Organisation Change: NLP in Sheep's Clothing

by Philip E Atkinson

In this article Philip Atkinson explains how an organisational change initiative concerned with creating customer focused culture evolved into applying NLP to installing change management skills with engineering professionals. He focuses upon shaping the culture of the business by changing the behaviour of key players in the organisation. He also highlights that to gain credibility in the corporate change arena and to fit with values of key corporate members, it may be best to lead with change management strategy with NLP as a methodology and a set of tools and techniques subsumed under that generic umbrella.

Effectiveness in change management

Much of the work in which we are involved focuses upon helping key players in large companies reshape their culture to become customer focused. This requires a high degree of commitment, especially from those who lead the business. Some would say that rethinking a company strategy creates its own barriers to change and many of which are attitudinal in nature. It is no surprise that research in to the effectiveness of organisational change suggests that approximately 80% of major 'cultural change' initiatives fail and are never sustained much beyond the launch date. Enthusiasm falls off as more people recognise the intensity of the change and the active role they may have to play in promoting it. Similarly, research into mergers and acquisitions suggests also that 50-70% of mergers or acquisitions never achieve the synergies for which the where originally intended for both businesses.

Resistance to change

One of the reasons that change is less than successful in these circumstances is that those who drive for change fail to recognise the degree of resistance within the organisation. Resistance tends to be passive – there are few people who actively and consciously state they are against changes – yet few embrace those same changes with the enthusiasm expected. So, if given the responsibility to introduce these changes, it is fairly critical to focus upon the benefits of the changes, for the organisation and for the people and focus upon the effect on the business; the pain of not adapting to change. We contend that people resist change in these circumstances because they don't have the full picture and neither have they a full understanding of the personal and organisational benefits of working through the transition.

The Case Study

For some years I had been working with a $14 billion organisation with headquarters in the USA. The company produces heavy duty agricultural and construction equipment. Consulting work had focused originally in Europe with a focus of installing ' a quality culture' within the business. Much of the work involved running large workshops with people from different countries and the output was forming cross-functional teams to work on company wide problems. We achieved some success in this arena but clearly there were more opportunities that could have been harvested. Similar work was undertaken in the USA with similar results but the momentum was too slow for the sponsor of the project, the then Director of Quality.

Change Agents

The sponsor was very much of the opinion that nothing changes until behaviour changes, yet not all his colleagues understood his map of the world. Ostensibly, the environment was strongly engineering focused with technical expertise rated very highly in comparison to man management or change management skills.

Hard & Soft S's

Emphasis in change management in the past had been focused on what we call the hard S's – assessing corporate *strategy*, reassessing the *structure* to achieve the goals, and finally *systems* to ensure that consistency and reliability were adhered to. We called these hard S's because they are tangible, concrete and easily identified – there are diagrams, charts methodologies displayed as process maps which portray rather than explain strict 'cause effect' relationships. By themselves the hard S's will not change and promote a greater customer focused culture. The culture has to be shaped through people. No real change will take place without a balanced focus between the hard and soft S's. The soft S's are more difficult to define – not quite nominalizations but all the same somewhat vague. The soft S's include, *skills, style, shared values* and *staff.*

Systems but No Passion

In previous organisational changes, focus had always been on systems and processes. That is, introduce a new system and the culture will change magically! It took some time to break down the relationship between system integration and changes in people's behaviour – in most cases we need the culture first, in order for the tools and techniques or new systems to be applied.

We questioned every programme that had gone before and challenged senior people to stste categorically how behaviour had specifically changed. We opened up the mindset to explore in very simple terms – what particular behaviours would lead to improved performance, those that needed to be coached, and those behaviours which were less than resourceful in achieving objectives. At this stage, we recognised that in order to help induce change – you have to be alert to where the client is in reality rather than where we would like her or him to be. We decided to pay far more attention to behavioural change rather than to systems and processes. Although a mix of both components are important, the mistake that many companies have made and continue to make is that when they embarked on their 'route to excellence' they may have got the systems right but there is little passion for change and the behaviours are not in place to reinforce and fully sustain the culture of the business.

