

That's what **FRIENDS** are for

Dave Andrew looks at how a 'client's friend' can play a vital, even decisive, role in contributing to the success of a major change initiative



The Beatles told us money couldn't buy love. Well, maybe that's true. But it can certainly buy a special and extremely valuable kind of friendship; at least if you are about to embark on a major change programme and are – possibly justifiably – worried about the possibility of it not living up to expectations.

Unfortunately the vast majority of change programmes don't live up to expectations. This doesn't necessarily mean they fail completely; but even change projects that don't completely fail may experience compromises and

reductions in the achieving of overall objectives, and of course such compromises are inevitably minor failures.

What is the link between friendship and the failure risk of change projects?

To understand this we need to look in more detail at why all types of change projects carry a significant risk of failure. The risk applies to change projects run by organisations of all sizes, but clearly the financial risk of failure is all the greater the larger the organisation. We should also bear in mind that where public money is being spent, as in a change project carried out by a department of central or local government, a failure in the change project will be regarded especially seriously. Yet failure of major projects of all kinds – and change projects in particular – are extremely serious for both private sector and public sector organisations.

Why are change projects so much at risk of failure?



Ultimately there are probably as many reasons for this as there are unsuccessful change projects, but some generalisation is possible. In practice, the following are the most likely reasons for change projects to fail:

- Inadequate initial attention has been devoted to identifying the desired business outcomes of the change project. There is a pressing need for clear thought here, but often the very fact that the organisation needs to engineer the change, while at the same time continuing to deliver a 'business as usual' service to its customers, places the organisation in something of a quandary. Clear thought is always more difficult when the organisation cannot take 'time

Failure of major projects are extremely serious for both private and public sector

out' from its everyday activities in order to pursue the clear thought in a tranquil and uncluttered state of being.

- There has been insufficient effort to communicate to stakeholders exactly why these business outcomes really matter.
- There is often a temptation to assume that the technology involved in the change project can shoulder more of the burden of change than it actually can in practice. In fact, while technology can be a hugely powerful agent to put change into practice, it is essentially a neutral resource in that it must be firmly directed to achieve a particular objective; it won't do so automatically. Using technology is no replacement for strong, energetic and flexible control of the project.
- The person at the organisation appointed to run the change project may not be experienced at making change happen. Most organisations will appoint what is generally referred to in the public sector as a 'senior responsible owner' (SRO) who will be responsible and accountable for the success of the change project. He or she will usually be given considerable authority. However, one basic problem that often arises is that SROs are frequently appointed from within the organisation. They may be very good at their job, but their normal job is likely to be managing the business rather than implementing change within it. In practice, they may be too close to how things currently function and to internal politics to be objective about radical alternatives.
- Even if the SRO is in fact a good choice for the task in hand, there is still the practical danger that he or she won't be given enough time to get the job done properly. Unfortunately the way many organisations work is that when people are given new responsibilities these are simply added to the list of the person's

current responsibilities. It takes a brave organisation to be able to say to an SRO, in effect, 'during this particular period we want you to forget about your usual daily tasks and devote yourself totally to this project without distraction'.

- There may be a basic unwillingness at the organisation to face up to the magnitude of the change. Just because a major change project can be summarised briefly as an item on the agenda of an important internal meeting does not mean that carrying out the project will be easy. A common problem is that the demands of the project are simply not fully understood at the outset by the organisation, with the result that the resources devoted to the project may be inadequate, and the thinking and planning time extended to the change project insufficient to give it a real chance of success.

Overall, the fundamental problem an organisation faces when it embarks on a major change programme is that there is a need to change the existing business while continuing to operate it. It is difficult to think of a good analogy for this complex challenge, partly because the challenge is not only complex but also unique. A surgeon who performs an operation on a patient will have the luxury of the patient being not only still but also very likely under an anaesthetic. Embarking on a major change programme at an organisation is rather like a surgeon trying to perform a complex operation on a patient who is not only NOT under an anaesthetic but is also still running about!

If this sounds like an enormously difficult task, that's not surprising, because it is. And this is precisely why an organisation is likely to benefit from having access to a 'client's friend': a highly able, experienced professional who can advise the client on the general strategy, or the specific tactics, of the entire change process.

The fundamental rationale behind the principle of the client's friend is that the senior responsible owner, and his or her team at the organisation, are probably not full time, professional change managers. The client's friend, however, will be, and will also bring a very significant level of independence and objectivity; the same kind of independence and objectivity that a very good non-executive director can bring.

Essential skills

The kind of skills that make a good client's friend are very much the skills first-rate management consultants are likely to possess, particularly consultants who have extensive experience of delivering business change not just advising on it. Technology experience is less important than the fact that the management consultant has a background involving practical responsibility for delivering change programmes. Furthermore, while the client's friend can indeed be just one person, this does not need to be the case. The 'job description' can also encapsulate a small group of people whose job, very simply, is to bat on the side of the client and help the client plan the change strategy, put it into practice, and deal with suppliers along the way.

