THE SCIENCE OF CHANGE

“WE’VE ALWAYS DONE IT THIS WAY. WHY DO WE NEED TO CHANGE?”

Change is a constant in our lives. But it is something most of us don’t readily embrace. That can make leading a program on change quite a topsy-turvy ride.

Dr Rose Trevelyan is a change management specialist at the University of New South Wales and understands the pivotal role of leadership in achieving successful change.

Rose says that successful change management can draw on neuroscience. “There are fantastic developments in brain research” she says. “Our understanding of the brain is growing and we draw on this in our leadership training.”

The research findings make practical sense for leaders: resistance and immunity to change is natural. “Resistance to change and the behaviours we observe during change are often part of the brain’s coping mechanism.”

The latest research is based on the established knowledge of the left brain rational thinking, versus the right brain emotional response.

Rose says the natural response is heightened when “changes are made to us and we are not part of the formulation of the change.”

“The emotional side takes over”, she says. “Workplace behaviour will be poor, and people go into denial. The rational side has shut down.

Welcome to the July edition of The Leader.

The only constant is change. The only way to beat it is to move with it. And yes, that sometimes does mean transforming the entire culture of an organisation to stay relevant and competitive.

Cultural transformation is a long-term change. It’s not a knee-jerk solution; it’s a gradual transformation from being one kind of business to being another. Adaptation must be gradual, evolving and gentle, and never enforced.

So the approach taken with employees in a transforming business needs to be inclusive. THEY will be the transformation; it’s ultimately the people within the business that shoulder most of the responsibility of transforming its culture.

This transformation is a responsibility that needs to be accepted at all levels from the top down. A true cultural transformation rarely works well when simply dictated from above; buy-in and enthusiasm from all employees is crucial if it’s going to work in the long-term.

Employees must be engaged with the significance of the cultural transformation, and giving them an early understanding on their future, and the future of the company, is key. Staff members need to know what the aims are upfront. They need a thorough understanding of what the company is transitioning towards. It’s the responsibility of the top team to filter this message down through the organisation, but then becomes the responsibility of all levels of management to pass on to their staff. People need to know the score early – and be able to pass on that knowledge.

The more training and development is put into leading the lower levels through a cultural transformation, the more effective the long-term change will be – and the more realistic. By equipping staff with the relevant tools to not only cope but flourish, they start to lead the transformation as well as simplifying the process for their peers, and other future employees.

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When Australian School of Business associate professor Gavin Schwarz and a colleague were invited into an organisation to help the firm implement major electronic data changes, the pair soon recognised that the desired change was never going to happen. The management team’s unbending attitude towards failure, or more accurately its complete lack of acceptance of failure as an option, smothered any chance of innovation, change or adaptability.

In the end, the organisation justified the lack of change and moved on to new projects, but from this experience Schwarz recognised an area of research that fitted into his specialty area of the behaviour of organisations as a group.

“My work focuses on organisational change and failure,” Schwarz says. “Organisations must adapt and change and recently I’ve looked at why organisations succeed or fail, or go through a period of inertia where they don’t change. I’ve looked deeply into the executive side of things and the decisions and choices that create that outcome. So, I’m a macro researcher but it does have to come back to people, to individuals.”

Much of Schwarz’s work has looked at senior management teams and their attitudes towards failure. How do executives orient themselves towards financial crisis failure, for instance, and how does that orientation shape the organisation’s sustainability or effectiveness? How do senior managers react to crisis and failure? How does that reaction affect the organisation’s adaptability?

“It’s not a negative study,” Schwarz says. “It’s not just about failure. It’s actually a positive spin as it looks at the orientation towards failure as a mechanism for effectiveness and sustainability. If a business does not accept or plan for failure, then it can spend a bucket load of money digging itself deeper and deeper into a hole in order to complete a project, especially one involving change.

“The facilitation of large-scale change requires a recognition and acceptance of failure so that goals can be reframed into a new construct once the failure occurs. Learnings are taken from the failure, the positives are recognised and a new plan that includes these positives is put together.”

