change expert, is relatively immature and was not recognised at all by a small number of contributors. Whether internal or bought in, these skills are likely to become increasingly necessary. Consultants can bring a wealth of expertise of delivering change within different environments, as well as an understanding of both the methodology and the psychology of change management, a view reinforced by Liz Mellon, "***We need change management experts. Change should be leader led, but they need help, support and advice.*** The best change consultants are those who are brave when imparting their expertise, honest with their views, credible when working with senior business people and intimate with their clients".

Contributors largely agreed that the demands with regards to leading, managing, supporting and advising on change have increased for the four groups discussed above. Traditional process orientated roles, such as those of manager and HR professional, have been impacted the greatest as these groups are now required to engage with, understand and support individuals and teams, often in addition to their more process driven work. Leaders are expected to understand more about what is needed to make change successful, and Jacky Simmonds described how the role of the leader is fundamentally changing, "***Mental toughness and resilience will be the differentiating leadership characteristics of the future***". However, leaders have the benefit of firstly often having learnt from past experiences and secondly having easier access to support and advice from HR, change experts and consultants.

Although expectations have changed and continue to do so for the four roles discussed in this section, these have often not been clearly defined and agreed within organisations and even less so across the wider business community. The different expectations put upon leaders, managers and HR with regards to their role in change means that although an individual may be successful in one environment, they are not guaranteed the same degree of success in another. Clearly flexibility in how these roles operate is required to best support their organisation's individual change agenda. However, without additional clarity over expectations it will remain difficult to identify, train and develop talent within these roles to increase overall change management expertise.

How can change fatigue be managed more effectively for better change results?



From the research it became clear that change fatigue can manifest itself in different ways for different people. The type and extent of change fatigue depends to a large extent on the way that the change is managed. However, over half of the contributors cited how style, age and previous experience with change can also impact how an individual reacts to a change situation. Sally Munday, CEO of England Hockey, described how over the last four or five years

while the national governing body has been making fundamental changes, including an overhaul of the way that talented players progress through the ranks of the sport, she has identified three specific groups of people. "There are those who love the change, are excited and want to get involved, those who embrace the change but need some support to find their way and finally those who struggle, find it de-stabilising and don't want to change or find change very difficult". Personality can play a part in how individuals react to change,

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as can be seen with some contributors describing how their younger employees found it easier to work within a constantly changing environment.

Bearing in mind that change fatigue has a variety of causes and symptoms, all of those interviewed still agreed that much can be done to improve change management and therefore to reduce change fatigue. Key players in leading and managing the change often do not get things right the first time. It seems as though there is no substitute for experience and that a lot of knowledge about what works and doesn't is gained through working in a variety of change situations (back to the purposeful practice) rather than theoretical learning.

This may be because some of the theory that has been used to understand and manage change may no longer be as relevant, requiring some adaptation for the complexity of today's business environment. For example, change models, such as the well-known "Eight Step Change Model" developed by Kotter (iv) and Kurt Lewin's "Unfreeze, Mobilise, Refreeze" (v) are useful to provide a structure and checklist with which to manage the change. However, a weakness of both models is that these models follow a linear approach.

Crelos' experience of supporting clients through change and the experience of many contributors, lends itself to systems thinking theory (vi) which sees organisations as a number of component parts making up an ecosystem of complex relationships and interdependencies. This theory suggests that change is a cyclical and iterative process rather than linear, requiring attention to be paid to all dependencies and knock on effects rather than just to the immediate change itself. Solutions should be tried, reviewed and then tailored or replaced by a different option, in order to achieve the optimum result.

This view of an "emergent" rather than a "forced" type of change is described by Jacky Simmonds, Group HR Director for TUI Travel, who positions change as "business improvement" saying that ***"change programme implies something that will start and then stop. Change implies that there will be an end to it – but this isn't the business reality"***. Emergent change, often originating from employees or customers, can be more powerful than change that is forced upon by the leadership, or by an external factor such as changes to regulations, reactions to environmental incidents, or other factors outside of the control of the organisation. Emergent change, however, requires an organisational culture that listens to, welcomes and is willing to act on contribution from all levels throughout the organisation.

