

Session SU213 – Facilitating Change – Dare to Get Personal!

Arne Gillert
agillert@kessels-smit.nl

Pepijn Pillen
ppillen@kessels-smit.nl



Session Learning Objectives:

1. Design organizational change processes that are much more likely to succeed than traditional approaches.
2. Reveal what is usually left unsaid.
3. Develop a concrete plan for your current change project.

A traditional approach to organizational change

In common approaches to organizational change one often sees management designing a plan, with good intentions, of how the people in the organization should change. The corporate mission and vision are carefully translated into strategic plans and the current and desired situation are thoroughly investigated and formulated. External consultants are hired with the assignment to apply their knowledge about the newest strategies in the specific organization's context. Then there is just one more thing to do: implement the change and make these great plans work! Employees now only have to do what their bosses invented. In this stage, employees are offered courses by experts who know how to act in the company's desired situation. The transformation of the employees and the organization is now a fact. Mission completed!

Why the traditional approach doesn't work

Despite the large amount of time, money and effort put into the above process, it seldom ends up as rosy as we described. Still, more than 70 percent of the change initiatives in organizations fail at the implementation. The management's plans always work out perfectly, as long as these don't leave the boardroom. As soon as they do, chances are that employees resist against the change. Lower management directly faces problems with people who try to delay or even stop the change. Often, this non-cooperating attitude won't stop the board from getting the change done. The usual way then is to use power in order to increase the pressure on the people who systematically block the board's plans. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to consider that this pressure will lead to even stronger resistance, either above or underground. People will simply not act or think differently against their will.

An alternative approach to organizational change: connecting personal interests

The employees are crucial to achieving the goals of the change. Therefore we propose an alternative approach to change, which departs from the notion that employees accept a change when they have the opportunity to connect with the change. Imbuing the change with meaning and connecting this with personal interests are the starting points required for an employee to choose to change his behavior and attitude. At the same time we propose that organizations, departments or teams highly benefit of holding a shared picture of the future they seek to create. At first sight these two ideas, working from personal interests and having a common goal might look conflicting. The case example below gives insight.

Textbox 1: Case example of connecting personal interests to a common goal
(Cited from van Noort & Gillert, 2006: 9)

‘An oil company has an internationally composed IT-team. The task of this team has changed quite drastically. Instead of developing state-of-the-art systems, the team is told that it must cut costs by purchasing, amongst other things, proven technology on which the development costs have already been earned back. For a number of team members this is unbearable; precisely there where their interest lies to be in pursuit of the newest of the new, they must now carry out research into what already works and how smartly this can be purchased. By carrying out a number of discussions with each other and with their leaders about how this changed goal brings the various interests in conflict, some team members decide to leave this department and to put their talents to use elsewhere. A number of others see the possibility of combining innovation with broadening themselves in the IT-field. They use the new goal to develop themselves in buying and implementing systems. Within a month, the positions have become clear and people can begin to realize the goal. In this situation it was not possible to line up all the employees behind the new goal. However, there were no delays and also the departing employees were well supported in finding a new workplace outside the oil company. In this way the relationship was not damaged.’

Acknowledging both personal interests as an individual’s main drives and the necessity to work on a common goal to implement an organizational change, it seems crucial to pay attention to both of these aspects during change processes. It assumes that employees will be committed to a change when they have the opportunity to realize their personal interests by striving for the organization’s (change) goal. Consequently, realizing the organizational goal is of the employees’ personal interest.

The workshop ‘Facilitating Change – Dare to Get Personal!’

During the workshop we show some fragments of dialogues from well-known movies that illustrate what we mean, or certainly don’t mean, by connecting interests. With the participants we will explore their perspectives on the scenes and on how to facilitate change generally. We give insights in the effect of applying different perspectives on change and we work on participants’ concrete cases about an organizational change.

For a review of the movie fragments, see www.kessels-smit.com/connectingmovies

Change – Dare to Get Personal!

The following analysis may help you to get a in-depth understanding of where your change process could run off its tracks.

1. What are the interests of the organization concerning the change?
2. Which personal interests do you believe the most important stakeholders have?
3. Which possible aims do you see that could serve most interests?
4. Which style can you use in your approach to best facilitate connecting the various interests around the table?