According to Schwarz, this planning for failure at the very beginning of a project is vital because statistically – in terms of business projects – we fail more often than we succeed. So to understand that this is likely and to have a plan to move onwards in a positive and progressive manner is enormously powerful.

“As humans, we’re built for success. We always expect success so we plan for it. But we need to begin to plan for failure,” he says. “Great strategists will do this – they work with failure and consider it a vital part of the process.”

In a paper he’s writing on the topic, Schwarz runs with the industry-standard definition of failure – “an organisation’s inability to achieve expected performance goals, thresholds, or desired results”.

“Key indicators of such failure include financial stress, revenue and value declines, imbalanced relative costs (costs as a percentage of revenues, costs relative to those of competing companies, and employee productivity relative to labour costs), high debt-ratio, and project failure,” Schwarz says. Most interestingly, this definition presents a non-terminal view of failure, recognising that an organisation can fail for extended periods of time before it eventually recovers or continues declining.

Expecting Bumps in the Road

Lindsay McMillan, managing director of business consultancy Converge International, maintains that failure is a term that is alien to many of today’s high-speed businesses. That’s not to say the outcome is never recognised or planned for, but that the term itself is not palatable. Instead, negative or questionable outcomes are strategised around concepts such as “contingency planning”, “risk mitigation” and “risk management”.

“A good leadership group, when a change plan is being put into place, will say, ‘What are our contingencies if this original plan does not work?’ That’s a very healthy and important part of the process. But however you refer to it, in my experience the success or failure of a change program comes down to energy and buy-in,” McMillan says.

“When I walk into a business to help manage a change program, the first question I ask is: why do they want to change? If there is a good argument that is broadly understood and accepted within the organisation, then I’ll ask who has determined the need for change, who is championing that change and how much of the organisation has bought in to the reason for the change. There is always a group that resists change but there is always also a group that is very happy to follow great leadership,” he says.

“Often, at the end of a change program when the original goals have not been achieved and the mopping up process begins, it’s because the people at the top of the company have lost the energy for it. The challenges along the way, the distractions and, yes, the little failures, have worn them down. For such a program to be successful it needs a champion – a vibrant, inspirational person who does not lose energy. If this person exists then the program is far more likely to succeed.”

According to McMillan, the speed of business these days, the sheer pace of movement, change, progression and innovation, means businesses must plan for the inevitable bumps in the road. They must recognise that problems may occur, goals may not be met, and have a Plan B in place for when they do. The time it takes to reflect and figure out what went wrong is a luxury most organisations can ill afford, so they must have a positive attitude towards failure and simply see it as a launch point for their contingency plan.

The Failure Orientation

Schwarz is quick to point out that he is not encouraging failure or asking managers to celebrate it. His work is highlighting the fact that decision-makers, as they yearn for success, should accept failure with a positive meaning, leading to the creation of a new failure orientation. Failure becomes something functional and normal, not something to be avoided, denied, or covered up. It allows executives to recognise and plan for failure situations by re-framing them in a positive light.

It becomes about redefining the original goals into alternatives. This enables a new definition of success and gives the failure a positive reason. Managers can think, “we failed that project, but it has become a successful failure as the outcomes have been redefined”.

Says Schwarz: “At a basic level, this means thinking about how you expect and engage with failure ahead of time, rather than reacting to it once it has happened. It’s about thinking of what it might take to change your own views of, reactions to and attitudes towards failure. It’s about the way the key players recognise the failure, accept it and then accommodate it.”

“Sometimes success simply means surrounding yourself with people who have a different mindset to your own in order to create balance. If you know you are someone who rejects all failure, then you need to surround yourself with people in the opposite quadrant to balance that. If the executive team views failure in a positive light, as a stabilising force, as a legitimate aspect of organisational survival, then it is likely to positively influence the behaviour of the organisation as a whole.”

(SOURCE: BUSINESS THINK)
HARD TRUTHS, WORKPLACE CYNCIS AND LONG MEMORIES

The failure rate for organisational change is alarmingly high, which might explain why managers and executives are often reluctant to share the hard truths about corporate machinations with employees. Whether it’s a change in job design, a new location or boss, a merger or redundancies, it’s far better to level with staff members, than risk their imaginative speculation and rumours. Frequently employees create a scenario that’s far worse than reality, notes Alannah Rafferty, a lecturer in Organisation and Management at the Australian School of Business.

