

Management of organizational change – Part six – **Managing the transition**

This article is the sixth in a series dealing with the management of change in organizations. In the previous two, we concentrated on the phase of awakening to the need for change and on the dynamics of communication. In this article, we examine problems associated to the transition phase and suggest a number of measures for dealing with them.



The managerial tradition...

Once the awakening phase has been successfully completed, management must then face the challenge of transition. Experience shows that having launched a change initiative, management often loses interest and turns to other projects. It acts as if, having taken the principal decisions and accepted the work plan, it is enough to delegate the follow-up to lower levels in the organization for the “magic” to work.

While this approach is appropriate for everyday operations, it has unfortunately proved inadequate for managing change, and often detrimental to achieving its objectives. Indeed, the staff of the organization will often interpret this type of behaviour as a change in priority on the part of management and, in turn, will tend to lose interest. However, once the

decisions have been taken, the most difficult part remains to be carried out – *implementing the change*.

The transition period brings with it very specific challenges for which specific measures need to be foreseen, otherwise problems will soon arise and the desired change may be jeopardized.

Very often, having initiated a change process, management loses interest and turns to other projects

A sizeable challenge

To illustrate the nature of these challenges, let us take the example of the Police Department of Geneva, Switzerland,

which, in 2002 and 2003, needed to replace all computer applications throughout its information technology system at a cost of several million Swiss francs, affecting more than 1 200 of its 1 500-strong staff.

The new applications consisted of three main modules and their implementation was to take place in two major steps. The first, completed in

BY PIERRE COLLERETTE,
ROBERT SCHNEIDER,
AND PAUL LEGRIS

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the autumn of 2002, consisted of introducing the first main module which primarily affected the *gendarmerie* (roughly 750 officers). The second phase started in November 2003 and consisted of introducing the other two main modules, this time affecting the majority of the force.

The preparation and implementation of the project were entrusted to the officer in charge of information systems security, supported by a small project team, a number of partners and external suppliers. A major part of the challenge was to design suitable and effective applications and properly to plan their implementation. Another part of the challenge was to design a transition strategy which would help avoid the pitfalls encountered during a previous change programme a few years earlier, the objectives of which were only partially achieved and which had left a bitter taste in the organization.

Let us examine the components of the problem at the time the transition plan was devised. On the one hand, the system that was to be introduced included a more complete and better integrated range of functionalities than the existing system but, on the other hand, required significant adaptation on the part of the police officers. Indeed, the work of keyboarding information, following up files, retrieving data, and producing reports was to be altered substantially.

In addition, a number of factors complicated the operation even further:

- the police service could on no account be interrupted;
- the new database needed to be accessible at all times;
- at any moment during the transition period, which was to last about nine months, some police officers would be working with the old system and some with the new system, and
- technical problems were liable to arise at any time on account of the complexity of the computer infrastructure and security requirements.

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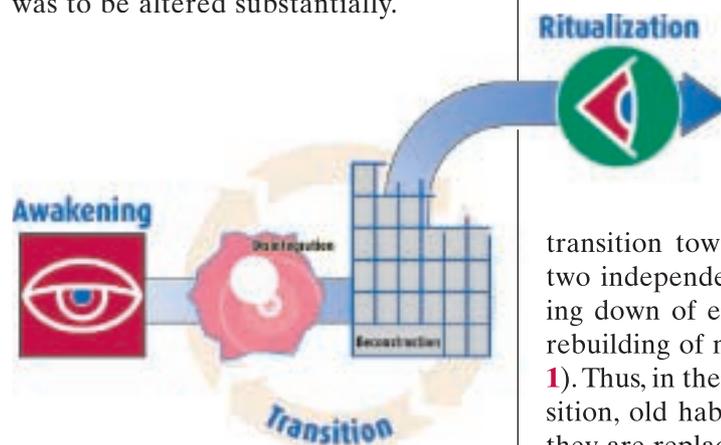
In the presence of so many constraints and sizeable risks, therefore, the project team had to

devise an approach that would enable the transition to run smoothly, new applications to be adopted quickly, that would not jeopardize public safety, would produce high-quality information, would not lead to a drop in productivity and not give rise to rejection.

Transition phenomena

Transition is the period when people have to give up their current practices and acquire others. It is an in-between period – old habits no longer have a place and new ones have not yet been assimilated. This transition towards new habits triggers two independent processes: the breaking down of existing practices and the rebuilding of new practices (see **Figure 1**). Thus, in the case of a successful transition, old habits gradually fade out as they are replaced by new ones.