Take a good look in the mirror

Through working from the top of the organisation and with the support of the Quality Director as key sponsor we had started to install a quality culture that people could readily discern from the traditional culture found worldwide in their manufacturing plants. By this time we were also inputting into several Plants in the US and working with top teams of those plants to focus on changing behaviour. We had devoted many hours to drive the message home that 'without Leadership there is no change' and had devoted much time to refining the leadership style of several management teams within the business. We used several tools to open up perceptions including Myers Briggs, OPQ, 360-degree appraisal. The organisation at the time employed over 20,000 staff and had manufacturing facilities in all continents.

An ISTJ Culture

The culture of the business was very much driven by a 'manufacturing culture' where certain abilities were valued more than others. When working with management teams and assessing leadership and management style, the majority conveyed a very logical, sensing approach to their work as was reflected by their training. For those who use Myers Briggs as a tool for team development, observers would not be surprised to find that the majority of managers in the business were of the ISTJ and ESTJ variety. In other words, the dominant valued behaviours or ways of working were focused upon the sensing tangible world where measurement and analysis was the key. The style of thinking and decision-making was certainly more orientated towards the logical rather than the intuitive, and 'how work was valued' was down to closure and completion rather than spontaneity and flexibility. Reliance was on the logical decision making process to execute decisions and these would be implemented in a step-by-step sequential process. Premature closure without the ability to revisit problem areas had caused many problems in the past. With this broad outline of the culture we decided that to be effective, we needed a balance in the culture rather than more detail and analysis – which some major players were

advocating. "Let's do what we have always done and in more depth and then we may change" – was the belief that we had to change.

Selling the Need to Change

Because people had valued the Myers Briggs and other approaches we at least had an entry spot into the culture. Clearly this was a no-nonsense company. There was a strict focus upon objectives with the application of tools to evaluate manufacturing performance. Instead of looking at more 'analytical tools' we focused upon how to create change through people – namely examining the effectiveness of people in their role as change agents.

Technical Wizardry & Quality Engineering (QE)

A large organisation existed within the structure that provided Quality Engineering (QE) expertise throughout the corporation. Eighty people were included in this group and they were all functional experts of one variety or another. The vast majority had an engineering degree, a further engineering Masters degree, and in many cases an MBA. This group was very strong on raw intellectual power and the cornerstone behind technical innovation not just in design but also in manufacturing capability of the majority of their plants. Give these people a technical problem and they would solve it. There was a certainty that pervaded the air that they would come up with a solution. The challenge to the group was to ensure that the 'solutions' could be transplanted into many different business units. As the culture of units differed namely by the country of origin, the product, history and background and dominant style of local management these technical wizards had to manage the process of change. Their sole form of authority was 'informational power'. To win the support of others to 'buy into the solution' and implement and then sustain any changes required a skill set outside their technical background.

The leader of this group recognised that the effectiveness of the team was enhanced by their technical competencies but, further, their effectiveness as change makers could be enhanced and improved by developing amongst other things their interpersonal influence and style.

'All Hands Meeting' – Commit to Change

At an 'all hands' meeting in the USA it was agreed that all those who worked in the Quality Engineering organisation were in effect 'change agents'. During workshop sessions it was recalled that the 'technical solution giver' is not the problem behind effective change management – it is getting others to take ownership and implement the change into their culture that is important. That was probably the biggest issue we needed to address. There was an understanding that the degree to which the

solutions of this group were implemented was reflected by their ability to read others, and present their case in the most effective manner.

Tree-hugging and tangible benefits of training

From those early days we evolved a programme of events that would support the work that this group performed. We had to ensure that the programme had credibility and, to test for understanding, we undertook a brief survey to establish what programmes were 'valued' and had credibility. Not surprisingly, a group of technical masters of solutions were a little uncomfortable with some of the elements of a programme based upon behavioural change and NLP. At the early stage there were plenty of comments about Workshops focused upon 'tree hugging' and other choice phrases and these were helpful signs to indicate that although the training would be broadly in the arena of NLP that we would ensure that any exercise, any material was totally tailored to the real world of the Quality Engineer. This was especially important as we were running a Pilot project with a selection of six senior people drawn from the wider organisation of Purchasing, Quality, Financial Services business, Production Personnel and the leader of Quality Engineering. The Pilot project was extremely successful and later this programme would cascade not just through the US based organisation but also was conducted in the UK and in specialised Plants and functions within the USA and the UK.

