

Abstract – Chapter 1

The art and science of navigating change

This is not a topic for the faint-hearted. Navigating change is a challenge that executives of all progressive organisations have to grapple with, as they strive to deal with constantly changing external pressures and at the same time improving performance and adapting capabilities and capacity to stay relevant. This challenge will be as important for executives leading large NGOs as for any other large organisation. NGOs sometimes struggle with a range of issues in terms of consistency, efficiency and of course efficacy. However, for a number of years, they have been making some important progress in the journey to become truly more professional, accountable and high performance organisations. Whilst many still have some way to go, they are faced with an ever-growing set of demands, in an external context that is more demanding and complicated.

This chapter is not intended to be a prescriptive methodology or step-by-step guide. Our intention, instead, is to encourage the reader to reflect more deeply on the demands and requirements of their particular situation, ambition and intended change. We aim to provide an accessible overview to a broad range of approaches, ideas, frameworks and concepts that are both informative and thought-provoking for executives who may be grappling with the challenges of navigating change. Almost all the topics and ideas covered apply to any major international organisation. However, we try to draw out those aspects that we feel are particularly relevant to the international development and humanitarian sectors. We deal with the basic ideas and requirements of managing any change – from smaller, contained initiatives though to large scale and complex transformational changes that are more directional, and hence less easy to define and plan.

The ideas outlined are structured along four levels of thinking. Level 1 addresses what we call “The basics”, not because they are easy, but because these are the foundations of almost any change initiative, big or small. Level 2 looks at a number of additional ideas when the complexity of the change is high. Level 3 takes a deeper dive into context, seeking to understand some more subtle aspects or circumstances that can have an important bearing on how individuals in an organization, or the organization at large will embrace or adapt to an intended change. Level 4 invites readers to explore the issues of timing and rhythm when shaping and leading successful change in large complex organisations – here we are more concerned with the “art” of change than the “science” of change. We conclude with some practical hints and tips that cut across all four levels.

The ideal, of course, is to have an organization that is constantly striving to reinvent itself from within, without the need for a large-scale drastic transformation. History tells us that relying on a mega transformation, to catch up with external pressures, is not always a recipe for success. However, if you do find yourself in a situation that demands a major strategic change in your organisation, we hope that this chapter will cast some light on your future journey, and hopefully increase the probability of success.