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Achieving positive change

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Business Adviser and Author Campbell Macpherson outlines the essential ingredients to successful and sustainable change in the workplace

Change is inevitable. Successful change isn't. Change has never been more prevalent nor relevant. People across the globe are voting for change, any change; seemingly at any cost. Entire industries are being disrupted and transformed by globalisation and a new breed of web-based conglomerates. The next wave of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation will create even greater dislocation. Change is a fact of life that individuals, organisations and nations alike have no choice but to deal with.

Those who are able to cope with change will survive; those who are able to seek out change and actively embrace it will thrive.

Yet 88% of change initiatives fail. According to a 2016 Bain & Company survey of 250 large companies, only 12% of change projects achieve or exceed their intended results. A similar proportion of corporate strategies, mergers and acquisitions suffer the same fate.

While there may be some debate about the percentages, Bain & Company isn't the only consultancy to arrive at a similar conclusion. Various studies by several consultancies over recent decades have all deduced that change is so difficult to achieve that organisations usually end up abandoning change programmes

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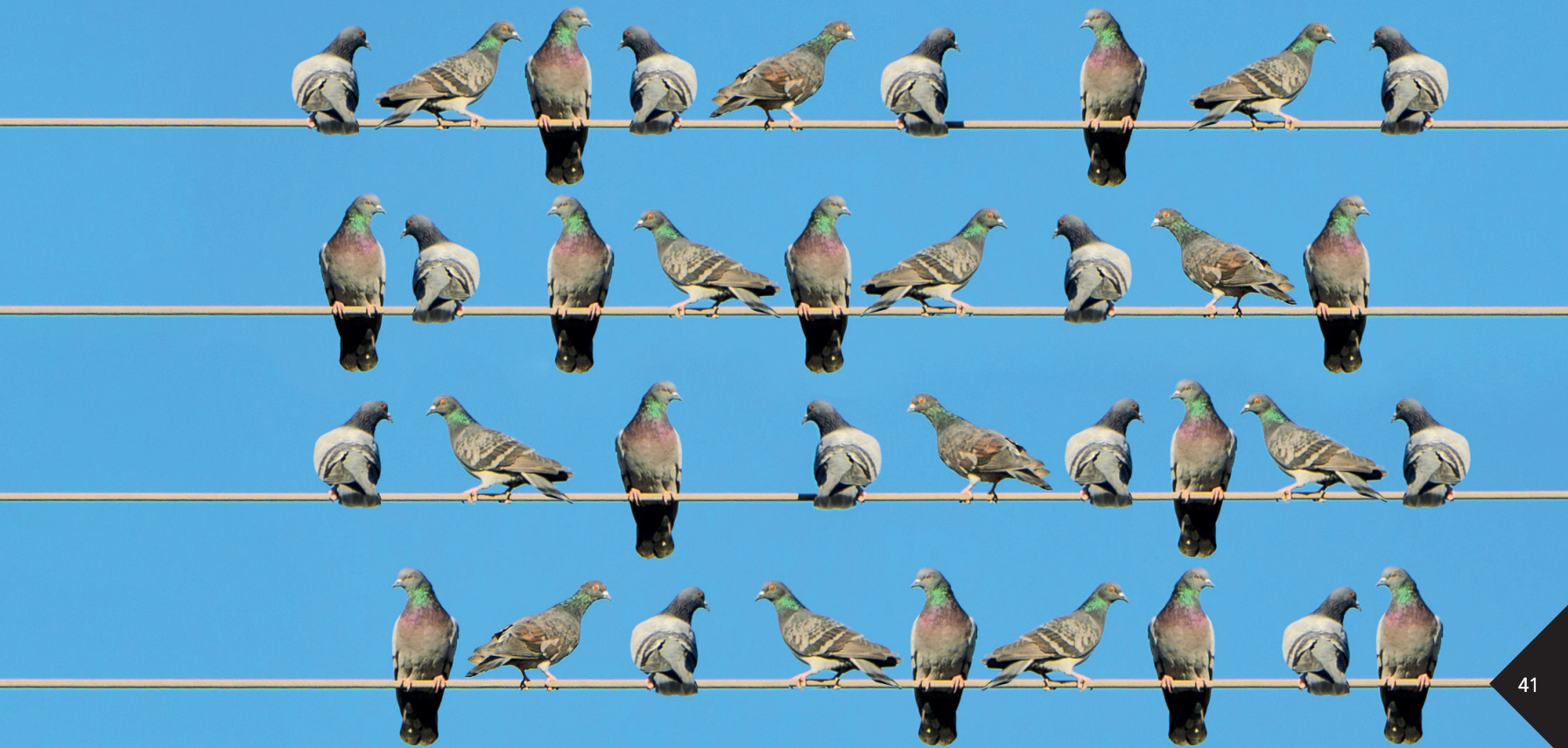
altogether or settling for significantly watered-down outcomes.

