

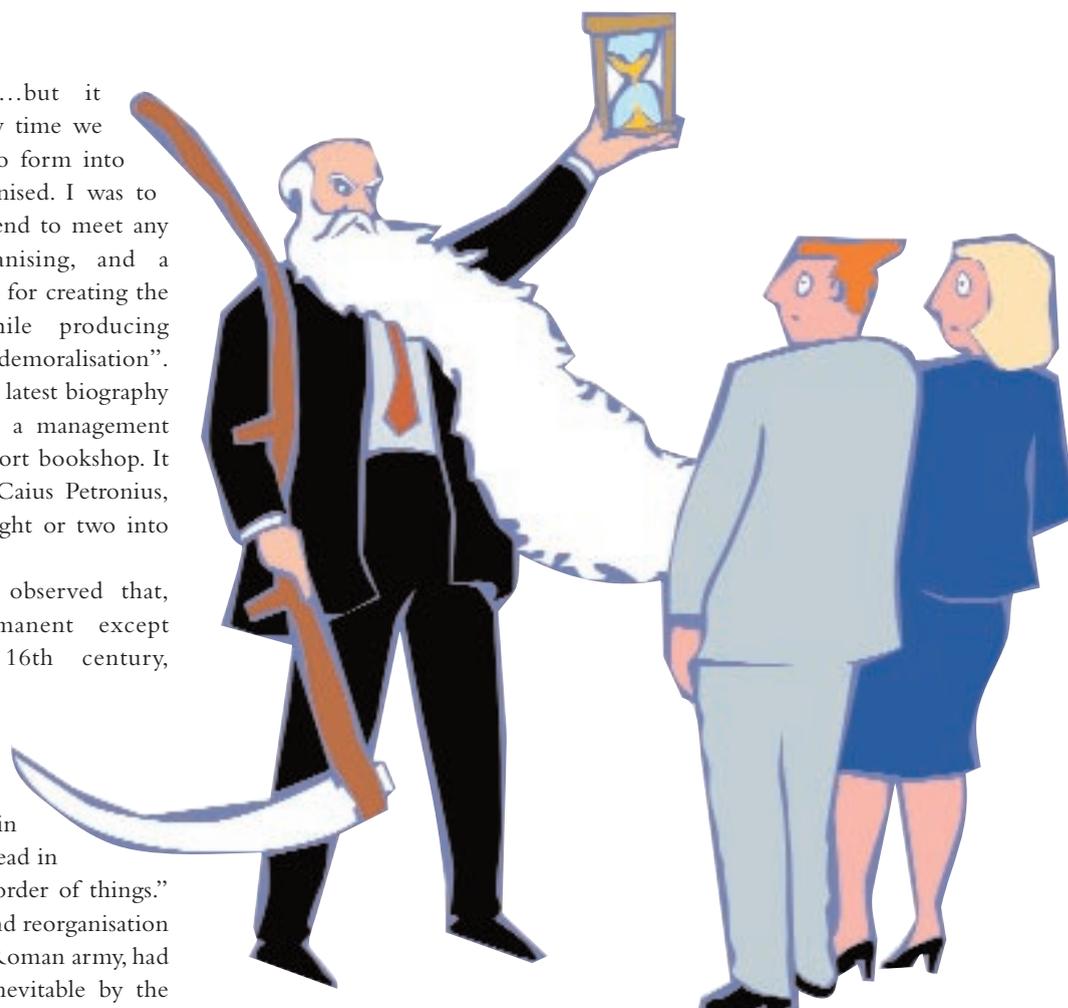
# Change is inevitable, misery is a choice

We live in a world of constant flux where pain is inevitable. Change can mean misery but this can be avoided, and the pain lessened, if change within a company is managed by focusing on people's behaviours, says **Dr Leandro Herrero**

**W**e trained hard...but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form into teams we would be reorganised. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganising, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralisation". This is not a quote from the latest biography of a retired CEO, or from a management consultant's book in an airport bookshop. It was written in AD 65 by Caius Petronius, who apparently had an insight or two into organisational development.

