



Mr Sam Cheptoris, the minister for Water and Environment, talks to staff at the ministry boardroom. PHOTO/STEPHEN OTAGE



THE C-SUITE

with
Ian Ortega

Why organisational change is often hard to pull off

No one comes out of organisational change unscathed, and it is never a straight line, neither will it be a clean scene. It is as chaotic as it comes, regardless of all the effort that goes into making it a smooth process.

I have witnessed some fair amount of organisational change, many times as an observer and quite a few times as an orchestrator. In all those moments, I have always confirmed one thing – change is hard, not just for those affected by the change but even for the change agents.

I love Japanese author Haruki Murakami. In his book, *Kafka on the Shore*, he talks about the storm which is an equivalent of change: “And once the storm is over, you will not remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You will not even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you will not be the same person who walked in. That is what this storm is all about.”

No one comes out of organisational change unscathed, and it is never a straight line, neither will it be a clean scene. It is as chaotic as it comes, regardless of all the effort that goes into making it a smooth process. Yet, all organisations must often go through change and if they do not orchestrate the change internally, external situations will forcefully bear on them to change.

Yet, most people will usually

ask the question, “why do we need to change?” Especially in moments when the organisation is doing well, there is a rhythm, there is revenue coming in every month, and it is a growing number. You will have the legends in the organisation who have been there, seen it, done it all. And they cannot understand why someone would disrupt what is working. If you have a winning formula, why disrupt it. Is it change for change's sake?

But here is the thing – you must always change before you need to change. For when the time comes when you need to change, it could be too late to change.

I always use the example of the newspapers (self-criticism). It is not that the digital world landed abruptly. Newspapers were the first organisations to adopt computers, they were the first to jump on the internet. They knew about everything digital long before other industries got to know about it. They reported about it. Yet, there was the inertia to change. That unexplainable feeling where you know what needs to be done, but still fail to do it.

The course of change

The puzzle with change is on which course to take. Should one take a course of bold strokes? Or a long march? There is a number in

BOLD STROKES

Most change in organisations is often orchestrated at the top, that you change the top layer, and that layer will influence the other layers. You could call this – the bold stroke. That people wake up one day and a restructuring is announced – another bold stroke

organisational change, something around 70 to 80 percent of all organisational change efforts end up in failure. If a human being is a hard thing to change, then an organisation is the hardest thing to change.

An organisation is a system of many interconnected and interdependent functions, interests, people, prejudices, biases, fears. Most change in organisations is often orchestrated at the top, that you change the top layer, and that layer will influence the other layers. You could call this – the bold stroke. That people wake up one day and a restructuring is announced – another bold stroke.

Bold strokes break the inertia, but they require energy to sustain their gains. Because underneath the visible layers of the organisation, are the invisible layers – what they tend to call the iceberg theory. That you may do so much with the visible layer and fail to change an inch on the invisible layers thus the change efforts become futile. Bold strokes are preferred when you do not have the luxury of time, or the inertia in the organisation is too strong to be broken by other means.

Thus, instead of bold strokes, some change champions prefer the long march. If the bold stroke is revolutionary, the long march is evolutionary. It is a series of steps, activities, actions, sometimes small and even invisible

in nature, yet all interconnected to the big thing. But it is tiring, it is costly, and it takes time to see the outcomes. It is easy to lose track of the long march, it requires resilience. Its pain is similar to the death by a thousand paper cuts. It is the slow burn of an organisation becoming its true self.

Hybridisation

Thank goodness the chaps in business school invented a way of eating your cake and having it, aka the hybrid. That instead of a choice, you can have both. You can pursue some bold strokes, while underneath, you pursue the long march. The bold strokes become the visible elements of change, while the long march holds the invisible layer. That invisible layer could involve organisational culture change efforts, new incentives of what gets rewarded or punished.

Thus, I always think of organisational change as a marriage of structure and culture. Structure is the bold stroke, culture is the long march. Organisations must always review their structure to ensure they're future-proofed, and then review the culture to ensure that it can uphold the structure. Contrary to popular thought, structure sits on culture.

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