Figure 1: The process of change



This period usually requires significant efforts on the part of those affected by the change and its duration can vary. While some surf through it painlessly – and sometimes even with equanimity and enthusiasm – others, on the other hand, suffer to varying degrees, and their numbers are even greater when there is no, or only passive, management of change.

Both at the level of the individual and on the collective and organizational level, this period is often characterized by *hesitation, ambiguity, turbulence, tensions, conflict, paradox, disorder, discontent, inefficiency and vulnerability of the company*. It is hardly surprising that, in a number of cases, things grind to a halt at this stage and people ask to return to their previous practices, adding that top management was mistaken or ill-prepared.

Three major phenomena usually loom behind these symptoms, bringing disruption into the organization: increased fatigue, confusion and a sense of failure.

Phew, what a burden... !

Adopting new practices forces people to concentrate more, to devote more energy to performing their work. They can no longer rely on their habits and must be more attentive to everything they do, which induces added fatigue. It is not surprising, therefore, that absenteeism often increases during this period.

Also, people need more time to perform their work and, as a result, some of them become overworked and overall productivity suffers. Although worrisome, this drop in productivity, often linked with a drop in quality, is unfortunately normal and predictable.

As this phenomenon is experienced by several people at the same time, it gives rise to a wave of discontent where many complain that they are

overwhelmed with work and becoming ever too tired to perform it. For some, this becomes like a descent into hell!

What havoc... !

When one needs to comply with new rules, old habits often seep to the surface and interfere with one's efforts to acquire new ones. There are no longer any bearings and one easily feels lost, not to mention that sometimes the processes themselves are still quite imperfect. This leads to confusion, worsened by the

growing fatigue.

Moreover, when facing new requirements, people often tend to concentrate on those aspects which they are able to control (or on mechanical aspects) and



overlook the rest, so that gaps begin to appear and confusion spreads to the collective and organizational level. People forget to do things that they should be doing or forget the information they were given and no longer know with whom they should interact to do the job or solve the problem.

For example, in one hospital where the Board had reorganized the duties of the top managers, eight months later several of them had discreetly returned to the old processes because they found

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the new ones too ambiguous. This was done with the best of intentions and with the sole purpose of ensuring that the hospital operated properly – it was their way of solving the confusion problem.

This phenomenon can considerably weaken the organization and lead to real anxiety among its members, who will then seek means, sometimes secretly, to restore some sense of balance.

It doesn't work... !

It takes some time to master the new practices, at least to the same extent as before. Thus, during the transition, not only will people take longer to do their work, but in addition the results will be imperfect, which will be frustrating both for the staff and for management.

Generally, when facing an unsuccessful outcome, people become impatient and blame the change and its promoters rather than assigning the cause to an unfinished learning process. They conclude that the change does not work and that it would be preferable to turn back in order to cut the damage. This phenomenon is all the more acute when people cast doubts on the value or relevance of the stated objectives.

Managing the transition

So, during the transition, the organization becomes more vulnerable and the quality of its products, resources and internal dynamics may suffer. To counter these risks, the organization should introduce methodical management and supervision arrangements, including exceptional measures, which will serve to

- limit fatigue;
- reduce sources of confusion and anxiety, and
- avoid the experience of failure.

The method adopted by the Geneva police project team for introducing the first module in the fall of 2002 provides a good example of the benefits of such close management. Among the measures used, a two-hour training on the new application was given to all police officers in small groups. It was followed the same day and the following days by individual tutoring by a colleague (designated as a COACH) who had become proficient with the new system.

This method, which may seem costly at first sight, enabled the new system to be implemented on schedule and within the planned budget, with a surprisingly high level of data quality, very few operational problems, and no negative impact on service to the public.

The following story is quite revealing. At the end of the morning training session, Officer X was clearly

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overwhelmed. Early afternoon already, his assigned COACH invited him to come and enter his first file into the new system. To avoid showing up, the officer first claimed he had an urgent phone call to make; at the second invitation, he said he had a file to discuss with a colleague, and so on, four times, until the fifth time he gave in and consented to sit in front of the screen.

The first file was entered with the help of the COACH and the exercise was painstaking; the second file, still with the help of the COACH, was difficult; the third file was easier, with scarcely any assistance; while the officer successfully completed the fourth one on his own. He was now able to operate alone and, if necessary, could get help from the COACH who remained nearby. Result: very limited fatigue, confusion avoided, experience of failure replaced by success! To his colleagues attending the training session the following days, he was able

Figure 2 – Desirable management actions during transition¹⁾

1) Adapted from *Le pilotage du changement* (Managing change).

to say, “I got the hang of it – and it works!”