A differing view was raised during the research by an experienced change expert from a large, global financial services organisation describing how "the packaging of the change is important. Our people are not naturally comfortable with change, so packaging the change as a programme and giving it a name enables people to buy in to, understand and even celebrate the change". Interestingly, systems thinking theory also supports the view that even though change should be seen as cyclical rather than linear, attention should still be spent on formalising the beginning and the ending of each stage of the change. This was emphasised by contributors who described how at the beginning of any change programme time should be spent on agreeing (amongst other things) objectives with all stakeholders. The ending of the different phases of the programme should include a thorough review and celebration of what has been achieved.

During these beginnings and endings it is valuable to encourage the skills of "reflexive practitioner", allowing time for individuals to make sense of the change and to ground the learning in present reality. Reflexive practice is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it, it is an important part of learning and a way of generating theory out of practice. These review points are crucial to encourage individuals and teams to draw insights and learning from what has happened and apply these lessons to the next stage of the change. The challenge of change managers and

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leaders is to make the beginnings, endings and review points effective in an environment where change feels like a constant.

The “business improvement versus change programme” and “emergent versus forced” ranging views show that there is no one size fits all method to managing change and suggests the importance of understanding the culture of the organisation, the environment within which it operates, along with the style and experience of employees, before deciding which change methods to adopt.

Linda Kennedy of Everything Everywhere described the choice that individuals are faced with when dealing with change, “People have a choice in how they react to change and some are naturally more resilient and open to change than others”. This choice is likely to be initially based more on emotional rather than practical factors, making it crucial for leaders to engage at an emotional level, communicating and owning clear messages about the change. Sarah Craig of O2 suggests that “leadership moments” such as informal conversations in the corridor, short bite-size communications or an impromptu meeting can be more effective at leading people through the change rather than relying on one-off large events or all-encompassing communications.

In Crelos’ experience, supported by the research, the psychology of change is understood mainly from an individual point of view, but the psychology of both teams and groups, and how to develop momentum behind the change, described by Malcolm Gladwell in his book “The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference” (vii) as “the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point”, is less so. More often than not the less experienced HR professionals will focus on individual behavioural change, by putting in place such interventions as workshops, courses and coaching. A more effective solution might be to communicate, engage and inspire teams and larger groups in the change required and how to go about it, along with the consequences of not changing. Team coaching and large group work is becoming increasingly popular as a method of galvanizing focused momentum behind the change agenda.

There is no definitive process or procedure to minimise change fatigue, given the wide variations in change agendas, organisational context and external influencing factors. Although certain underlying principles are key, such as being concerned with the content (what is changing), process (how it will change) and context (where the change will occur), the need for thorough and regular communication and rigorous review are still valid. Today successful change managers need a wide toolkit, built up from both theory and experience, to draw upon and most importantly tools need to be applied with consideration for the context. A successful leader or manager in one organisation may fail in another because they have not taken enough time to understand the context and culture of the organisation or the style and previous change experience of employees. The phrase “horses for courses” is nowhere more applicable than in the management of change in 2011.

Conclusions



The causes and manifestations of change fatigue are varied, reflecting the complexities of the social, environmental, political and economic context and the subsequent impact on organisations. It is clear that there are a number of ways that change fatigue is caused and that the different causes may in turn result in different symptoms. However, despite its various guises, it is clear that the amount and depth of change fatigue seen in organisations is directly

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impacted by the way that the change is managed. The more emergent change with clear change goals linked to organisational strategy communicated honestly and managed in a way that engages and involves the workforce and celebrates achievements, is likely to minimise its occurrence.

The research showed that the way that the change is managed has a direct impact on the extent to which change fatigue takes a hold. It is therefore crucial that those people playing key roles in managing change are trained, developed and given opportunity to build up experience of change management situations. It is time for change management to be thought of as a profession, requiring a career map with recognised skills, practical experience and relevant qualifications.

With the pace of change likely to continue accelerating over coming years, and regulatory, environmental, political and technological developments requiring organisations to continuously re-invent themselves, the pace of change is unlikely to slow. It is therefore the responsibility of leaders, managers, HR and consultants to be better at understanding the causes and symptoms of change fatigue and what they should personally do to minimise the impact on themselves, their colleagues and employees.

