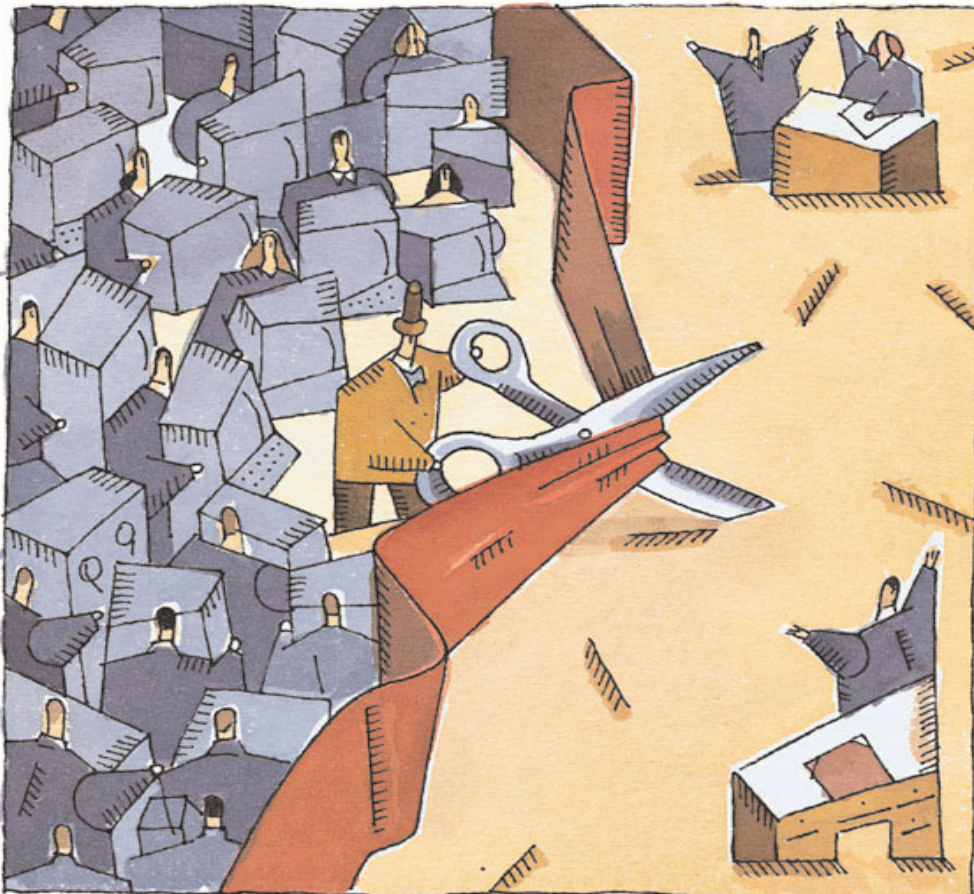


Adopting Change

by Robert Tobin

When a Canadian telecommunications giant made the decision to bring its own people together with those from two recently acquired companies and relocate them all to a new and distant facility, corporate management knew it wouldn't be easy. Apart from the difficulties of merging 600 people from six separate locations and three distinctly different cultures, the introduction of an open and highly collaborative work environment would be a dramatic change for professionals used to working in private spaces. Even before the project began, it raised some difficult questions for project leaders:



How can we get our people to “buy in” to our new workplace design? How can we involve them in a way that ensures the best possible result from our investment? And how do we engage our organization’s leaders in helping to make the new facility work?



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If any of this sounds remotely familiar—if your facilities and design team is being challenged by questions like these—then change management should be an integral part of your project Plan.

What's going on?

This example isn't all that unusual. There is a lot of change going on in business today, and it's influencing workplace design in significant ways. Leaders are looking for ways to stimulate innovation,

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improve customer satisfaction, streamline processes, and reduce cycle times. This often leads to a desire for new, interactive work behaviors, and a corresponding emphasis on the role of the physical workplace in enabling these

behaviors to flourish. In short corporations are pursuing dramatic new workplace directions to support desired improvements in organizational performance. They are setting aggressive standards for containing real estate costs, while also seeking to boost productivity and employee satisfaction.

A wide range of organizations from all sectors are creating new kinds of spaces to support new work behaviors. When asked to describe the characteristics they value most, most corporate leaders list some or all of the following attributes:

- They want spaces that encourage collaboration, promote interaction, and support teaming.
- They want spaces that are conducive to information exchange, knowledge management, and learning.
- They want spaces that allow informal relationships to develop, that promote access to people at all levels within the organization, and that advance free-flowing communication.
- Importantly, they want spaces that encourage a spirit of empowerment and a responsive, change-ready mindset.

As a result, more and more of office workers are being asked to move away from traditional offices and space plans. They are relocating to environments that place less emphasis on dedicated individual space and



more emphasis on collaborative workspaces and teaming areas that are flexible and can be rearranged quickly and economically.

People take it personally.

People care deeply about their workplace. Why wouldn't they, considering the large part of their lives they spend there? Changing the environment affects how people relate to others, and how they perceive themselves and their status. Every major space change in turn affects how people work and how they feel about their work.

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When dramatic workplace change takes place without active employee participation, the change is destined to fail. When employees do not feel adequately involved in the process of change, there is virtually no likelihood of achieving employee satisfaction. And where there is no satisfaction, there is no support for the change. The result? At best, the organizations; investment in its new environment will not generate a return. At worst, performance will decline and dissatisfaction will disrupt activity in the new environment.

Can expectations and attitudes be managed?

Workplace design is a powerful catalyst for organizational change, and a great tool for improving organizational effectiveness. But effectiveness doesn't happen by itself, it has to be nurtured. Even the best facility design won't bring about desired new work behaviors and processes alone. That's where culture change management comes in. And that's why workplace change and work culture change must be managed in tandem. Both must happen concurrently and in an integrated way.


Managing work culture change.

Workplace design that is undertaken to support or effect new cultural behaviors must be managed in a way that places a high priority on active employee involvement and communication. Dozens of client organizations throughout North America and the United Kingdom, with employee populations ranging in

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size from a few dozen people to just under 30,000, support this finding. All engagements—regardless of business size or type, indicate that across-the-board employee involvement is the essential ingredient for a successful transition to new work cultures in new work environments.

Through its move process, that telecommunications company (mentioned at the beginning of this article) became a more tight knit and cohesive organization. Their success, and the success of similar companies faced with these same issues, happened because of a top down commitment to make it work, and to make it work for everyone ... every step of the way.



The author believes there are five key factors that lead to success for organizations seeking to create new work environments to advance culture change in the workplace:

1. A connected message

Every employee has to understand how the new work environment relates directly to the organization's business direction. This message has to be simple and clear, and it needs to emphasize that the new environment is a strategic business tool that can positively affect performance and results.

2. Visible executive leadership

The people at the top need to set the tone for the entire project. Leaders must occupy the same kinds of spaces as everyone else in the organization and serve as models for others. And, they must set a direction for managers to follow in guiding and supporting employees throughout the change process.

3. Mid-management involvement

All management and supervisory personnel must play an active role in helping to smooth the transition for their employees. And they need to be equipped with the education, information and tools that will help them support their people through the change process.

4. Passionate user group

Colleagues are the best source of information, influence and inspiration. A representative group of employee opinion leaders should be convened and equipped to act as a focal point for project input and the dissemination of information.

5. Communications support

People need to know what is happening, and what will happen next. All communications must be complete, timely and produced on a continuous basis. Everyone should have a voice in the project process, including a way to ask questions, express opinions, and gain access to needed information.