

# Keep on moving

All companies go through change. After all, if you're not moving forwards, you're probably moving backwards.

**Peter Gordon** discusses the importance of oiling the wheels

**“OUR PEOPLE** are our most important asset.” How often have you heard that corporate mantra? Nowadays it's routine for organisations to use accreditation schemes such as Investors in People and Total Quality Management as PR tools, something to be trumpeted from the rooftops as evidence that they are “people businesses”. But how genuinely valuable are these schemes when it comes to the crunch? More often than not, when a serious internal issue arises, IIP and the other schemes go out the window and are supplanted by JFDI: “Just f\*\*\*ing do it!”

A discipline that makes it possible for an organisation to achieve sustainable change, and to carry its people along with it, is called “change management”. This has been defined as “the active addressing of issues affecting people – individually, as teams and as a community – when an organisation pursues change.” In English, it's looking after the people within your company when it's going through change.

A relatively new discipline, it is critically important that PR practitioners understand how change management works and seize the opportunity to become directly involved in it. This is a huge opportunity for PR professionals to add to their communication skill-set and benefit their organisation – and position themselves better for career advancement in the process.

**RESEARCH SURVEYS** consistently highlight that failures of individual projects and programmes of change are most often due to “people problems”, rather than from any lack of resources, basic technical competence or from unclear objectives. Experience shows time and again how organisations fail to understand how the actions and reactions of their own people can undermine what they want to achieve. Take, for example, the company that demanded change but overlooked the potential for employee resistance. It found itself in a storm of strikes and systems sabotage, leading to conflicts with its customers over delivery errors. Several years on, it is still trying to rebuild internal and external relationships.

There are clear benefits to the organisation that uses a change-management approach rather than relying on JFDI. For one thing, it means changes will be more effective and sustainable, with less chance of employees reverting

to previous practices because “we've always done it this way”. Change management normally increases employee involvement, commitment and satisfaction; and by winning hearts and minds brings the prospect of significantly enhanced reputation – both internally and externally (yes, people do talk). In terms of the bottom line, this translates to increased profitability in the private sector, and in the public and voluntary sectors better meeting organisational goals and targets.

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Change management uses proven processes, tools and techniques in a planned but flexible way to ensure an organisation's change objectives are met with minimum negative disruption from and to the people in the company. In most cases, change management invites employee participation, on the basis that people are more committed to something that they have helped to create – a participative rather than directive management approach. Change management is not without its hard edges. However, tough messages can be given without brutal communications. And please, forget confusing spin.

It should already be apparent that change management is not a “one size fits all” solution. Change situations differ widely, and no two individuals or groups of people will react in exactly the same way. Actions and people's reactions must be managed dynamically using a variety of tools and techniques. What change management does is use a broad-ranging tool kit in a systematic and unified way. During the planning and evolution of the change process, the approach ensures that the reactions of people are, as far as possible, predicted and that the necessary support tools and resources are ready and available to address the issues, whatever these may be, as they arise.

## SO WHY IS CHANGE MANAGEMENT SO RELEVANT TO PR PEOPLE?

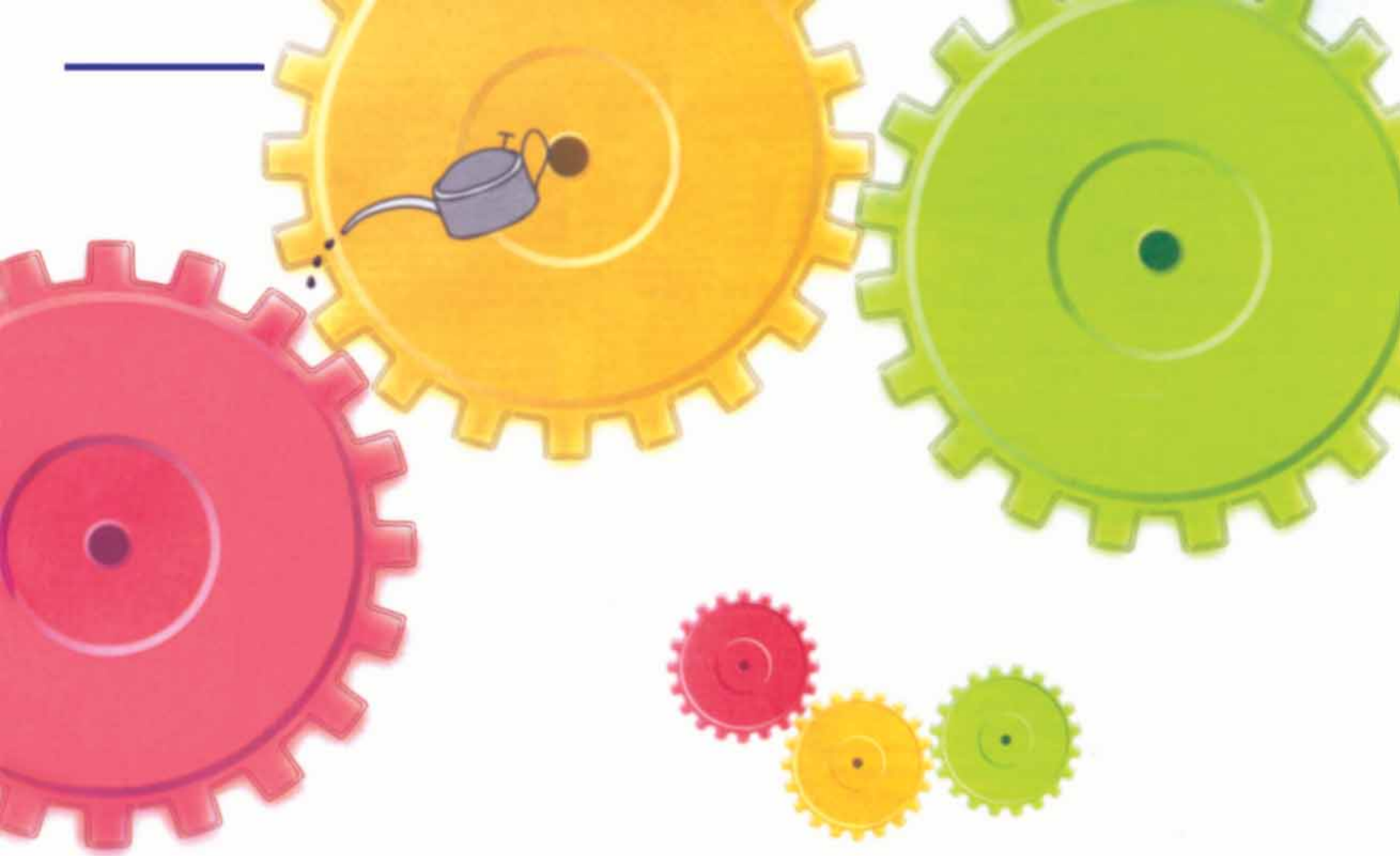
**COMMUNICATION SKILLS** are key to the success of most ventures; they are absolutely critical in managing change, though, because communication is the lifeblood.

