Institute of Leadership:
The Readiness for Change: The Missing Element

While there is a huge amount written on change in both academic literature and books for practitioners, there is very little written on the readiness for change. Does this matter? Actually we do need to understand this part of change as research shows half of failed large change initiatives such as mergers or business model changes fail because the organisation ignored the readiness stage.

Perhaps the most well- known writer on change is John Kotter who covers readiness of change within his model with the concept of 'urgency'. He wrote: "Establishing a sense of urgency is crucial to gaining needed cooperation." However, the readiness for change is more than making it urgent. In fact, the readiness for change is a more complex and multi-faceted construct than he states. It requires both people's shared resolve and commitment to implement the change; and, their shared belief and efficacy that they have the capability to do so. This includes how people regard whether they have the time in addition to their everyday tasks; whether they have the resources and support to do so; and, whether they believe the situation is right. In other words, the readiness for change is both psychological and practical and much more than creating 'urgency'.

One of the determinants of commitment to change is how it is valued. People will ask: do we need this change and is it beneficial and worthwhile? The more people in an organisation who value the change, the stronger the desire to implement it and take the necessary course of actions. However, it is clear that how people value the change is parsimonious – it will be valued for different reasons across the organisation by different people. This can be a challenge but regardless of the reasons, as long as people collectively value the change enough to commit to its implementation, they will move forward.

At a cognitive level, people assess readiness for change by whether they believe the organisation has the human, financial, information and material resources required to implement the change effectively. People in an organisation share their judgements by asking: do we have what it will take to implement this change effectively; do we have the resources to implement this change effectively; and, can we implement this change effectively given the situation we currently face? This will include people assessing the amount of time to implement the change well and whether the internal (and sometimes external) political environment supports the implementation required. When people share this common assessment they then share a common sense of confidence and belief that they can implement a complex organisational change. In other words, readiness for change is a relationship between the psychological and practical or structural construct for people.

However, a final point is that organisational readiness for change does not guarantee that the implementation of a complex change will succeed in its outcomes whether its improved quality, safety, efficiency or whatever the desired outcome is. If the complex organisational change is poorly designed, or lacks confidence and belief in the change itself, no amount of readiness will generate the benefits. Overestimating the collective capabilities to implement the change is common. Therefore, accurate information, preferably based on experience is far more effective when linked to readiness of change as described here.