

THE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

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Introduction

We can look at change in two ways. We can consider it, first of all, in terms of the change itself – the new syllabus, the new technique, the new textbook etc. However, this kind of view will not explain many of the difficulties and apparent irrationalities that are experienced in the change process. An alternative is to view change in terms of the change in behaviour (and the attitudes and values that underlie that behaviour) required of the people involved in order to accommodate themselves to the actual innovation.

Change as a human problem

When we view change as a human problem in this way, a number of fundamental features emerge:

1. Change is not just a professional concept. Change is a natural part of the human condition. It is likely that people react to professional change in the same way as they react to change in other aspects of their lives, such as marriage, accidents, growing up etc.
2. Change in one aspect of a person's life will have an effect on, and be affected by, other aspects. Reactions to professional change, therefore can often have little or nothing to do with the actual change itself, but may be conditioned by apparently unrelated factors.
3. Change poses a potential threat to what psychologists call the 'key meanings' of our lives (Blacker and Shimmin, 1984). Key meanings provide stability and security, and make our behaviour meaningful. Examples of key meanings are our relationships with other people, our perception of our status, our moral or religious values, our group allegiances, our habits and routines. Any change poses a threat to one or more of these key meanings.

We aim to maintain a balance in the complex ecology of our key meanings. Change threatens this balance. As a result, the commonest reaction to change is resistance.

Individual reactions to change

Marris (1974) approached the question of individual reactions to change by studying reactions to bereavement. He argued that if we study how people react to what must be the most disruptive of all changes – the death of a loved one -, this can give us an indication of how people react to change in general.

The behaviour of the bereaved follows predictable patterns and is characterised by apparent contradictions. For example, they say that they have nothing to live for and yet rush back to work; they say that they want to forget, but obsessively cultivate reminders of the dead loved one.

The shock of bereavement, Marris argues, throws the key meanings of a person's life out of balance. In the process of grieving the bereaved person tries to restore the balance by resolving the contradictions and conflicts that the disturbance has created. Methodological change, of course, cannot compare in severity to the shock of bereavement. But any significant change will disturb the key meanings of an individual's life and create the need to restore the balance. The important feature of this process, however, is its highly personal nature.

'To protect key meanings we will defend the contexts within which they developed. Reason, persuasion and argument by others are not enough to help people adjust to significant losses, for no-one can solve for someone else the crisis of re-integration that disruptive changes impose' (Blacker and Shimmin, 1984)

The individual reaction to change, therefore, is slow, fraught with contradictions and highly personal.

Group reactions to change

Each individual is a member of a network of different groups – national, regional, ethnic, gender, family, language and age groups, as well as work groups, political and leisure groups, etc.

Groups provide a number of benefits. Blacker and Shimmin (1984) list the following 'psychological rewards' of group membership:

1. Groups provide identity and esteem
2. Groups enable us to test reality
3. Groups satisfy our need to belong and to be wanted
4. Groups make individuals more powerful and thus better able to achieve their aims

Groups develop norms of behaviour which provide an identity for the group and which mark it off from other groups. The price we pay for the benefits of group support is loyalty to these group norms. Group norms change very slowly and any threat to them will provoke defensive action.

Individuals act both as themselves and as representatives of their groups. Since individuals greatly fear isolation from their groups, when in doubt it is best to trust the group loyalty to dominate.

The power of groups to affect individual behaviour is generally ignored in ELT teacher training, where teachers are by and large trained or retrained as individuals. The logic of the ideas on group norms argues in favour of educating teachers in their normal work groups i.e. their school, faculty or department.

Varying perceptions of a change

When considering human behaviour, there is no objective reality. People behave in accordance with how they perceive the situation to be. And perceptions vary, because individuals approach the same situation with different key meanings. 'Changes which appear reasonable and straightforward to some may, in altogether unforeseen ways, undermine certain key attachments that are felt by others.' (Blacker and Shimmin, 1984).