Business Think (BT): Can we first define the types of changes facing people in organisations?

Alannah Rafferty (AR): Generally, people tend to think of the larger-scale changes, such as mergers, downsizing, and redundancies. All those kind of changes have a massive impact on our wellbeing because we can become anxious and fearful about them. But one of the important things to recognise is that organisations, and people within them, experience a lot of smaller changes on an everyday basis – getting a new boss, having a job enlargement or a job reduction, for example. Those changes can actually have a big impact as well, and we look at all of them when we study organisational change.

BT: Why do people get apprehensive about change, which in some cases may just be a new logo or a new location, although the people are still doing the same job?

AR: A new logo, for example, has big ramifications for peoples’ identity. One of the interesting things about change is that organisations want us to commit to a company, and a part of that involves committing to the company’s current identity. We get a picture of ourselves in that organisation as it is. When we engage in changes, such as changing logos, we’re actually asking people to shift how they think about themselves in that company. Even seemingly small changes can have massive, unanticipated consequences, like getting us to change how we think about ourselves in the world, and how we relate to an organisation.

BT: What’s the major influence in terms of how people deal with the change? Is it how well people get on in their jobs – whether they actually care about the job or their co-workers?

AR: There’s a wide range of consequences that we need to think about. One is certainly performance – and organisations are often only concerned with performance. Something important for organisations to think about is also wellbeing and how people feel about being at work, because that translates into outside life as well, how they feel about and treat family … There’s also physical health and job attitudes and a whole range of (other) consequences that we need to manage when dealing with organisational change.

BT: So how do we deal with that change? How should it be presented to the people who have to implement it?

AR: People who are implementing change are often lower-level supervisors – the people at the coalface, so to speak. It’s really important that there’s clear communication between strategic management – the senior leadership team – and also the supervisory leaders. You need to be clear as a supervisor, “Well, why are we doing this change? What does it mean for myself and my team?” That needs to be communicated clearly and realistically to everyday employees.

BT: Yet those employees may be cynical about it. They’ve seen it all before and it’s yet another change from the top management team that’s being imposed. How do you get away from that?

AR: Cynicism is a real challenge in organisational changes. Some of my own research suggests that people’s past change history in an organisation – how they feel they’ve been treated in the past in previous changes – has a really important impact on attitudes such as cynicism and commitment to change. The history of our experience of change in an organisation has big consequences for the future. If you get something wrong today in change management, that has big impacts, long term, for change in the future as well.

BT: What are some of the common change management mistakes?

AR: Probably the most common mistake is under-communicating. Thinking that a hard truth will make people anxious, scared, resentful and angry, whereas research suggests that it’s better to tell the hard truth and let people into the secret. Ultimately, they will react better with that knowledge, as opposed to not knowing anything, which tends to generate rumours and gossip, and really scares people in organisations.

BT: People who turn up and do the job should just be told the hard truth?

AR: People should absolutely be told the hard truth, because if they’re not, they’ll probably come up with something worse through sharing rumours and trying to get some information. The hard truth might be better than what they’ll come up with themselves. I think it’s really important to recognise that more communication is better, even when it’s not something that you feel that people will want to hear.

BT: How about feedback as well? Should middle management be listening to the people who are implementing change?

AR: A lot of recent thinking suggests that people who resist change are cynical because they see problems with how change will be implemented, but they may want to contribute positively, by saying, “Wait a minute, that’s not going to work!” It’s important that managers and organisations recognise that the people doing the work actually have a really valuable insight into whether things may or may not work. A lot of what we call resistance is actually constructive criticism trying to make change work properly.

BT: Maybe staff on the ground has a much better idea of how it’s going to be implemented. Should the top management team then be listening to that feedback?

AR: It’s a real challenge finding a balance between identifying feedback that is constructive versus instances where people might just be resisting or feeling negative towards change because maybe they’ve had a bad experience in the past. But I think it’s important to recognise that sometimes people actually have legitimate points to make and are not just resisting for the sake of it.