There are many reasons why change fails so often and they are all intertwined. But from my many decades of experience assisting organisations, large and small, to instigate change, I have come to the conclusion that the reasons why change projects, programmes or initiatives fail can be grouped into ten key categories – and the key reason that infuses every other is that we humans don't like change.

When it comes to change, especially in the workplace, we have an innate desire to cling on to the status quo. We find change extraordinarily difficult; even when it is good change. We fear that the new world may not be any better than today. We fear that accepting change will be tantamount to being blamed for the way we currently work. We fear that we may try and fail.

Sometimes, we simply don't trust our change leaders. We don't believe that the change will deliver a better future – for us, our colleagues or the company. Almost

always, we need someone to help take the fear away.

The other key reasons for change's 88% failure rate includes a lack of clarity about what we are trying to achieve and why; a lack of understanding of the implications of the change, an obsession with process over outcomes; inertia and complacency; projects that are set up to fail; disingenuous communications and stakeholder engagement; a change-averse

'Superficial engagement is disrespectful, counter-productive and a waste of everyone's time'

culture; a leadership that doesn't stay the course, and the fact that we forget that emotions trump logic every time.

Rational motivation alone is not sufficient; we humans need to be motivated emotionally if we are to embrace any sort of change. Our pride, our ego, our heart, our gut; these are the areas that need to be motivated if we are to proceed successfully down a new path. Rarely do change programmes expend anywhere near enough time or energy to provide a positive emotional reason to embrace the new world or address the emotional barriers to change.

The 'leave' campaign during last year's UK referendum to pull out of the EU understood this innately, appealing directly to the emotions of many millions of voters with a brilliant slogan, 'Vote leave, take control', a catchy 'Brexit' name and, most important of all, the promise of a better tomorrow outside of the EU.

In contrast, the 'remain' campaign completely ignored the fact that our
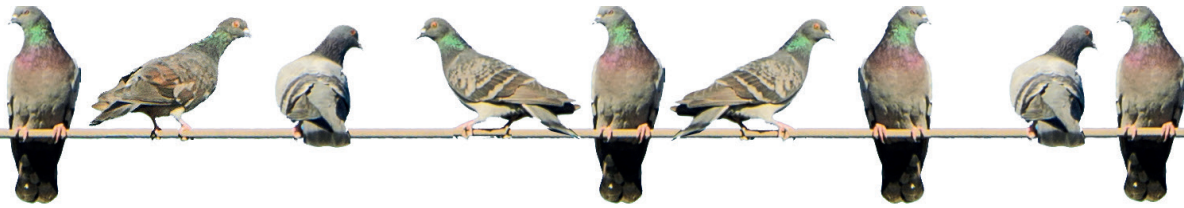
emotions drive our decision making. Campaigners tried to convince people to vote 'remain' through logic, statistics and fear. They lacked empathy, failing to understand that, for a large proportion of Britons, the platform was already ablaze – too many voters felt they had nothing to lose by voting to leave the EU.

These voters had been left behind by globalisation and the free movement of people across the EU, and had spent eight long years reaching into their own pockets to pay for the failure of the global banking system in 2008. They needed a positive emotional reason to vote for the status quo – and none was forthcoming. Another school-boy error from the remain camp was complacency (a common cancer that scuppers many change initiatives). The then Prime Minister and the remain team didn't seriously consider the possibility that UK voters would actually vote to leave - either because they didn't understand what life was like for a large proportion of their constituents or they assumed that 'fear of the unknown' would put them off. Either way, their complacency was palpable. But of course, the question on every change leader's lips is: 'How can I ensure that my next change initiative or strategy is one of the one in eight that succeeds?'

In answer to that question, I have compiled my 10 essential ingredients to successful change. To shorten the odds of success for your next strategy, change, merger or acquisition, I recommend addressing each one in as much detail as you can.

1. Your change catalyst. The ingredient that is almost always absent is the one I have placed at the very top: the

Essential ingredients to successful change:

- a change catalyst
- complete clarity regarding what you are trying to achieve and why
- detailed understanding of the implications of the change
- laser-like focus on the outcomes
- a change process that includes a 'pause for reflection'
- clear governance and thorough planning
- genuine engagement with people at all levels of the organisation
- identification of emotional triggers
- a strong, committed, aligned and unwavering leadership team
- establishment of a change-ready culture.

appointment of a change catalyst: someone who is obsessed with the delivery of the outcomes the company requires, in a manner that is in tune with your corporate culture. A change catalyst's strength lies on his or her focus on outcomes. A project manager's strength lies in his or her focus on process. You need both. The change catalyst is the yin to the project manager's yang; a high-EQ individual who enjoys the trust of the leadership and employees alike.