In 513 BC, Heraclitus observed that, "There is nothing permanent except change." And in the 16th century, Machiavelli stated in *The Prince*, "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things." So there you are – change and reorganisation was sort of invented by the Roman army, had already been accepted as inevitable by the Greeks, and has continued ever since. But don't despair if you are part of it, even Machiavelli conceded that it is difficult. But, how difficult?

If one has to judge using the conventional wisdom and shared beliefs in this area, the answer is a lot. I can't think of any other phrase or statement more used in management conversations than the one that says "people are resistant to change". By repeating it like parrots, we have taken it at



face value. If you heard somebody in a company saying that people are not resistant to change, your first impression would be that he, or she, must be nuts! Look around – all these legions of consultants and academics saying the opposite; a whole industry of books, tapes, conferences and motivational speakers delivering "how to" (change) solutions, all under the premise that people need to be pushed, otherwise they would

prefer to remain static. The Machiavelli school of change management is the official one: it's going to be difficult, pain is inevitable, people don't like it – push or else.

There is a particular sector of the organisation that has been repeatedly given the Oscar for the 'best resistance to change'. It's called middle management. Apparently, there is this layer in the organisational sandwich, somewhere in the middle, that blocks everything, resists everything and, quite frankly, that we would be better off without. So, that's what happened during the past two decades under the lean and mean corporate clean up. Hierarchical corporate structures became flat pancakes and those battalions of unhelpful managers in the middle – blockers of change, gatekeepers of information flow, obstructive individuals, corporate parasites and ugly people in the ranks of middle management – left big corporations to be resuscitated as top managers in smaller firms, enablers of change, providers of information and knowledge, facilitators of change, and beautiful consultants selling services to their ex-employers at a premium rate. The science best positioned to understand corporate transformation and talent markets is not management science but ecology. The market place is an ecosystem of life and death, growth, maturity, degeneration, regeneration and, unlike biology, resuscitation. But this is a topic for another day.

Now, suspend judgment for a minute, forget management and look around. You may be married and have children who are small and growing, or already grown up and independent. You have perhaps moved jobs three or four times if not more, moved house a couple of times, and perhaps emigrated a while ago. Look at your neighbours, they may be in a similar situation and, if not, surely you know others like you. As for your health, perhaps you feel a bit older now and have stopped doing the things that you did when you were younger, but have started doing new things that you didn't do just a while ago. Perhaps you stopped smoking recently. Perhaps you have remarried and started a second family. If not, you know somebody who has. You may have seen your children going through primary and secondary school, abandoning you for university (and providing you with that spare room that you always wanted) and having boyfriends and girlfriends, who always look different from what you expected. You've seen the death of your parents and the birth of your grandchildren, or you are now

spending more time than ever with your surviving parents.

If you look around what you see is a symphony of change. People, emotions, attachments and geographies changing sometimes with the rhythm of the four seasons, at other times with the violence of tsunamis and earthquakes. There is a name for all this: it's called life. In life, pain is inevitable but misery is a choice. I can't figure out who said this first – there are hundreds of people claiming authorship – but what I know is that management could learn a thing or two here. Just by looking at ourselves in the mirror we can see that all around us, and within ourselves, is pure change. We are part of a Heraclites-sized world where we constantly adapt. From a biological viewpoint we are not resistant to change because we are change. You can't say that a baby resists becoming a child and child resists becoming an adolescent. Life and change is the same word. There are different degrees of pain associated with the various changes but we are always in transition; we are transition. And, incidentally, the transformation from pain to misery is largely in our hands.

### Unnecessary misery

Sloppy, insensitive, mismanaged, unnecessarily prolonged change programmes in companies, whether on the back of a merger or an internal reorganisation, create misery out of the possible pain. Creating unnecessary uncertainty by lack of clarity or openness produces anxiety that could evolve to unnecessary pain and misery. We are not talking here about the need for suppression of all forms of pain but the unnecessary hi-fi of pain. We all know that a deviant form of obtaining pleasure is to produce pain. We have a name for this: sadism. There are managers who believe that part of their role is to turn on the pain hi-fi under their underlings. That would make them powerful apparently. I know a few of them. They have a tremendous ability to create around them a sense of fear and misery. They belong to a spectrum of deviant management that has on the one hand benign machismo and, on the other, malignant machismo often disguised as "it's not me, it's the system". Ooops, a conversation for another day!