BT: In your research, you must have talked to a large number of companies that have been undergoing change. Have there been any successful strategies that have really stood out for making change work?

AR: What we found works well is not just from relying on one type of formal change. For example, in some recent research I did on a merger in the Philippines, the organisation relied on two formal communication (information) sessions and that was pretty much their entire change management strategy. You can already see that probably is not going to be comprehensive enough.

When managing communication issues, it’s important to think about managing formal communication and
providing informal communication to your employees on an ongoing basis. It's important to use mixed and varied approaches to managing change, and not think that a one-time approach is going to work. Change is a process, and therefore we need to be continually managing and communicating and refining our strategy in order to make change a success.

**BT:** Often the top management team decides what’s going to happen, and then just makes one or two announcements about it. But should they be talking about it with middle management before they’ve made any decisions? In some cultures, that may be seen as a sign of weakness.

**AR:** The issue of culture is interesting. Increasingly, globalisation means that we have to be very careful about making blanket statements. In terms of organisational change, obviously national cultures will influence communication. But it’s safe to say that in most cultures, it’s important to continually communicate with people. You might vary how you approach communication, depending on a culture, but in most cultures, people want ongoing information and updates.

**BT:** The workplace is a very sociable place. Most people get on well with their boss. So is there an “emperor’s new clothes” problem of suggesting a change won’t work? “How do I tell you when I get on with you really well?”

**AR:** That’s right. We develop social relationships with people in the workplace that can be an impediment to change. So we don’t want to put a hand up and say, “Sorry boss, the approach you’ve outlined is never going to work and I don’t like it.” There are all these complexities because we’re trying to maintain positive working relationships during times of change. We have to balance maintaining the relationship with trying to make constructive comments about change.

**BT:** Beyond the sociable aspect of work, there are the KPIs (key performance indicators) in the appraisal system on which people are evaluated at the end of the year. How do people actually deal with implementing a change that they may not believe in, but knowing that it’s got to be good at the same time?

**AR:** We’re all in a very difficult position where ultimately we have to implement these changes in order to perform, get paid and have job security.

An important point for the strategic leadership of organisational change is having enough formal mechanisms, where people can actually participate and have a voice in change processes, giving them a say in how change is implemented and what will happen. Doing this means using all the tacit knowledge and expertise that exists in an organisation. So we’re not thinking that we know everything before we go into a change; we’re actually using the expertise that we have.

**BT:** I understand that you’ve also come across really positive experiences to change, of organisations that have done it really well?

**AR:** There are organisations that I’ve seen do the simple things well. In terms of designing organisational change, for example, I’ve seen really large organisations with more than 4000 people actually go out into regional Queensland and talk to work groups and employees. You wouldn’t typically expect these organisations to be providing feedback on large-scale changes. One particular organisation went out and consulted with gangs of road workers, and got their perspectives on what needed to change and how change should be introduced in that particular company. For me that was a really encouraging and positive approach. We got some really great information from those groups of people – they provided unique knowledge about how to manage change for different groups of employees in that organisation.

**BT:** And what was the impact of that? Was the change better implemented and did people feel engaged?

**AR:** What we learned is that there’s no one-size approach that kind of fits all organisations and all employees. It’s really important to recognise when you work with different groups of employees, you might need to do things slightly differently to get organisational change to be accepted and to work for that group of people.

**BT:** The approaches need to be tailored for different work groups – those in the office and those road workers – then?

**AR:** Exactly. The same approach won’t work for both groups because they’re not facing the same challenges; they don’t work in the same environment; they have different educational backgrounds and interests. We need to take account of those different backgrounds when thinking about implementing change successfully.

**BT:** Finally, if we really want to sum up how top management teams should approach change, are we saying that top management teams should listen to staff on the ground?

**AR:** Absolutely. Communicate, listen to what your people have to say, and also try to recognise that you have a big impact as a top manager in people’s attitudes and uncertainty to change, and ultimately, how people adjust to it.
Belinda Gibson was deputy chair of the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) from 2010 to 2013, having joined as a commissioner in 2007. She also served on the Financial Reporting Council and the Corporations and Markets Advisory Committee.

