

## **LARGE SYSTEMS CHANGE – A Wild Ride** by Kevin McKee and Barry Bond Our perspective on a recent consulting assignment

Have you ever noticed how real organisational change is so different from what you read about in management books? Over the past year we have been closely involved in a large global change project. We wanted to take the chance to illustrate some real change lessons using this as our case study. We hope that the story is interesting and informative.

### **The Context**

Our client is a large division within a global conglomerate. As a matter of public record this was a company in big trouble. As of late 2002 a crisis led to the replacement of the group CEO and also that of our client company.

The new CEO in our divisional client instituted the expected restructure. Alongside this he announced new “Ways of Working”. There were a set of behaviours aimed at transforming the day-to-day relationships within and beyond the organisation.

Our assignment was to help start the process of communicating and embedding these new Ways of Working throughout the organisation.

### **The Scorecard**

We started out with a clear set of conditions which were needed to give this change a chance of succeeding. These will be familiar to you we imagine. They are listed below along with a) how we think we and the client did on achieving that condition and b) a big lesson we have learnt!

#### **1. The change had to be seen as a business imperative**

##### **Score: (out of 10) 6**

Lesson: Given the dire business situation, you would think the message was inescapable. The CEO certainly kept his message clear and urgent. However, many people still struggled with the need to change their own behaviour.

#### **2. The company’s own staff had to be seen as heavily involved in shaping and delivering the message**

##### **Score: 6**

Lesson: By active participation we managed to get the top managers and key others to take the lead in this. However, more was needed in identifying and deploying internal change agents. (See Book Ref. “The Tipping Point” for some fascinating new ideas in this area.)

#### **3. That one person in the company should be seen as being responsible for co-ordinating this change – a “change manager” appointed to spearhead the process. We had a very clear picture of the specification for this person that would underline our feeling that this needed to be seen as a “Business Imperative”**

##### **Score: 2**

Lesson: Should we have walked away when the client refused to do this? It seriously hampered the change process. (Belatedly one has now been appointed.)

- 4. We needed to use the principle of “see, feel, change” an emotional process rather than the usual rational approach. We were also harking back to the fact that you can only change the organisation one by one, person by person, or it doesn’t work!**

**Score: 6**

Lesson: In a company full of engineers this was a challenge. However, many of the managers we worked with rose to it as well. However, our scope to follow through with the potential catalysts for change was limited. We could have been smarter here and will be next time. (John Kotter’s “Heart of Change” is a good source of examples on this point.)

- 5. We, Cole-McKee Associates, had to model the changes in the way we worked with the client.**

**Score: 7 (Self-assessment!)**

Lesson: It is sobering to hold your own behaviour up to scrutiny against a set of criteria. It is a good discipline though and a reality check for what you are asking people within an organisation to do.

- 6. We had to work with the new chief executive to get him to spend enough time on this imperative rather than do a big blast and move on which often happens with CEOs**

**Score: 4**

Lesson: This needs constant recontracting. In turbulent times the person at the top is pulled in many different directions. The average CEO, however intelligent, typically underestimates the time they must invest in the “softer” side of change.

**Summary**

You may see those scores as a bit low. However, compared to many change processes we have observed we regard them as much better than average. The behaviour change has a chance of succeeding in a real world, fit for purpose way. Our main conclusion is that if there is a genuine change imperative, affecting structure and/or process, behaviour change is both necessary and more likely. Even with that context it is mighty hard work to put the forces for change in place.

“If you focus on results, you will never change. If you focus on change, you will get results.”  
Jack Dixon

“Be not afraid of going slowly; be only afraid of standing still.”

Chinese proverb