

## **Organisational Change Management - How Black**

### **Saturday changed my perspective on change**

It may seem a long bow to draw, linking Black Saturday to my 12 years as an organisational change manager and consultant. But my personal experience on Black Saturday was a defining moment in the way I now look at my work.

Organisational change management has come a long way in recent years. When I started out in this work, I spent most of my time and effort justifying my existence to the very organisations who had employed me. They might have intuitively realised they needed some assistance but had little practical idea what that help looked like or the kind of activities needed to support their change project. Once we started to discuss possible approaches, surprise was a common reaction alongside scepticism, often followed by a comment that there was little budget available to fund activities beyond communication and a little training.

Fortunately, organisational change management is now a recognised and structured discipline and organisations are adopting a more enlightened attitude to actively managing change, have a better understanding of the benefits and are prepared to fund it more readily.

So all this is good news, right? A sign that things are slowly moving in the right direction? Oddly enough, I can only manage a lukewarm smile in response to those two questions. You see, I've been feeling

uncomfortable about organisational change management for a long time without quite knowing why. I find myself intellectually torn between acknowledging the benefits of my chosen field of work, whilst suspecting that it isn't really delivering quite the outcomes we were all anticipating. In the end, it took a bushfire - Australia's worst natural disaster - to clear away the clutter from my mind, bring me back to essentials and show me what was - and I believe is - lacking in our current approach to managing change.

We humans can have an unhealthy and often unreasonable view of change. Whilst some changes might be welcome, we initially tend to view others in a negative light - as something unfair, uninvited and sent to derail or upset our lives. It can take a long time, if we ever manage it, to find any positives in the whole experience. And yet I would argue that change is at the very heart of all our lives - it's what life is all about, how it moves forward, expands to new places and creates new experiences for all of us.

The trouble with change is that, while we often believe we have little or no say in its timing and impact on our lives, we are still responsible for how we deal with it. The trade off from all the delicious new opportunities is that it can be a very unexpected and unsettling experience and one that no schoolroom has ever really taught us how to handle. We often inherit our way of reacting to and coping with change from our parents and other role models and so it grows up with us and accompanies us

inevitably to our workplaces. Because many of us see change as something we would rather avoid, we spend little time thinking about how we might handle it more effectively, let alone embrace it as an opportunity for growth.

At around 4.30pm on February 7th 2009 I was at home alone in St Andrews, just below Kinglake, in the north east of Melbourne, Victoria. I was standing, transfixed, as a large fireball swooped up and over the ridge opposite my house and landed high on the hill in my neighbours' paddock. It was at once a frightening and totally mesmerising experience - frightening because of the very physical feelings of dread that instantly flooded my whole body and mesmerising because it was almost impossible to tear my eyes away from the speedy, spewing awfulness of the fire, throwing flames and embers up and out to catch in every piece of bush and grass. In truth I had started to feel uneasy some 20 minutes earlier as the red-brown haze from the Kilmore East fire consumed the entire sky. The wind had died to a whisper, settling into an eerie stillness on one of the hottest and windiest days in Melbourne's history and, despite the lack of any official warnings, the sensation of impending danger was almost tangible.

Seeing a deadly bushfire arrive and knowing you will have to fight it on your own focuses your mind in an instant. Decision-making becomes a matter of life and death. As it was, adrenaline kicked quickly in and I ran into the house to gather gloves, goggles and overalls. When I emerged

from my house a few minutes later, it seemed as if fire had taken over my entire world and had spread to every tree and shrub and blade of grass on my property. As I stood in my doorway, motionless and appalled, my choices had been reduced to staying calm and sticking to the plan or panicking and dying. But I did have a choice and as I've now learnt, if you are alive, then life isn't over. This was the start of a fight for survival and eventually a very lucky escape. It was also the beginning of one of the most challenging change journeys of my life.

That I survived is a miracle and another story in itself, but what matters here is the brutal reminder that life can change on a dime, in the blink of an eye. It only took a few short hours one afternoon in February to incinerate the fabric of my life, leave me homeless and take from me some beloved animals. There was no consultation, no negotiation, no time to consider how I reacted and almost no escape. I walked out of my burning home with the clothes I was standing up in, the contents of my handbag and one dog. A few days later I discovered that my horses had, incredibly, also survived. Interestingly, I was keenly aware, even as I struggled with the aftermath of the devastation, that what happened next was still up to me.

So began an emotional process of recovery where almost every choice I made could stagnate, shrink or expand my life. Oddly I didn't feel angry - possibly because I chose to take responsibility for my decision to be there on the day and for living in that beautiful and deadly spot. Anger seemed

somehow pointless against a force of nature so huge that it wiped out 173 lives and left almost 7500 people homeless. A part of me realised that accepting what had happened, however traumatic it might seem, would more easily allow me to take responsibility for what happened next. It turned out to be an empowering decision and helped me to see the whole experience as a truly life-changing event, rather than as a complete disaster. Suddenly I saw myself as someone who was lucky to be alive and who had new choices to make rather than simply a victim or survivor. Sure, there were bleak and sad days for me but finding and holding my perspective and continuing to trust in life really helped me get through. I told myself that things would be OK, that I had to let things unfold and that there could and would be a flipside to all of this. I also understood that accepting help and support would be crucial to my recovery and I was truly astonished and inspired by the compassion of so many different people from all walks of life.