PR professionals are (or at least claim to be) highly skilled at identifying the current mind-sets of target audiences and the needs for more information or experience to shift their attitudes, views and actions. Turn these skills from focusing on the audiences outside the organisation and on to the ones *inside* and you will appreciate why PR practitioners should be pivotal in change efforts. Sadly, this is not currently the case.

So far, most organisations have failed to recognise the enormous potential for deploying their PR staff's external communications skills in the field of change management. This is partly because PR is still so outward-facing, focused as it is on achieving a big public splash or in influencing external audiences via the news media. It is also, however, a reflection of the comparatively low status accorded to PR. The function is too often regarded as something that is bolted on at the end of the organisational decision-making process, rather than, as it should, being an integrated contributor to the strategy development.

**IF PR PEOPLE** want to capitalise on the skills they have, and fulfil more central roles in change management, they themselves need to embrace change.





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Most important is to stop viewing PR as a world of its own. Focus is good; myopia is not. There needs to be deeper understanding among public-relations people of business dynamics – how functions combine to deliver the goals of the organisation – and a greater willingness to involve themselves in issues wider than tactical or even strategic PR. In short, public-relations professionals must enhance their “business” skills and raise their credibility inside their organisations. They have to be able to stand their ground alongside any other function.

PR is not the normal starting point for individuals who later become corporate CEOs (aside from, of course, in PR agencies) or public-sector leaders. But maybe it is time for public-relations practitioners to aspire to run these organisations – in which case it is essential for them to develop the wider business skills that will equip them to participate more fully in the change-management process while they are on their way to the top. ●

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## CASE STUDIES

### How things can go wrong when insufficient attention is given to the people issues

#### Involve the right people

**T**AKE THE case of new NHS contracts for GPs. They caused significant embarrassment for the Prime Minister when it was revealed to him, live and on national TV, that some surgeries were responding to the need to see patients within 48 hours by only allowing patients to book appointments a maximum of 48 hours in advance. Somehow I don't think this was what the government had in mind...

Perhaps wider involvement of GP

representatives would have predicted these responses and caused some reappraisal by the government of their measurement criteria. Indeed, recent governments' penchant for target-setting in so many areas makes them appear to subscribe more to the JFDI approach.

Perhaps the spin merchants should spend more time appreciating the impact of policy rather than on its simple transmission.

#### Recognise cultural differences

**T**HE MERGER of two companies from different countries required many changes, but the leaders of the integration failed to appreciate the full impact of the companies' substantial cultural differences. One had developed a predominantly participative management style, the other a “macho”, individualistic style – each reflected their home nation peoples' characteristics. Failure to recognise and deal with these cultural issues was causing the merger to come seriously off the rails.

The solution was to implement change-management disciplines and, in particular, revisit the management-style options that could really leverage

success from the merger; a case of, “better late than never”. However, early recognition of the cultural differences and their blocking effects on smooth integration would have saved enormous time and effort, and could have prevented much of the emotional trauma suffered by employees. There is no doubt that the merged company's business results suffered from the poor appreciation of these issues.

PR people's skills at understanding target audiences were certainly ignored as far as the internal community was concerned. Were they just too busy selling the merger benefits to outsiders to consider those within the company?