On the basis of field experience, supported by research, we have singled out a number of particularly important practices for a successful transition:

- Management at the level above that where the change takes place should play an active and visible role throughout the transition period.
- The direct supervisors of individuals concerned should be put to contribution.
- Overall leadership of the operation should be entrusted to a top manager.
- There should be no change in priorities so long as the intended change has not been sufficiently integrated.
- A mechanism parallel to the usual management mechanisms is put in place to ensure that the project is managed and monitored.
- The affected staff members are provided with tangible, close and sustained support.
- Sufficient resources are made available to support the staff in its transition efforts.
- Progress is regularly monitored in order to identify gaps, which are then rapidly corrected.

These practices must be supported by specific management actions. Our research and experience point to there being about 20 more effective ones. They are summarized in **Figure 2** in the form of a checklist which can help the manager self-assess his way of operating.

	Agree	Rather agree	Agree more or less	Rather disagree	Disagree
1. The manager gets actively involved during the implementation phase.	5	4	3	2	1
2. The manager seeks the staff's views about the impact of change on them.	5	4	3	2	1
3. The manager seeks the views of customers/partners/peers about the impact of change on them.	5	4	3	2	1
4. The manager periodically assesses the progress of implementation.	5	4	3	2	1
5. The manager regularly informs staff, customers, peers and partners of the progress of implementation.	5	4	3	2	1
6. The manager is open to comments and endeavours and to following them up in order to facilitate the introduction of change.	5	4	3	2	1
7. The manager endeavours to correct problems as and when he or she becomes aware of them.	5	4	3	2	1
8. The manager allows those affected by the change to become actively involved in its implementation.	5	4	3	2	1
9. The manager regularly reminds staff about the objectives sought in introducing the change.	5	4	3	2	1
10. The manager makes sure he or she regularly visits the staff concerned.	5	4	3	2	1
11. The manager encourages the staff regularly throughout the transition period.	5	4	3	2	1
12. The manager shows understanding with regard to the difficulties encountered by some staff members.	5	4	3	2	1
13. The manager displays tolerance with regard to unintentional mistakes.	5	4	3	2	1
14. The manager points out successes to the staff.	5	4	3	2	1
15. The manager expresses his or her expectations clearly to the staff.	5	4	3	2	1
16. The manager answers questions clearly about the change.	5	4	3	2	1
17. The manager adjusts the organization of work in the unit to take the transition into account.	5	4	3	2	1
18. The manager clarifies the role of each individual in relation to the change.	5	4	3	2	1
19. The manager states his or her opinion clearly about the strengths and weaknesses of the change being introduced.	5	4	3	2	1
20. The manager provides <i>adequate and sufficient</i> means to facilitate the transition.	5	4	3	2	1
21. The rate of implementation is neither too fast, nor too slow.	5	4	3	2	1
Sub-totals					
Total score					

- If your score is in the 105 range:** you are actively managing the transition.
If your score is in the 77 range: you are moderately managing the transition.
If your score is in the 49 range: you are passively managing the transition.
If your score is in the 21 range: you are not managing the transition.

People become impatient and blame the change and its promoters rather than assigning the cause to an unfinished learning process

To a large extent, these actions involve systematic support and tutoring, which will limit the risk of fatigue, problems of confusion and instances of failure. By analogy, one could think of a patient who, after major surgery, is followed in intensive care; it is considered normal and desirable that “for transition period” he should benefit from close monitoring and support.

When this approach to transition is discussed with top managers, they often show reluctance, offering a range of arguments to elude the issue. A sample of these is given in **Figure 3** together with some counter-arguments.

We should remember that the likelihood of success is proportional to the supporting and follow-up efforts expended by management and that a direct contribution on the part of top management will often bring decisive added value.

The likelihood of success is proportional to the supporting and follow-up efforts expended by management

Ritualization and adjustments

As the transition unfolds, new practices stabilize, recriminations decrease, individuals gradually develop new habits and recover a higher degree of efficiency – we have now reached the stage of ritualization. The change has been assimilated to varying degrees depending on the individual, and we

Figure 3 – Arguments and counter-arguments



That kind of approach is too time-consuming !

It is true that it requires time. However, not applying it also requires a lot of time, since problems need to be put right afterwards and efforts spent on getting things moving again, not to mention the negative effects resulting from discontent and the failure to meet the objectives.

Middle management should be responsible, it is up to them to lead the change.

By no means should they be excluded. On the contrary, they should be closely associated. However, they will need the active leadership of top management, otherwise they will also turn to other activities... Often, in fact, middle managers do not really understand what top management is seeking to achieve, or are not fully convinced of the benefits of the new practices, or just don't know what to do to update them; they can hardly be expected to effectively and independently promote a change which they did not themselves initiate.