Rationale for the Programme

The programme was completely customer driven – the customer being the person who received the service from the QE professional specialist. The first thing we focused upon with the QE organisation was – 'what's it like to receive our service?' We asked everyone attending to adopt the analogy of looking in the mirror and saying – what's it like to work with me – what's it like to receive my behaviour? This self-critical approach was well received and reinforced the self-esteem of the whole group by looking at and differentiating the behaviours that would enhance quality of service from those that detracted from it.

Actors in the Change Process

A second element that pervaded the whole programme was the focus upon the process of change management with particular emphasis on the actors in the process. We have always maintained that 'change' is not just a logical sequence of steps that has to be followed, but rather a process or flow. The people who need or want to change decide how long it is going to take them. So in an organisational context several Plant Managers and Operations Directors would decide if a particular change – the installation of a process, would work or not.

Their implicit support would determine the success of any project. We focused entirely on looking at the interactions and relationships that could exist between the four key actors in the change process. And while looking at the key actors, we also focused upon strategies to aid the interaction between those actors to accelerate the flow and implementation of need changes.

Replace Authority with Persuasion as a strategy for Influence

The four actors are, the Sponsor, the Change agent, the Target and other Constituents who are impacted by the process of change. No change will take place without teamwork between the Sponsor of a project and the person who is destined to implement it – the Change Agent. Yet in many organisations projects fail because the Sponsor adopts a 'Pontius Pilate approach' to matters and washes his hands after handing over the project outline to the lucky individual charged to implement the idea. Many conflicts arise because the Sponsor and Change Agent do not work closely enough. Often difficulties unforeseen at the design stage of an idea will only emerge as the project is being implemented – so it is crucial that healthy debate and rapport exists between these two individuals or parties.

Likewise the person charged with installing the idea or initiative, the change agent, probably has very little authority over those who have to implement the idea. Because QE staff were external to many of the Plants, their ideas would not be imposed. If those targeted for the change did not see the inherent good sense, the benefits of the projects and the time and resources taken to install them 'made sense" then there was every likelihood that change would only be cosmetic and superficial.

Finally – there and others who are involved in the change process and these other 'Constituencies' could on occasion block progress – so examining the interaction between the actors is critical to understand the process of change and combat resistance to it before it is manifested.

80 % of Change Initiatives Fail

In the corporate world many change initiatives wilt and die but often quite some time after the energetic first bouts of enthusiasm witnessed in early training or Workshop events. Sustaining a change initiative requires a plan for implementation very much based upon the TOTE Model – only exiting the loop when all the conditions have been met and finalised. Yet many corporate change initiatives are based more on hope rather than establishing cause effect relationships.

Change Acceleration

Three modules were designed to facilitate the speedy implementation of change and

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provide those attending with the skills by which their engineering expertise could be transferred into plant operations. We adopted the theme of Change Acceleration stating that 'implementation will take as long as we decide it to take.' Three modules were designed and they have evolved into a three-step process. Each module is of two days duration and linked by action plans – the modules are designed around *Interpersonal Influence, Diagnostic and Consulting Skills*, and *Learning, Thinking, and Creativity*. Each attendee sets themselves goals that relate to both their work and their personal development. Increases in self-esteem are critical to improving performance on and off the job.

The first step in the process focuses upon Interpersonal Influence and is characterised by examining 'resistance to change' – which introduces the four actors in the transitions. We use the Transition Curve of Kubler-Ross to explore the opportunities for improvement and the stages of change that people have to progress through to achieve a positive integration of new behaviours. A brief introduction focuses on a variant of the work of Joe Luft and Harry Ingham using the Johari Window and then the development of skills and competencies using Cog's ladder of transition to Unconscious Competence. We concentrate the majority of the time how the change agent can make use of non-verbal behaviour, active listening and questioning, a simple NLP processing model. We focus upon the personality types of any potential client using two traits of use of 'power' and use of 'emotion'. We arrive at four types the Regulator, Visionary, Helper and Analyst. Further we develop seven alternate Influencing strategies that people can use when one strategy fails to operate for them. The remaining time is devoted purely to experiential exercises using CCTV for feedback

What makes the event very powerful is;

• The experience is strongly action orientated and focused upon real change or engineering interventions that people will experience in the real world. The role-plays have been written around the special relationship that they will have with manufacturing personnel. (The case material is changed depending upon the context – so for instance it was tailored to appeal to the context of a Financial Services business in the UK).