The client's friend system can be enormously powerful and effective

The client's friend system can be enormously powerful and effective. The main advantage is precisely what you would imagine it to be, namely that the client who is ultimately responsible for the change no longer needs to feel faced with a daunting and even, on occasion, terrifying challenge. Instead the client's friend brings a level of proven expertise to the business of running the project and injects a very considerable level of likelihood that the project will be a success.

Ultimately, the client's friend will offer the SRO support and assistance with every aspect of the project from start to finish. However, areas where the client's friend can be particularly helpful are likely to include the following:

- Initial planning. Organisations





Hiring a client's friend is, in effect, a form of insurance

often, procurement processes can feel as if they are driven by an unholy alliance of technology and procurement specialists who take a positive delight in formulating contracts which non-technical business leaders don't actually understand and feel ill-equipped to challenge. Organisations are certainly justified in questioning whether procurement arrangements they can't understand are likely to be in their interests. The client's friend can insist to any supplier that contracts must be very clear and very straightforward and will have no compunction about denying supplier status to any suppliers who don't play ball.

often need assistance with the overall strategy of the initiative, in particular the realistic planning of key business objectives. A definitely non-trivial factor here is the correct presentation and writing up of plans. It's far too common for long, turgid planning documents to be prepared that focus in laborious and dreary detail on the intended processes of the change initiative rather than detailing clear statements of what will be delivered, in what timescale, and what will be achieved. Just as there is often a direct correlation between the expense of a celebrity's marriage and the brevity of the marriage, there is frequently a similar correlation between the length and verbosity of planning documents and the likelihood of failure of the project.

- Helping an organisation avoid projects which vaguely promise 'jam tomorrow' rather than clearly defining a realistic delivery of benefits to a schedule which aligns with operational priorities.
- Setting the change issues in context in language which the organisation's leaders understand and which readily enables them to see what kind of project is being put together and why they should buy into it.
- Arranging accurate alignment of technology options to outcomes. It is very easy, as we have seen, for organisations to generate an exaggerated concept of what technology can deliver for them.
- Accurate timetabling. How many times in business does one hear people say we were really foolish with our initial plans for the timescale of our change management initiative; we allocated far too much time for the initiative and we pulled it off in about half the time we'd allocated! These words have probably never been uttered honestly since the dawn of time. In practice, the best-laid plans of mice and men, whether they go astray or not, almost always take longer to carry out than was initially hoped. A client's friend will be very realistic about timescales, and if he or she comes back and tells you that the project in question is going to take about twice as long as you envisaged, don't be surprised because it probably will.
- Addressing the right procurement issues. This is an area where the client's friend, who is – at least at one level – paid to be cynical, can be especially useful. All too

- The client's friend can ensure that suitable management structures are put in place for tracking progress and identifying key decisions and their consequences. It's too easy for the project to be managed by an unwieldy project Board that draws together all the stakeholders but is prone to indulge in extensive discussions without making very much happen that is truly positive. Indeed, the phenomenon of 'analysis paralysis' can be a major problem: so much energy is expended on analysing what is going on that not enough does go on.

- The client's friend will help the organisation to focus less on processes and more on achieved and delivered benefits. The client's friend, in effect, will cut to the chase, which is something that all change programmes need to do if they are likely to work.

Cost implications

What about the cost of using a client's friend? This will of course depend on the size of the project that is being supported and the scale of the involvement the organisation needs from the client's friend. But it's best to hire the friend at the very outset and keep the individual or team in place until the initiative has been brought home to a successful conclusion.

Organisations should bear in mind that hiring a client's friend is, in effect, a form of insurance that should dramatically increase the chances of the initiative being successful. For this reason, an expenditure of about two percent of the overall cost of the initiative itself is by no means unreasonable as a ball-park figure for the cost of using a client's friend. While it is true that a client's friend will often consist of a number of people rather than only one, a reputable consultancy that offers a client's friend service should be able to justify its precise resource allocation very convincingly to the organisation. Beware of consultancies that appear to be taking a positive delight in maximising the number of people involved with the project.

There is a growing belief in both the private and public sector that paying to obtain such support for a

major initiative is not a sign of weakness but rather a sign of resourcefulness and good forward planning. Indeed, the National Audit Office (NAO), which has the job of ensuring that the government gets value for money from its expenditures, has specifically suggested that government departments should spend some part of their budget for a major change initiative on getting support for that initiative. Private sector organisations could usefully learn from this suggestion.

The cost of hiring a client's friend is therefore likely to be something that it is in an organisation's interest to incur, as long as a client's friend is chosen that seems to empathise with the project and is convincing from the outset as a potential ally. Besides, the cost of engaging a client's friend is likely to be fairly small compared with

the dangers of a major change initiative running into significant budgetary and time overruns.

But having a client's friend on board is much more than just a kind of insurance policy. It's also potentially a massive boost to confidence and a real catalyst for making the project go according to plan. It's so useful and comforting, for example, in a meeting with a highly-technical supplier, to have a client's friend on board who really speaks the supplier's language but is batting for you, and will score plenty of sixes and prevent you getting stumped.

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