

LET'S GET EMOTIONAL ABOUT PROJECT MANAGERS



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I was really pleased to have graduated with a *Postgraduate Certificate in Shared Services*, from Canterbury Christ Church University in 2015. It has been very helpful in my shared service and collaborative working across my council's partnerships.

For module 2, the postgraduate academic review, my interest was in organisational change because it *"affects people, their jobs and responsibilities and their existing behaviour patterns"*¹.

In accepting that collaborative working is a multi-partner, change management programme, I wanted to understand how emotions influence and drive the *"reaction process"* that individuals go through, when they are personally confronted with major organizational change².

I wanted to apply my research to my project activity, with a view to using the learning to influence strategies that enable change in the project plan and avoid the phenomenon of collaborative inertia that slows down, and frequently defeats, project progress³.

What drives reaction to change?

Much academic study indicates that 70% of change initiatives are unsuccessful in living up to the original promise of the business plan⁴. However, it goes on to recommend that in order to ensure this is not the case, *"focusing on employee reactions, including resistance and acceptance, during organizational change is of utmost importance to the success of the initiative"*⁵.

Reflecting on why so many shared services and collaborative projects under-perform, it appears that the influences responsible for determining the individual's response to the changes appears to have been underestimated.

The reason is that most change models are problem based and take little account of emotions⁶. They focus on 'the deal' and not 'the relationships'.

Much research on change seems to have excluded psychological traits and predispositions, which are equally as important in the success of any change programme.

Saunders and Thornhill⁷ evidence that the recipe to change success, though not guaranteed, is more about individual and group psychology, than strategy and leadership in isolation.

Taking time to consider the impact that emotions have on employee reaction to change is important, because without such understanding, and left unchecked, emotions expressed in behaviours may be obstructive and even destructive to the goals of change⁸.

Emotions during change can be positive or negative as people anticipate or experience its outcomes and processes⁹. This resonates in the process of creating a shared service where questions relating to career prospects will no doubt emerge as there may be new roles and promotion prospects available for some, yet job roles may be obsolete for others.

Other concerns relating to training and work group status in the newly merged organisation will also arise and may result in positive or negative emotions dependent on if they are perceived as beneficial or not to the individual concerned.

The evidence demonstrates that emotions determine employees' reaction and are useful in charting the response that emotions are likely to bring about. So how can we take that into consideration?

⁶ (Vince and Broussier, 1996 cited in Nikolaou et al., 2004).

⁷ Saunders and Thornhill (2003)

⁸ (Henderson and Loney, 1996 as cited in Elrod and Tippet, 2002, p. 280).

⁹ (French, 2001 as cited in Matheny et al., 2010, p. 29)

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Understanding emotions as the cause of reactions is useful, because they have "behavioural outcomes and can help or hinder the implementation of organizational change"¹.

In fact, emotions to change can be so intensive, that the academics, such as Kübler-Ross, compare them with individual responses to traumatic incidents such as death and grief².

My challenge is how to account for this in my collaborative transformation, or shared service, projects. After studying the academic papers and reflecting on my own, and colleagues', emotional reactions to the change fostered by our shared services journeys, I would suggest the following.

Three suggestions to support the challenge of collaborative change

1. On appointment of a project manager for the delivery phase of collaboration, high importance should be attached to ensuring this individual has high emotional intelligence and empathy for colleagues. In addition to focusing on the deal, they must put substantial effort into emotional relationships.

The level of importance of this soft skill is such that "the project manager's leadership and associated emotional intelligence can play a key role in organizational success"³.

2. The project manager (with the support of the leadership) should initially complete an employee temperature check.

Stepping into the delivery phase of the collaboration, it is important to take a snap shot of employees' emotions, attitudes and opinions.

This will prove a useful method of setting a benchmark against which future checks could measure improved or reduced

morale. Such an understanding would ensure that communications and actions are directed to maximise positive emotional reactions.

3. Initially, time must be spent by the project manager on understanding employees' emotions.

I have gained so much from understanding emotional reactions and what drives them. I believe that project leads should also take time out to learn more about themselves and how emotions may influence the reaction of their colleagues.

Tools such as *Belbin* and *Myers-Briggs*, which explain group dynamics and personality type respectively, may be assessments the project team could consider, particularly for managers, to support the soft facts of change.

Collaborative transformation is a change journey...

In summary, even where there are positive emotional reactions to the announced change, it is essential to focus on maintaining this, especially as the reality hits and changes become physically evident.

Understanding emotions, emotional reaction and the ways in which to influence these in a positive fashion are all skills that are essential in the leadership of collaboration projects going forward.

One tenet of leadership according to Elrod and Tippet (2002) is the ongoing need to transition people, or groups, from one state to another.

If leaders of the change exert high levels of emotional intelligence, they will "be able to recognize and use his or her own and others' emotional states to solve problems and regulate behaviour"⁴ and influence a positive response during the change journey.

¹ (Bovey and Hede, 2001; Kiefer, 2005 in Matheny et al, 2010, p. 29)

² Kübler-Ross

³ Leban and Zuluff (2004, p. 557)

⁴ (Huy, 1999, p.325)