• Feedback on progress comes from the group – with a healthy focus upon positive feedback.

• NLP is approached and some of the methodologies are discussed and applied without mentioning those three letters.

• Those attending recognise that their ability to influence others is not based upon technical capability but their ability to take in the events, the surroundings, the behaviours (conscious and otherwise) and then reframe the strategies available to them and stack up potential strategies for influence.

• Perhaps the most important issue is the personal development of the people taking part - they recognise that they do have the ability to influence events, both in their business and their personal life, and most important of all, they recognise the important of planning for interaction rather than leaving it completely to chance – that is trusting the technical capabilities will serve them well.

The second module is grandly titled *Diagnostic and Consulting* skills and works on a number of levels. It focused upon creating change in terms of the personal, the team, the organisational and the level of National Culture (that is where non nationals have to operate in different geographies where values and behaviours may differ). A number of tools and techniques are discussed which range from Myers Briggs in terms of personal change (everyone completes a profile and is provided with an explanation and Expert System profile on the same day). Belbin's model of Team Types and various corporate culture diagnostics are explored as well as several interpretations of National Cultures founded upon the work of Hofstede and Van Tramponeurs. These diagnostic tools are extremely important for helping those attending to understand the perspective of others, either in a team or working across National boundaries – as many of these people do.

The skills from the first session are integrated with the tools because all the work is experiential with people working as teams of internal consultants who have to apply the tools to novel situations and then feedback several approaches to implemented the changes needed.

The third Workshop on Learning, Thinking and Creativity is founded very much on an NLP model for using the brain and extending this to risk taking and implementing a culture of continuous improvement. The last day focuses upon Planning for my Life and adopts a holistic approach to once referring to NLP – that is, planning on where and who I want to become but within the context of one's whole life. The challenge is to work through this material with only casual reference to Neuro-Linguistic Programming. We decide to do this after talking with the first Pilot Group. They loved the whole programme but stated it would have been less credible if we had started with a hefty input of NLP. So eventually they all become NLP converts but only after we have reframed the concepts and delivered them in their manufacturing context of logic, analysis and closure.

Conclusions

The reality of change management in a corporate setting is that often the larger initiatives are not integrated into the business culture. In many cases, the business culture is vague and will not be shared across plants and geographies. A great deal of my consulting resides in first diagnosing a business culture and then working with a top team to manage the gap between here and the vision for the future. But the important point that however much a consultant may want the organisation to change, it can only change from where it is to where it wants to be. Ownership by senior managers is critical for success and they need to be equipped with specific change management skills and diagnostic tools. In this example, both senior teams in Plant locations and a functional Quality Engineering group were equipped with the tools to master change.

A major benefit for participants of the programme was that they could adopt an open perspective on the role they could take to drive change. Reliance was not just on the quality of their recommendations, it was also down to how they approached the people who needed to drive and install the change within their own businesses. These people changed personally as well. In one Workshop session we worked on corporate beliefs and we used the analogy behind how identity and beliefs etc cause behaviour to happen. After further working through the work of Beliefs it was like a huge gate had opened. Much of what we talked about was transferred to their home life.

The penultimate concluding point was that the NLP context and tools enabled the change management philosophy to come about and was integrated into the 'style' of these professionals with ease but only because it (NLP) was phrased in their context and made accessible to them. In some ways this is a learning for me because whilst working on this project I have also worked in the UK in Call Centres, with many sales people in Financial Services businesses and on many Personal Effectiveness Workshops in a variety of industries and I have found that shaping and deliberately tailoring the material to the specific context of the customer ensures much higher rates of acceptance, integration and application in their world of business. I do believe that practitioners need to go that extra mile to make NLP accessible and a natural methodology for change in business rather than just teaching NLP in its purest form.

Finally, I believe that is important to me to know that NLP and the techniques and tools that trail behind and evolve from the methodology can be used in any context with major effect.

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