The most effective change catalysts are home-grown, for the simple reason that successful and sustainable change cannot be done to an organisation. Sustainable change comes from within. Find this

person, trust this person and, most importantly of all, give them all the 'air cover' they need to deliver.

Your change catalyst will help you achieve the other nine ingredients for successful change.

2. Complete clarity about what you are trying to achieve – and why. The question 'what are we trying to achieve?' is the most profound weapon in a consultant's armoury. Too often, change leaders don't pay enough attention to answering this simplest of questions – from the different perspectives of the shareholders, the customers, the leadership and the employees.

In business, as in life, there is a 'right' reason and a 'real' reason for everything. This is especially pertinent when it comes to change. The 'right' reason for the change will be the one that is widely communicated. But lurking in the shadows will almost always be a 'real' reason that is rarely made public. Even if you only communicate the 'right' reason, it must be genuine and credible for people to understand, believe and embrace.

3. Detailed understanding of the implications of the change. Some of these implications will be so significant that the strategy will need to be altered accordingly. As a wise man once said: 'Strategy without execution is a daydream. Execution without strategy is a nightmare.'

4. Laser-like focus on the outcomes. 'The operation was a complete success. Unfortunately the patient died.' Process is an important enabler, but the achievement of the business outcomes you set out to achieve is paramount.

5. A change process that includes a 'pause for reflection'. Corporate history is littered with failed projects, where the ambition was too grand, the scope all-

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encompassing and the costs snowballed out of control. A simple trick to lessening the odds of this happening is to insert one or more 'pauses for reflection' into the process, acknowledging that the 'runaway freight-train' nature of large-scale projects is a common, global and all-too-human phenomenon.

6. Clear governance and thorough planning. Most projects appear to be established with strong management and governance roles… yet seven out of eight of them fail. This is because, in real life, grey areas occur in any governance structure. Misunderstandings occur at every junction, project governance boards often need assistance when making decisions and no one is formally tasked with challenging their decisions. The project board members may be outcomes-focused but only a small proportion of their time is allocated to the project. While the project manager may be full-time, his or her skills lie in managing the process. A change catalyst is outcomes-focused and thrives in the grey areas. They are the glue that holds it all together – the person who ensures that the outcomes are delivered.

And, of course, thorough planning will enable the project to set off in the right direction with the right people doing the right things. But to quote German Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke, 'no battle plan survives contact with the enemy', so your change plan must be living and adaptable. Its sole purpose is to help you deliver the outcomes your organisation requires.

7. Genuine engagement and communications. By 'genuine engagement', I mean the full gamut of a) communications and b) stakeholder engagement – and I use

the word 'genuine' deliberately. Your communications may be 'professional' but if your employees don't believe they are genuine, they will be worse than no communications. The same is true when it comes to stakeholder engagement. Superficial engagement is disrespectful, counter-productive and a waste of everyone's time. Genuine engagement involves listening and acting upon the insight you receive.

8. Find the emotional triggers. When it comes to finding your people's emotional triggers, you will need to unearth the 'real' reasons behind their resistance and the 'real' things that genuinely motivate them.

9. Strong, committed, aligned and unwavering leadership team. To quote Italian Renaissance historian and politician Niccolò Machiavelli: 'It ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.'

Successful change demands leaders who genuinely and actively embrace the change – and are seen to do so. It requires

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a leadership team whose members are all aligned and working together to achieve the desired outcomes; outcomes that every one of them genuinely cares about delivering. It requires leaders who will 'stay the course' in the face of future obstructions and challenges. Any chink in this armour, any gap in the alignment - and the change effort will begin to crumble – and quickly.

10. Establish a change-ready culture. Creation of a culture that embraces, encourages and rewards change is our final key ingredient for success. People need help if they are to embrace change willingly. They need help to overcome their fear of the unknown, of failure, and/or their fear of being blamed. To enable this on an organisation-wide scale requires the establishment of an environment where people eagerly look for improvements in the way things are done, are allowed to question the status quo, are encouraged to learn from failure, and are open to new processes, procedures and structures.

Change is tough. No CEO or leader of change sets out to fail. Yet the vast majority of the time, they do precisely that. By following the approaches outlined earlier, and the appointment of a change catalyst, you will be able to help your people embrace the future and ensure that your next change initiative will be among the one in eight that enjoys outrageous success.

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