Why change needs gardeners not mechanics

A Guest Article by Gary Lloyd
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What results will your initiative deliver?

If you are leading a major organisational change initiative, how confident are you that it will deliver the desired results?

At the end of last year, I asked 159 experienced change practitioners about their experience of change.

- Three quarters of people said that, for initiatives in which they had a personal involvement, 60% or less of the expected value was delivered.

The graph below shows the full results and, as you can see, 57% of people said that only half or less of the expected value was delivered.
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How would your business case stand up if you assumed that you would only get 50% of the value that you were forecasting? It’s likely that the business case would be marginal at best.

It’s also likely, however, that you will not believe that the statistics will apply to your initiative. You will probably believe that you will succeed where others failed because you are smarter and more determined than they were. Leaders are optimists. They have to be. It’s what psychologists call optimism bias.

The results of the survey reflect this. Most people thought that value is usually overestimated and difficulty underestimated with:

- a predominant approach of over-optimistic, big-bet, top-down initiatives that either press on with an inflexible Plan A, regardless of the results, or simply run out of steam and willpower.

Alternative approach

I doubt that I have dented your confidence too much, so let me ask another question. When will you know if your initiative actually delivers the expected value?

The survey indicates that it is most likely to be towards the end of the initiative, only after a lot of time and money has been invested and when it is too late to adjust.

But what if there was an alternative approach? One that would keep risk low and deliver regular usable value?

I believe that there is a better approach and it’s signposted by a pair of questions in the survey. I asked (on a scale of 1 to 10) whether people believed that today’s organisations were more like machines or more like ecosystems. I also asked if organisations acted like machines or ecosystems when it came to change. The contrast could not have been more stark.

- 72% said organisations are more like ecosystems than machines.
- 90% said organisations plan and execute change as if they are machines.
Most people see organisations as a complex network of interacting parts and people. The corollary is that we are more likely to succeed if we plan and execute change as if we are gardeners not mechanics.

But what does that mean in practice?

We need to recognise and accept that organisational change cannot be forecast, planned and controlled like a civil engineering project, such as building a bridge or a dam. According to the examples provided by respondents to the survey, however, that’s exactly what the majority of change initiatives seek to do: forecast, plan and control.

The alternative is an adaptive approach that embraces uncertainty. An approach in which we learn by doing, sensing and responding, rather than by guessing and hoping. And given that most of us believe that organisations are more like
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ecosystems than machines, gardening is a really useful metaphor for thinking about such an approach.

A good gardener doesn’t start a new garden without a vision or a plan. The vision might be for a beautiful rose garden, a wild flower meadow and a bountiful supply of seasonal vegetables, all year round. The plan might describe which areas of the garden will be home to which plants. It might also have a schedule that says when to prepare the ground for cultivation and the time of year that flowers and fruits are expected to be at their best.

However, although an experienced gardener will have made assumptions about what will thrive in what situations, the gardener doesn’t stick rigidly to the plan, regardless of whether plants actually prosper or not. The gardener watches closely and adjusts, not hesitating to remove or transfer plants that are not doing well. The unexpected is expected, so results are closely monitored.

A couple of further lessons are worth extracting from this metaphor.

First, the gardener doesn’t plant everything on the same day, nor is there a desire for them all to flower and fruit on the same day. The gardener plans for a continuous flow of “value” from the garden, in the form of flowers and fruit, all year round.

Second, cultivation is not a one-off task. Plants need to be constantly monitored and nurtured and that means watering and feeding.

How does this translate into organisational change?

I believe that it looks something like this:

• A shared understanding of purpose and vision.

• Unambiguous definition of value to be delivered and how it will be measured.

• Keeping key business case assumptions visible and checking them regularly.

• Creating lots of fast, cheap prototypes with clear learning objectives.

• Not starting a significant project without validating expected value through pilots.

• Continuing to run the pilots while projects are running, because the world changes.
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- Not assuming that successful pilots in one place will be successful in another.
- Breaking projects into smaller pieces, each of which deliver *useable* value over the entire life of the project.
- Never hesitating to cancel non-performing projects.
- Investing money to engineer loosely coupled solutions, projects and programmes.

The survey indicates, however, that the gardening metaphor doesn’t supply one other critical ingredient for successful change, and that’s *involvement*. When respondents expressed themselves in their own words, lack of involvement was identified as the number one mistake made by organisations, as shown below.
To be clear, involvement is not the same as “getting buy-in” to something that someone else has already decided. Involvement is about harnessing knowledge from customers, front-line staff and other stakeholders, to shape purpose and vision. It’s about participating in the creation of a business solution and it’s about being empowered to act and be listened to when things don’t go according to plan.

Putting this all together, we get an inside-out approach that delivers regular useable business value and doesn’t have to fight the organisation’s immune system.

And the good news is that you don’t have to swap one big bet for another. You can just take one first, small step and see whether it delivers the value you expected, at the cost and timescale you expected. And if not, you can adjust expectations for the other elements of your living plan.

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If you would like more information on any of the points covered in this Guest Article, please contact TCii on 020 7099 2621.