

# REPORT ON BUSINESS

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# Don't manage change, enable it

Change management is dead. Organizations today need to prepare employees for constant change

The economy is changing at an unprecedented pace, driven by new technologies, innovations and ideas — all of which are forcing employers and their employees to quickly and constantly adapt.

Change is so rapid, in fact, that trying to manage it is now considered the wrong approach, says Krista Schaber-Chan, managing partner at Harbinger SCR Inc., a Toronto-based consulting firm specializing in business transformation.

"I think 20 years ago the notion of managing change made sense but in today's day and age, where change is happening all of the time, we don't necessarily want to or can manage it," she says.

Instead, Ms. Schaber-Chan believes organizations need to see change as ongoing, embrace it and enable it by creating space for the growth and opportunities it can bring.

"When I work with clients, I want to enable them to go through the change as oppose to managing it like it's something that's happening to you," Ms. Schaber-Chan says. "No matter what the change is or when it comes, they need to be ready for it."

## WHY CHANGE FAILS, AND HOW TO FIX IT

For decades, change management programs have been the go-to strategy for organizations dealing with disruption, both internally and externally.

Still, corporate transformations have a "miserable success rate," according to an analysis published in *Harvard Business Review*. The authors from the International Institute for Management Development cite studies showing about three-

quarters of these projects fail due to issues such as poor implementation, lack of buy-in, misguided ideas or simply change fatigue.

Successful change comes down to strong collaboration and communication, says John Oesch, associate professor and academic director, morning and evening and executive MBA programs at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

"A good strategy accounts for many stakeholder groups and gets as many people involved as possible, so that the change belongs to everyone and not just to the change team or top management team," Mr. Oesch says.

Patience is also a requirement. "There are many barriers to change and real cultural change takes a long, long time," Mr. Oesch says.

Change management is often considered negative because it comes with words like "restructuring" and "redundancy," says Yvonne Ruke Akpoveta, a change management strategist and adviser and founder of The Change Leadership event series. It's also difficult because it forces people to leave their comfort zone and learn or do something new.

Ms. Ruke Akpoveta believes organizations can change successfully by giving a voice to employees from all ranks and departments. "We now work in a collaborative environment, so everybody plays a key role in terms of leading and driving change and not just that person with the title 'leader,'" she says.

Ms. Ruke Akpoveta cites an example of when

she was hired by a large financial services company to help them adopt a new technology platform. "The leaders were very gung-ho about how 'this was the new way we need to do things; this is the new technology we need to implement.' It was very top-down," she recalls.

However, when Ms. Ruke Akpoveta started to consult with the different divisions impacted by the transition, she discovered the changes didn't meet regulatory requirements. If implemented, the company could face stiff fines. The project was rejigged and was eventually successful thanks to the collaboration with all levels of staff. "[Change] needs to be about 'how does this serve the whole organization,' rather than just is the project being delivered on time and on budget," Ms. Ruke Akpoveta says.

## CHANGE DRIVEN FROM THE TOP, BUT INFLUENCED BY ALL

More companies today are taking a proactive approach to change, including preparing their employees and giving them leadership skills as part of ongoing professional development training, Ms. Schaber-Chan says. "We are much more change adaptive and much more change enabled," she says.

The good news for organizations is that millennials, who today account for about half of the workforce, are very open to change, Ms. Schaber-Chan says. "They're already prepared. They're almost born prepared," Ms. Schaber-Chan says.

Employers should see employees from this generation as influencers who can help affect change, even if their job titles don't reflect it. "[We need to] look at leaders of change as people who are leaders without title — people who have influence, instead of power — and really bring them to the table and have them lead their peers throughout change within the organization," she says.

A high-profile example is teenage climate change activist Greta Thunberg of Sweden who has no official title, but has been influential in the environmental movement.

"She did it by being articulate, passionate in her desire for change and constantly providing knowledge," Ms. Schaber-Chan says. "This is the kind of leadership we believe is required in organizations — empowering individual contributors or front-line staff to be the voice of change."

Enabling this kind of grassroots change requires executives to sometimes stand back and let others speak, Ms. Schaber-Chan says.

For some, it's not easy. "Ego sometimes gets in the way of what we're trying to achieve," she says.

Change still needs to be driven from the top, but it should be led by the middle based on collaboration throughout the organization.

"Leaders are really beginning to realize it's not just about them being the boss," Ms. Schaber-Chan says. "It's about them being collaborators and team members as well as being leaders."





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