

MANAGEMENT



Alistair Lloyd

Change management: leaning in to discomfort

6 May, 2019



The only thing constant in government is change.

Discomfort is often associated with fear, risk and danger, and people at all professional levels often try to avoid it.

However, discomfort doesn't always have to mean angst. It's about facing up to ambiguity and uncertainty to build solid foundations for change. A healthy level of discomfort is what individuals, teams and organisations need to feel to achieve better results, particularly when it comes to change management.

In the government sector, change is constant. Change in government is driven by the need for greater community focus, increased productivity or streamlining of projects. Understanding the best way to manage change in the sector is more important than ever before. You just need to look across local, state and federal {

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how many changes are – and will be – driven by advances in technology, and the changes in how people choose to engage with government services.

Here are some key ways organisations can ensure that discomfort is managed through the change process.

- **Test an organisation's cultural appetite for discomfort**

Understanding an organisation's appetite for discomfort is a lot like understanding someone's pain threshold – it varies from person to person. Organisations need to understand what level their people are willing to go through. It's important for leaders to not overdo it. Leaders shouldn't be saying to their people, "This is going to hurt, so brace yourself"; change shouldn't be like going to the dentist.

To find your organisation's cultural appetite for discomfort, it's important to learn how to empower individuals and teams. When people are the agents of change, and feel they are in control rather than it being forced upon them, they will begin to feel more comfortable – reaching a 'happy medium' of discomfort.

Organisations can further mitigate discomfort by putting people in touch with a change agent they can trust – someone who is a trusted peer, who can support and guide them along the way. This is also a critical factor in preventing an organisation from going above its discomfort threshold.

- **Have the uncomfortable conversations**

Change communications shouldn't be one-way. As a leader, listen to the feedback. Whether it involves surveys, consultation sessions or one-on-ones, these tools can help you identify where people might be avoiding discomfort or just tuning out.

These sessions can also provide a supportive environment for conversations. A lot of the time, vocal disagreement may mean that an individual isn't understanding the change. Another reoccurring theme when people are disengaged or rejecting change is because they have 'seen it all before'. Their views are based on their experiences – change hasn't delivered on promises, has disrupted processes and systems, or has made things worse. Leaders need to engage in these sometimes uncomfortable situations and help those people feel listened to and empowered, rather than threatened.

However, having conversations is not just so leaders can help their people understand change. As leaders, asking people their opinion is simple, but often falls off our radar. Leaders need to be open to feedback so they know what could be done differently and sharing their observations and experiences to inform the change process.

- **Listen for silence**

When pockets within an organisation become silent, it can signal that people are being avoidant or complacent and that they may not have the level of discomfort required to take part in the change process. It's important to have a degree of empathy and try to understand why this has occurred. Seek out the quiet ones and ask them why.

Of course, silence can also indicate that a project has gone well. People can be quick to call out what went wrong but celebrating successes can be missed. Managers need to acknowledge the wins along the way and congratulate those that had the difficult, transparent conversations to achieve the right outcome. Over time, sharing the stories of change done well will create a new narrative around what change means; this may hurt a little, but it'll be worth it.

Alistair Lloyd is Executive Director Strategic Partnerships and Program Management for the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority (ESTA). Alistair has 20 years of experience working in leadership roles involving business transformation, organisational change and strategy development and implementation.

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Alison Lalieu says:

May 15, 2019 at 4:23 pm

Thank you for this well written article. It was of interest to me as I have recently co- authored a new EQ report (with the global Six Seconds network), called the SEI LTC (survey of Emotional Intelligence- Leading Through Change) which measures Change Readiness – our capacity to navigate and lead well through uncertainty.

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