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The business world has arguably seen more disruption in the last nine months than in the last nine years, bringing new and urgent demand for change. Initiatives are being launched by the dozen, adoption can't happen fast enough, and the stakes are higher than ever. In the midst of a Covid-induced recession, and with some industries on the brink of extinction, change isn't about fine-tuning — it's existential.

But traditional change management — often characterized by heavy process, lengthy timelines, and clunky rollouts — won't cut it right now. As organizations fundamentally rethink their product and service portfolios, reinvent their supply chains, pursue large-scale organizational restructuring, determine on the fly how to operate in a virtual world and rebuild to correct systemic racism from the ground up, the type of change management required in this moment is quick, agile, and (in many cases) virtual.

In the article that follows, I borrow principles from agile software development processes and draw on Korn Ferry's experience helping clients navigate change in recent months to reinvent the change management playbook. When facing crisis-driven change, consider these modifications to accelerate and streamline your process:

Declare your change vision.

The first step in well-known change management models is often to “create a sense of urgency.” It's safe to say that 2020 did that for us. Depending on the change you are pursuing, you may be able to skip straight to declaring a change vision that outlines a compelling vision of your future state, including the principles and values that will guide your response and provides specific actions you'll take. While details are preferable in these types of statements, companies should be confident they can deliver on any stated commitments in the change vision.

Moving quickly will mean that not everyone will be able to weigh in, and your change vision won't be perfect. But it will make clear where you stand, put an end to any speculation and buy you time (though not much) to develop a plan. Companies without a clear vision will spend too much time fielding stakeholder inquiries instead of tending to the necessary changes.

Empower the people who are best positioned to drive change from the beginning.

In times of crisis, senior leaders are almost always preoccupied with crisis management. CEOs can accelerate the change process by empowering a group of trusted experts deeper in the organization who can be redeployed full-time against the challenge at hand.

Companies should also look to build an external network of advisors who can quickly be tapped to weigh in on business threats where in-house expertise doesn't exist. Having these individuals at the ready will reduce your response time and lend credibility to the plans that are created. Your group of experts should include a change management advisor.

To eliminate friction and delays, the group of internal and external experts will also need to quickly align on guiding principles and open a physical or virtual “war room” to drive collaboration.

Encourage self-organizing teams to supplement your efforts.

When time is of the essence, these teams can help tackle challenges and opportunities as they see them, including those that aren't visible to leadership but are critical to supporting the change agenda.

For example, one such group emerged at IBM as employees transitioned to working from home earlier this year. They took it upon themselves to establish guiding principles to help make work and life easier for themselves and their colleagues, collaborating with business and HR leaders to evolve their efforts into a company-wide pledge. Within a matter of days, thousands of employees posted their individual pledges to an internal social media channel and CEO Arvind Krishna [shared his publicly on LinkedIn](#). This grassroots effort likely did more to accelerate the company's transition to productive remote work, and on a faster timeline, than any corporate-led initiative could have.

Similarly, many race-based employee resources groups self-organized following George Floyd's murder to launch grassroots efforts — from hosting “difficult conversations” to lobbying for Juneteenth to be formally recognized with a day off — that complemented top-down diversity and inclusion activities.

Use internal social channels and influencers to drive employee awareness and engagement.

For organizations operating virtually, internal social media and collaboration platforms are likely the fastest and most effective way to drive understanding of your change efforts and recruit the cadre of people who will champion the transformation.

If your CEO or other leaders are not active on these platforms, help them get up and running. One CEO that came under attack for non-inclusive practices following the racial justice protests recently began posting weekly Slack updates on his organization’s transformation efforts. This more informal channel created greater authenticity, enabled two-way dialogue and made it possible for the CEO to assess employee sentiment as the change efforts unfolded.

Employee influencers should be tapped to initiate online conversation around change efforts too, leveraging positive peer pressure to bring colleagues on board and creating a sense of virtual community around the initiative.

Embrace a “test-and-learn” approach.

Recent events have confirmed what many change leaders already knew — though your change vision is critical to driving alignment and buy-in, that picture will seldom stay the same from the start of a change project to its finish.

Even projects on short timelines, like the ones many companies undertook to roll out collaboration technologies in the spring, will need to respond to ongoing volatility internally and externally.

Against this reality, change managers will need to:

- Establish ongoing listening mechanisms that allow them to keep a pulse on employee and stakeholder sentiment.
- Welcome changing requirements, even late in the process, and modify change initiatives, or even the change vision itself, to ensure the work continues to be relevant and will deliver value.
- Lean more into the art of change management than the science, making determinations in the moment about which steps and tools are needed and which aren’t likely to add value that surpasses the lost value of delays.
- Adopt agile practices, such as daily stand-ups, that enable continuous coordination and evaluation of new variables as they surface.
- Use “fast-turn” and informal communications channels to update employees on strategy and what is needed from them.
- Leverage “sprints” that result in minimally viable change management resources that can be tested and evolved for continued relevance.

The fact that many companies are bringing employees back to work in phases allows for the agile iteration and continuous learning. They should take advantage by piloting change tools and processes on early returners and improving them with each subsequent wave.

Shift from long-term to short-term accountability.

The virtues of the shift from annual performance reviews to frequent check-ins should be apparent to leaders looking to drive rapid behavior change. More frequent feedback enables real-time coaching and allows managers to place the emphasis on what is most needed from the employee in that moment. Managers should focus on behaviors that will be critical for the future of work and will support change objectives, such as working successfully on a hybrid team, supporting coworker inclusion, practicing compassion and empathy and, yes, becoming more agile.

Reward programs can also help drive swift behavior change. Retailers instituted hazard and overtime pay to support their change efforts at the onset of Covid-19, and many of their employees rose to the occasion, taking on tough assignments to keep the business humming. Non-financial rewards play an even larger role in more challenging economic times. Korn Ferry research indicates that these non-financial rewards (e.g., meaningful work, career development, training, recognition) are more instrumental in talent engagement and retention than base pay and variable pay programs.

While anyone who tells you there is a way to achieve change management objectives overnight would be lying, there are ways to accelerate change in an increasingly fast-paced and uncertain world. Indeed, many of the world's most admired companies have figured it out. According to [Korn Ferry research](#), they are more likely than their peers to anticipate change, to consistently capture the next opportunity, to quickly fill people capability gaps and to quickly deploy teams to solve the challenge at hand.

Formal adoption of agile may or may not be right for your organization but now is the time to consider how to make change management work faster and harder. If we know anything for certain in this moment, it's that more change is coming.

Sarah Jensen Clayton is a senior client partner with Korn Ferry, leading the firm's Culture and Change capability in North America. Sarah's range of expertise includes leadership alignment, change management, culture transformation, M&A and restructuring, diversity and inclusion, employee engagement, and internal communications, among other things. She frequently works at the intersection of crisis management and culture transformation, helping leadership teams to recover reputation and drive behavioral change.
