

Hot Topics Hot Seat: Managing People through Change

In addition to Hot Topics? Coole Solutions! Coole Insight brings you these regular articles where we interview experts, professionals and commentators on a range of issues that impact on education and society.

The Hot Topic – Managing People through Change

There's a lot of information out there about managing and coaching people through the change curve, and the emotional and psychological impacts of change are quite widely discussed. Change is such a constant in all our lives right now, especially at work. Add to that watching the news regularly and it gives us a real sense of how rapidly and significantly the world is changing. That's why when we caught up with Vic Langer recently she was keen to share her insights into delivering large scale change in a complex organisation.

One of the first things Vic read about when she set out on her organisational change journey at the start of this year is that the overwhelming majority of change projects fail. This is often as a result of under-resourcing or bad planning, but one of the key things that stood out to her was the idea that focusing on systems over people was probably going to make things worse. This struck a chord with Vic, because she has often believed that whilst systems and processes can almost always be streamlined and improved, it is the people using them that gets anything done.

Change is hard, anyone who has ever tried to give anything up can tell you that, and for lots of people they have a fear of change. It's easy to understand why, uncertainty makes people anxious, and let's be honest none of us likes it when other people make decisions about our lives and we don't feel in control. It was fascinating to hear first-hand from Vic about what she has been learning about this.

In the Hot Seat – Vic Langer, Strategy Director, Save the Children UK

Vic has historically been found trying to effect change in the outside world rather than delivering it inside an organisation, though she talks enthusiastically about making things more effective. For all her talk of change Vic's only worked in three organisations in the last twenty years. Starting out at Staffordshire University Students' Union in student activities at the turn of the century, she soon moved on to spend the next 10 years at the National Union of Students. Reflecting on why she said "I stayed at NUS for so long because I really believed in what we were doing in terms of influencing external debates, but also because whilst doing that we were creating a much stronger organisation, and I guess the same is true at Save. Whilst I will be always be proudest of the impacts we've achieved for children in the outside world, changing the organisation is key too".

For the first five years that Vic was at Save the Children UK she worked first as a Head of, then Director of Campaigns, and in 2016 became the Director of Influencing and Operations. It was in this role that Vic really got to combine her passion for external change, overseeing the government relations and campaign mobilisations work, whilst developing her skills for enhancing organisational transformation and effectiveness.

Over the last year as Director of Strategy she first off developed the [2019-21 strategy](#) and is now busy leading on the organisational transformation programme that comes with implementing the strategy. "I've learned so much in the last year about strategy, transformation, operation model design etc but the biggest thing that has struck me is the complexity of human behaviour in change. I am fairly empathetic and so dealing with the anxiety and emotions of hundreds of people has been pretty overwhelming at times, but I've learned a lot about that too, and about drawing down on the skills I already have as a campaigner".



"People are thirsty for information but if you give them too much they will drown in it all"

Your career has mainly been in influencing external change, what made you want to spend the last 12 months doing organisational change?

VL "Whilst developing the strategy it soon became clear that if the organisation was to really change the world for children there was a lot that needed to change internally to allow that to happen. I felt a need to roll up my sleeves and have a go at making the organisation more fit for purpose".

What has been the biggest challenge?

VL "Getting the right balance between all the work that needs doing to make the change happen and ensuring the right level of comms and engagement with people. Most change projects fail, and often because of a lack of resource, being a charity, rightly Save wants to spend a little of its income as possible on its internal stuff, so doing that balancing act of people and tasks with limited resources was hard.

On the comms and engagement piece there were moments when I forgot that as a campaigner that giving people information and persuading them of an argument is what I know. There was a short spell when I allowed the "transformational change" badge to doubt that".

Vic's tips for what you can to help people cope with change

1. When considering what might happen try to help people to think in probabilities not possibilities. I've had a lot of conversations recently where people have let their imaginations run wild rather than taking a good look at all the data points that they have in front of them.
2. Recognise that even people who are supportive of changes, that going through change is still going to be stressful. It's not just the people who are resistant to change that get stressed when it is happening.
3. Take time out and prioritise how you are feeling. Be honest when things are getting to you and take action – it's harder to absorb or deflect other people's anxieties if you're not feeling tip top, make time for you.
4. Be ready to do a lot of active listening but realise that you might not be able to take action on everything that is raised. The process of being heard makes a difference.

Further Reading – some of the best stuff on change that Vic has read recently, having taken recommendations from others

7 pitfalls to avoid – it has a great graphic
<https://www.thoughtworks.com/insights/blog/seven-pitfalls-avoid-during-organizational-transformation>

A reminder that during times of transformational change it's important that leaders change themselves too
<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/change-leader-change-thyself>

A more practical how too – with a good section on the need to 'confront reality'
https://www.strategyand.pwc.com/media/file/Strategyand_Ten-Guiding-Principles-of-Change-Management.pdf

Some good tips on managing change when you are the messenger not the decision maker
<https://medium.com/better-humans/how-to-motivate-your-people-through-change-7f7f94586790>

You've been managing people deal with change recently, can you share you key insights with us please?

VL "Sure. I think it is important to say that I am right in the middle of this change, and so that is the view you're getting from me, knees deep.

Right, first up people are thirsty for information but if you give them too much they'll drown in it all. Once we started to think about key messages, the change narrative and focusing not just on why we are making the changes, but the vision for how things will be better in the future, it's felt like we have started to turn a corner.

The next thing that I keep reminding myself about is that the change curve isn't linear, which makes the down - up loop of the curve feel like riding a rollercoaster. A new piece of information or an update can send people back to the beginning of the change curve, so I've found myself constantly managing other people's anxiety and repeated resistance

Finally, I think I would say that resist the urge to answer questions that you don't have an answer too or give people information they want when you know it's not the right time for them to get that information. A key tension I have found is between being open and transparent and managing information flows in what has been a quite an active and agile process. Uncertainty is one of the things about change that makes people the most anxious, so only giving people bits of information without full context might feel open and honest, but it's also risky. I feel really strongly that in the need to support people when they get stressful information and so I think that needs to be planned and deliberate".

You have mentioned a couple of times managing other people's emotions, what impact has that had on yours?

VL "The one thing I genuinely wasn't prepared for was the level of personal resilience I needed to have. It's been well documented in the press that Save's had a challenging time over the last eighteen months, and so delivering change, however much needed, in an organisation that been going through deep levels of organisational trauma has been a real test. When you're the person associated with leading the change it's inevitable that some of the anger generated by fear and anxiety is going to end up coming your way. That has been tough, I've had to make more of an effort to practice self-care".

Save is a big organisation, and when you were at NUS that was quite small in comparison, do you think the size of the organisation makes a difference?

VL "Totally. Save UK alone is an organisation of over 1000 people, and that is where the changes I've been working on are focused. Lot's of organisations say that they are 'deeply complex' but Save is mind-blowingly so. So, all that complexity and all those people mean that there isn't just one culture, there are many different cultures, and given that delivering any change requires cultural interaction – navigating that has been eye opening. Watching how people have performed to departmental type has been fascinating. The trick for me has been trying to understand the different nuances without getting too sucked in too much of the drama."

If you could go back in time what would be the one thing that you would do differently?

VL "I think that would be to be clearer up front about how decisions were going to get made and by who and being clear about who was going to be consulted/engaged or informed and at what point in the various processes – and then being really transparent with everyone about that. When I say it like that, it sounds obvious! Clarity of decision making is one of the things we are trying to improve as part of the transformation process, and so I would have spent a bit more time interrogating that at the start."

If you want to follow up with Vic, she is at - vic.langer@gmail.com