Recommendations for change leaders

- **Put in place systems to spot the early warning signals of change fatigue.** For example listening for groups of employees who are expressing confusion about the planned change or even a general sense of being completely overloaded because of the change agenda. Being aware of the physical and mental fatigue that can be caused by change and spotting the warning signs is a first line of defence.
- **Protect yourself from change fatigue before supporting others.** Linda Kennedy of Everything Everywhere used this approach when managing the merger of Orange and T-mobile. "We talked to managers about what they should be doing to protect themselves and their teams during this time. We used the oxygen mask analogy of putting on your own mask to protect yourself before helping others".
- **Understand the culture of the organisation and the people within it before deciding on your change model and approach.** Is the change emergent or forced? Do you need to package the change as a change programme with a name, or define it more in terms of business improvement? When working with change models, find the one that fits your culture, situation and the type of change required. Don't fall in to the trap of thinking because your change method worked in one organisation and culture it will work in another.
- **Rigorously establish, agree and communicate change objectives and success measures before kicking off any new programme.** Ensure that these are regularly reviewed and be flexible to change them if they are no longer appropriate. Keep in mind the desired business benefits at all times.
- **Establish a pool of experienced change leaders.** Ensure that leaders, managers and HR are clear about their change responsibilities and either have the skills and experience necessary to implement, or are working with someone more experienced with change than they are to develop the change experts of the future. The development of a roadmap of change experiences and skills can be useful to provide a purposeful approach to the development of change management expertise.

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- **Communicate, communicate, communicate!** Decide on your “change story” and ensure that all leaders are communicating the same key messages. Contributors to the research found that communicating little and often was a more effective method than a long communication once in a while. If there is nothing to say, then tell people there is nothing to say. In the context of change, no news is not good news - it leads to anxiety and stress, the precursors to change fatigue.
- **Establish a process of regular review.** More often than not, change is iterative and emergent. Regular review and reflexive practice is vital for people to ground, make sense of and learn from their experiences. Blogs are a useful tool to share change knowledge and review outcomes.
- **Build in regular celebration of what's been achieved.** Often a change programme can be launched in a flurry of communication and then followed by silence for a few months, during which all momentum is lost. Communicate and celebrate success throughout the programme. Acknowledge that any achievement may be a great feat if achieved in an adverse climate.
- **Role model “change behaviour”.** One particular contributor and change agent described this by saying “You need to know your own philosophy and beliefs. You need to make tactical decisions founded on those beliefs and be willing to take risks. You need to make a personal commitment to act as a change agent”. It is unrealistic to expect others to enthusiastically adopt the change if you are not fully engaged in and adopting the new state.
- **Think of behavioural change as a process, not a one-off intervention** The Transtheoretical model, developed in 1977 by James O. Prochaska (viii), is a useful way of managing individual behavioural change for greatest effect. This model identifies the importance of helping people to plan and prepare for change. Without these phases behavioural change is likely to be resisted and unsuccessful.
- **Don't let change fatigue fester, take positive action to restore a sense of energy and optimism** If you (or colleague or team member) are suffering from change fatigue, take positive action in one or a number of the following ways:
 - Try to establish the specific cause for the fatigue. Talking through your feelings and symptoms with a colleague or family member can help this.
 - Raise your concerns with your manager or HR business partner. Discuss the options required to improve the situation including; identifying additional resource, re-allocating some work activities and responsibilities to other team members or getting support in the form of a mentor, coach or change consultant.
 - Focus on your general well-being. Healthy eating, exercise and relaxation are important to restoring a sense of balance.
 - Consider if your personality and style fit with your role and also the culture of your organisation. HR may have some access to psychometric questionnaires, which will give you more insight in to your own personal style and your optimum working environment, and may help you to make some difficult decisions regarding your long term career.

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Our consultants use the best proven and scientific research regarding how and why people react and behave as they do to design bespoke solutions that effect change. Through consultancy, facilitation, executive coaching and professional development we support executive leaders and their teams to solve their most complex and challenging business issues.

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