I'm not advocating that everyone should think and feel as I do but I am suggesting that this is what worked for me and that how I chose to think about and feel about this sudden, abrupt change deeply shaped my recovery and influenced the subsequent choices I made about my life. Many months later, it has also caused me to reflect on my previous work in organisational change management and to wonder how I could ever have imagined that I could manage anyone else's change.

To be clear, I haven't suddenly decided that all forms of organisational change management no longer work. I just believe that in many cases we get the emphasis wrong. As change managers, change management consultants and specialists we often try to ensure that changes are introduced smoothly and effectively and with the least disruption to business activities. We create strategies, approaches and plans. We communicate, assess impacts, hold workshops, train people and engage exhaustively with all our stakeholders. We inform, advise, influence, convince, counsel, cajole and persuade. It's designed to help people understand the what, why, how, where and when of the change and we try, often very hard, to ensure nothing will go wrong. And when things do go wrong, when there is a lack of interest or engagement or unhelpful resistance amongst those affected, it's hard not to feel some responsibility, hard not to feel dispirited, hard not to shoulder some of the almost inevitable blame. When we retreat to lick our metaphorical wounds, we wonder what we should have done differently.

I can see now that we've been on a hiding to nothing in some ways. In reality, we've taken responsibility for how others feel about a change and how they react. We look first to failures or inadequacies with our own plans and approaches before remembering that the responsibility for managing change ultimately rests, and always has done, with each individual. When fire wiped out the material history of my life, it was down to me to choose a perspective and down to me to choose how I thought and felt about what had happened. No one else could make that

decision for me and I wasn't informed, consulted or given any time to get used to what would change!

Whilst we might not be able to choose the kinds of changes that come along in life and work, whilst we may not be considered or consulted, we can choose our response and in that response lies our power and the seeds of what we need to do next. We can choose to be victims or we can choose to become someone with new opportunities. We can also choose to avoid, resist or opt out, blame a lack of information, consultation or a myriad of other perceived failures. We might be correct in what we say but we're still making a choice - we're choosing to fight change and to reject the possibility that something good may emerge for us. It's a somewhat sad state of affairs since change is a constant in our lives and our energy would be much better spent finding opportunities to thrive as things transform around us.

Whilst change management practitioners intuitively know this, how often do we meaningfully address the need for each affected individual to take responsibility for a planned change? How often are our activities focussed at the level of the affected individual, providing the kind of information and assistance that will allow them to make a difference to the way they experience change in general not just at work but in their lives? Beyond communicating the reasons for and substance of a change, how much can we really do to influence how a person understands and responds to it? My own experience would suggest that much depends upon a person's

perspective on change and how we choose to avoid, resist or take advantage of change in our lives.

We sometimes consider those who resist change as a potential threat to the overall success of an initiative. We may try to convince or even to compel them to fall into line. And when we do this we fail to understand that it isn't necessarily the idea of the project or initiative that is proving uncomfortable for people but rather the whole concept and prospect of change itself. When we try to tackle the problem purely at the level of the justification for and content of the particular change rather than at the level of an individual's beliefs around change in general, we run the risk of missing the point entirely. After all, if an individual truly believes that most changes in their life are unwelcome and especially those they don't get much say in, they are unlikely to be looking for the opportunities in this or any other change that comes along.

So where to from here? I am by no means advocating a move away from proactively managing organisational change or from our efforts to involve people in changes which will affect them but I am suggesting a shift in the focus of the effort. I believe we need a sensible discussion about and a much clearer understanding of who is really responsible for the success or otherwise of a change. Change managers, change teams, consultants and specialists can only do so much - their responsibility can only really extend to the communication and support of a change. It is the individuals directly affected by the change - whether they are directors,

managers or staff - who need to step up and take full responsibility for how they choose to experience a change, whether they welcome it or not. Intellectually, most organisations would recognise this but in practice, it seldom happens that way. We need a shift in thinking from all those involved and to change the nature of our conversations with stakeholders. We need to get back to basics and place proper and practical importance on how people make choices about change and the skills they have to individually to manage change in their lives.

### **About the author:**

Karen Curnow is a consultant, speaker, trainer and facilitator with over 18 years experience in a variety of industries both in Australia and overseas. In recent years she has specialised in helping organisations manage large-scale change effectively but her experience as a survivor of the February 7th 2009 "Black Saturday" bushfires in Victoria has profoundly changed her perspective on change. She is now sharing what she has learnt and speaks, writes and run workshops to help others to change their experience of change.

### **References:**

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