One should not treat people as children. They are paid to do their work and must in good faith adapt to new requirements.

It is not a matter of good or bad faith. It is a matter of natural and predictable human reactions which each of us experiences when living through change, even when this involves changes that we ourselves wished for!

Isn't it disproportionate ? Why go to all the trouble ?

It may indeed require a lot of energy, but it can be seen that, in general, management does too little, and research has shown the costly consequences of such inaction.

are now beyond the point of no return; reference to change has disappeared altogether and has been replaced by the concept of “our new operating mode”.

Nevertheless, there may remain a number of gremlins, gaps and incongruities trailing at management’s heels. Not everything is fully settled and adjustments need to be made to correct specific points and to harmonize the whole.

To reap the benefits of change, it is often necessary at this stage to review the new situation to identify any remaining shortcomings and correct them. In that respect, Orlikowsky and Tyre (1993) in a research paper on the introduction of technological innovations in industry, observed that short and repetitive cycles of implementation and ritualization were more effective than long cycles where one attempts to settle everything before the ritualization stage.

A plan for the Geneva Police

Here are now a few ideas of what could appear in the Geneva police’s plan to facilitate the transition period (several of these steps have actually been applied).

- The management committee should designate a top manager as being officially responsible for the change. In addition to acting as promoter of the project in different spheres, he will do the reporting to the management committee, propose the required corrective action and foster the contribution of other top managers.
- The project leader should report to this top manager, his role being to coordinate all of the practical work that needs to be done to ensure the project’s success. He should also be supported by a small full-time steering committee to carry out the design, implementation, troubleshooting and follow-up activities with the staff members of the organization.

- Station and squad duty officers should take charge of leading the change within their units with the support of the steering committee, and provide their staff with the required support, which will decrease as new practices come under satisfactory control.
- Station and squad duty officers should have detailed knowledge of the implementation plan and of what is expected of them well before the transition.
- Practical training should be provided to police officers just before the implementation stage in their units. Station and squad duty officers should have received the same training beforehand.
- A few officers more familiar with the new applications (the **C O A C H E S**) should provide support to their colleagues in the early days after the training to help them migrate smoothly and without experiencing a sense of failure.
- Top management should visit each unit in person in the course of the implementation, be it only for a few minutes at a time.
- On the basis of practical findings and direct interviews with police officers and management, the steering committee should conduct a regular review of the implementation and any problems encountered in order to correct them as they occur.



Photo: P. Krieger

Old Town, Geneva.

About the authors

Pierre Colletterte is a professor and researcher in management at the University of Quebec en Outaouais (Canada). He has published



several works in the fields of organizational change and management systems. In addition to his academic activities, he has held management positions and has operated as a consultant in numerous projects in Canada and Europe.

Université du Québec en Outaouais,
Gatineau (Québec), Canada J8X 3X7.

E-mail pierre.colletterte@uqo.ca



Robert Schneider heads his own consultancy firm, *the Centre de recherche et d'intervention en gestion* (CRIG). For more than 25 years he has been providing advice on planning issues, organizational change and corporate strategy. He has also taught, as a faculty member, in several university programmes, and has published several works and articles on organizations.

Centre de recherche et d'intervention en
gestion (CRIG).

E-mail crig.schneider@sympatico.ca



Paul Legris is a professor and researcher in information systems and management at the University of Quebec en Outaouais (Canada). He has more

than 20 years' experience in management positions in the fields of IT management and public administration. He is pursuing research on technology integration in corporate business processes.

Université du Québec en Outaouais,
Gatineau (Québec), Canada J8X 3X7.

E-mail paul.legris@uqo.ca

A direct contribution on the part of top management will often bring decisive added value

- A follow-up committee consisting of managers and a number of police officers could be established. With the project leader, their purpose would be to discuss the progress of implementation and make suggestions for adjusting the approach.
- An information tool in the form of a newsletter should be circulated regularly to inform the staff of the project's progress and of corrective action introduced.

These few measures are not unusual and are easy to implement. Nonetheless, few organizations are found to actually apply them. But when they do, results generally follow!

Conclusions

One recurring difficulty for the project leader in such situations is to secure the active contribution of top management. Even though they may know that it is an important and high-risk project, their natural tendency will be to let the project team do the work and devote themselves to something else. In fact, they are so strongly solicited from all parts that it is unrealistic to expect that they will become involved on their own initiative.

That is why the project leader will constantly have to return to them to seek their involvement and tell them very clearly what they should do and when they should do it. ■