At ASIC, Gibson had responsibility for the oversight of Australia's capital markets, supervision of exchange traded markets and brokers, and improvements in disclosure and corporate governance. Initiatives under her leadership resulted in lower fees and improved services for Australians who rely on financial markets.

From 1987 until joining ASIC, Gibson was a corporate law partner at Mallesons Stephen Jaques, specialising in transactional advice and corporate governance issues. Gibson spoke to Knowledge@Australian School of Business.

An edited transcript of this interview follows.

Geoffrey Garrett: Welcome to the ASB video series on leadership. In this series, we're interviewing some of our adjunct professors, who are very senior business leaders in Australia and internationally, and are actively involved in our education program, both by teaching our students and by mentoring them. Today's interview is by my colleague Chris Styles, deputy ASB dean and director of the Australian Graduate School of Management. Chris is interviewing Belinda Gibson, who recently retired as deputy chair of ASIC.

Belinda was responsible for the oversight of all Australian capital markets. I'm sure you'll enjoy this interview with Belinda as she reflects on a career of leadership, not only in the public service but in the private sector, where she was a very prominent attorney in Australia.

Chris Styles: Thanks Belinda, for being part of our leadership series. Let me jump into your time at ASIC, which of course is our major regulator in Australia. The time that you were there was really characterised by a lot of change and reform, much of which you drove. What did you find when you arrived at ASIC that was really driving that change?

Belinda Gibson: When I arrived at ASIC, it was November of 2007. I think the market peaked the week I arrived, and it went down fairly fast after that, which I don't think was me and I don't think was Australia; I think it was the global market. So 2008 [required] a huge preoccupation with the challenges of a folding market. When I arrived, the commission had [already] decided it was a time for change, even before the crisis. We wanted to make ASIC much more market-facing, [so] that instead of being driven by internal structures, [it would be] driven by what the market wanted. So, we did a very large structural change at a time of extreme market difficulties, shall we say.

Styles: What other types of challenges were there, particularly for you as a leader in the organisation?

Gibson: Leadership challenges for me, if I might speak from a personal point of view to start with. I'd come from a world as a lawyer, in a large law firm, but where you closely managed a small number of people – 10, maximum 20, on a transaction – to a world where at times I had 20 direct reports, and at all times I had 500 or 600 people in that sphere. And that's a huge personal challenge to lead and to really learn to lead that many people. Within ASIC, those sorts of leadership challenges are learning about communication; you enter a new organisation that has its own dynamics and its own existing infrastructure, and you have to come to terms with that. You might want to build change into it, but you can't do a wholesale change; you have to work within that. And that took some adaptation.

Styles: So how did you adapt? You've talked about a very different environment in Mallesons, where you were a partner, to your role in ASIC. How did you go about adapting to that different environment? Was that a conscious thing, or was it something that you reflected on, or was it something that you learned your way through?

Gibson: I learned my way through. I looked to others to assist – the [then] chairman of ASIC, Tony D'Aloisio, was an enormous guiding influence. Other commissioners, other senior executives in other organisations that you could talk to in generic terms about how you do this, and learn from others. I learned the value of that probably more than ever.

Styles: The transition from being a partner in a law firm to ASIC, what drove that in terms of your career? I mean, sometimes our careers are well planned, sometimes it's happenstance. How did you, and why did you, make that shift from one to the other?

Gibson: It was to a large extent happenstance that there was a knock on the door [asking]: “Belinda, what would you think about moving down here?” Up here, you might say. It was at a time when I was ready for a change, ready for a challenge, ready to do something that was going to utilise all my skills. I'd been at Mallesons 25 years, I'd been a partner for 20 and it was just time for a change. It was also time, and an opportunity to give something back to the wider community. I've done a lot for specific clients, I've done a lot for the firm, I've done quite well myself along the way; and this was a chance to help the market more broadly, which was my skill set.

Styles: If we go back to the early part of your career and particularly your education, how do you think your education set you up for your career, or what sorts of things did it give you that now, on reflection, you've drawn upon?