If changes are to be effective, the differing perceptions of all concerned parties must be taken into account. If they are not, there is a risk that reaction to the change will be non-committal or downright obstructive. (For a good illustration of this, see Tomlinson, 1990. In Tomlinson's example the perceptions of certain key players were not taken into account with the result that many of the aims of the project were not fulfilled.) (See also Tomlinson, 1988).

Educational innovation is particularly prone to this kind of problem, as educational systems comprise a large number of groups with differing needs and interests – as well as teachers and students, there are head teachers, ministry officials, inspectors and advisers, examination bodies, textbook writers, academics and publishers.

As far as teacher development is concerned, the concept of differing perceptions throws up the question of who should decide the content and nature of INSET courses. What may be perceived as a problem by the trainers may not be seen as problematic by the teachers themselves and vice versa.

How do people resist change?

Resistance to change follows general patterns (Blacker and Shimmin, 1984):

1. The simplest strategy is inertia.
2. If personal inertia does not work, the next stage is to exploit the inertia of other interested parties such as the ministry, the inspectorate, the trade unions, the parents, etc.
3. A more active form of resistance is to accentuate all the negative aspects of the change. "It's too time-consuming. It's too noisy, etc."
4. If this fails, resistance has to take the more personal form of questioning the abilities of change agents or their right to introduce the change.

5. Finally resisters can exploit the lack of insider knowledge of the change agents. The expatriate ELT 'expert' is particularly vulnerable to this strategy.

These general strategies have one underlying characteristic – they all put the responsibility elsewhere. The motivation for resistance is basically fear of the disturbance of key meanings or fear of isolation from a group. People, however, are reluctant to admit to fears and inadequacies. They, thus, look for a socially acceptable mask (Berne 1967). When people say “That won't work in my classroom”, they are really saying: “I'm scared of trying that in my classroom.”

Dealing with resistance

How can we make use of these ideas in the management of change? Fundamentally we need to be more concerned with getting the process of change right and worrying less about the product. In this approach we can identify a number of important guidelines:

1. All concerned parties must be involved in order to gain the commitment of everyone to the change. This is generally known as 'getting a contract for change.'
2. People should be encouraged to express their resistance. So long as resistance remains hidden, it remains a problem and a potential threat to the success of the change.
3. The commitment of all parties to a change is vital, if the necessary time and effort are to be invested. This commitment will be most readily given, if the people involved feel that it is their own change. This is known as sharing the ownership of change.

None of the above strategies will guarantee the effectiveness of any change, but as a general approach they are at least consistent with the studies of how people react to change, described above.

Furthermore, there is empirical evidence from the world of industry for the validity of this kind of approach. The most coherent model is the Total Quality Approach, variations of which are used by the world's most successful companies. A key feature of the Total Quality Approach is the high level of worker involvement in quality control and improvement through such mechanisms as Quality Circles. While such a model cannot be taken over wholesale into ELT, we can learn a lot from the approach in general and exploit a number of the techniques. (For more information on this approach see Robson 1988).

Conclusion

Change is an important feature in ELT, particularly in the area of teacher development. We need to see change as a human problem and concentrate on the impact that any change will have on the individuals and groups involved. This involves recognizing some important aspects of how people react to change.

Change disturbs the framework by which we make sense of our lives and our natural reaction is to resist. On an individual level, change generates the problem of integrating new ideas or actions into our existing network of key meanings. The process of accommodation is slow, often contradictory and can only be achieved by the individual concerned. Change also threatens group norms. People fear isolation from their groups and so will resist straying too far from the group norm, even at the cost of their own individual feelings. Lastly, in any social activity, such as education, there will be differing perceptions of the need for and the nature of any change.

These views of the impact of change have important implications for any profession, like ELT, that is seriously concerned with innovation. Most importantly, they indicate a need to develop sensitive and supportive environments in which people can adjust to changes that affect their working lives.

Bibliography

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