Gibson: Having been at ASIC, my economics degree suddenly came out of the bottom drawer. I suppose I hadn't really drawn on that terribly much over the years as a practising lawyer, or even over the years managing the law firm. But when you're suddenly talking about crisis and prudential requirements and market influences, that degree came back with bells on, I might say.

My law course set a framework, a way of thinking. I did some courses when I was at Mallesons, just week-long courses – one at Harvard on negotiation, which I think has to be the most valuable course I've ever done in my life in terms of structures, and in terms of thinking about yourself, and learning. I did another one on joint ventures at INSEAD, again just a week or two. But they make you think, and they give you a framework, and that's good.

I did get some coaching when I was at ASIC on managing a large number of people. I just felt I needed some assistance, particularly at a time when we were a couple of commissioners short. And that was of great value. I think I've learnt how much, how good it is to learn, and to seek assistance.

Styles: So when you were in the law firm and you became a partner, then you started leading people, and you really took responsibility for not only their outcomes but also their own development. What sort of approach did you take.
**Number Crunch**

In Australia, 70% of workers are employed full-time.

In the 1980s, IBM was one of the first companies to offer employees a work-from-home option.

40% of vacancies are filled by employee referral programs in companies such as Deloitte.

In a recent Forrester Research study, 6 out of 10 executives claimed that projects with an external talent cloud were “emerging and expanding” in their company.

50% of the German workforce is now employed on a contract, casual or freelance basis.

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**Gibson:** That was also a journey for me. I think as I started and through my career, it was very much [a case of] lead by example, and not spend a lot of time with people, talking to them about their advancement as opposed to their work on particular projects. As you get older, you start to think, “Well, I’m learning from that; I can give some, too.” So, and especially at ASIC, I spent a lot of time talking to people about their careers and where they might go, and giving them the benefit of my thoughts.

**Styles:** That’s really signalling a move away from the technical or the content part of one’s job, whether it be in a law firm or in ASIC, and more [towards] the managing people part. Would you say that as you went through your career, you were spending more and more time on the people part rather than just the content part?

**Gibson:** Absolutely. And that’s an element of my maturing; it’s an element of progressing, that as you get higher up the tree, as it were, you can’t manage the micro nearly as much, and you need to do better at helping those doing the micro [work] do better at it. So it’s an element of self-help, but it is an element of maturing to work out how you’re going to get the best outcomes.

**Styles:** Well, that’s all about your leadership style and your development. You’ve been able to observe in your career a lot of business style and your development. You’ve been able to observe in your career a lot of business style and your development.

**Styles:** Well, that’s the future. What would your advice be to people who are developing careers, increasingly having more responsibility and greater leadership roles? What advice, based on your experience and what you see ahead, would you give them?

**Gibson:** Mentors are great. Coaches are good. Education and framework, I think, is important. I don’t want to sound like an ad for a business school ... But the education I’ve done in that regard gives a framework to see how to establish things, and how to carry forward, and it gives you a framework to analyse what you’re doing and what others might do, and what, if you like, good practice might be.

The second one, on a more personal level, would be to be objective about what you’re doing and how you’re doing; that people give you hints along the way, people say things along the way that you think, “I’m doing really well”, but actually, they might just be saying that.

So the study helps you be objective, but be objective. And seek challenge, I think, is the other one; don’t get too comfy.

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**SOURCE:** BUSINESS THINK

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**Gibson:** The challenge, I think, for business leaders today is the engagement with the market, by which I mean not customers so much as the securities market, the financial markets, the newspapers, and I include in that blog sites and whatever. That’s the ground that’s shifting enormously. And some handle it better than others. And I’m not talking about the sort of incidents of continuous disclosure breaches or otherwise; it’s the wider picture of how you communicate. You are expected to communicate with a much greater array of stakeholders, investors, workers, and so on.

**Styles:** Well, that’s the future. What would your advice be to people who are developing careers, increasingly having more responsibility and greater leadership roles? What advice, based on your experience and what you see ahead, would you give them?

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**Dr Rose Trevelyan** is the Program Director of AGSM’s Leading Change with Impact program. She is both an experienced practitioner and academic concentrating her research in change management, cultural transformation and leadership effectiveness, having published in international journals.
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