So, what about change cookbooks that can lead us to reasonable ends with some ingredients of pain, no misery and finally to a good dish on the table? There are hundreds of them but for some reason John Kotter's –

the legendary Harvard expert on leadership – are the management equivalent of Nigella Lawson if you are in the UK or Martha Stewart if in the US (despite her small local difficulty), and my apologies to the rest of the national chefs-cum-advertisers. Kotter's steps for change read as: establishing a sense of urgency, creating a guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision, empowering a broad base of people to take action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and, institutionalising new approaches in the organisational culture. There you have it, follow the steps, add salt and pepper, put it in the oven, and change will be produced.

Far from dismissing or trivialising Kotter's approach I think that it has the merit of making management feel that change is doable if certain conditions are created and some success factors are embedded. My main criticism is that there is too much sequence in this approach. Whether he supports this sequential view or whether it is the inevitable translation from the practitioner and reader's side, I don't know. After all, we are used to absorbing things such as the six steps to A and B, the five steps to become C, and the three steps for a successful D, etc. We are probably doing the same with managing change and Kotter's sequence makes sense in this context. But the biological reality, and therefore the psychological, psychosocial and managerial one, is less sequential and more of a parallel one. The boiling life of the organisation, the pressure of challenges, the shortening of product and market lifecycles, the speed at which technology reinvents itself, the 7/24/365 information and life knowledge, the ephemeral nature of many products and the compressed time and space that, whether you like it or not, characterises business life today forces us to look at things as 'whole systems' as opposed to a 'sequence of events'. In plain English, and paraphrasing Woody Allen on London ("all seasons in one afternoon"), we need the eight steps in one afternoon. There is no such thing as a sequential, orderly business organisation world, but there is a chaotic, multidimensional, network-centric, otherwise very rich one. Kotter's and a Kotter-like framework would work for me if we could establish a sense of urgency at the same time that we are creating a guiding coalition, and at the same time that we are developing a vision and strategy, communicating, empowering, generating wins, and consolidating gains, all in

one and in parallel, all in the pot together and moving backwards and forwards. I know this is counterintuitive but not impossible.

In my last month's article, 'Forget culture, change behaviour', I made the case for focusing on changing behaviours to change the organisational culture. I usually introduce this framework to my clients as a "cultural change programme, and this is the last time you hear the word culture". Behaviours are what matters.

### Behaviours in the spotlight

Talking about counter-intuition, people believe that cultural change is always slow, often painful and, on occasion, possibly miserable. This is true when it is not behavioural-focused. Putting the spotlight on behaviours has the advantage of producing faster-than-expected changes that, when properly reinforced, change the ways of doing things, which change culture "without calling it a culture change". The most popular change-management cookbook, Kotter's, is not behavioural and this is its main weakness. I accept that I may be the only management consultant alive daring to say this, and that it will sound to some like stating that the recipes of three-star Michelin restaurants are not good.

One key advantage of behavioural-focused change management is that it's fast and avoids misery. It doesn't get rid of pain, but it makes it very difficult to hi-fi it. Although Sun Tzu, in the 2,500-year-old 'The Art Of War', said that "there is no invariable strategic advantage (shih), no invariable position (hsing), which can be relied upon at all times", people in business are always looking for proven recipes, templates, repeatable process and standardised frameworks. That is why the 'seven habits', the 'three steps' and the '50 ways of' type of literature is so attractive. We can't blame ourselves for looking at maps to travel and walking sticks to walk in mountains. We need to see those maps as tools to take us from A to B, not as ends in themselves, and certainly not as providers of one-way itineraries.



*Dr Leandro Herrero writes on a management topic each month in Scrip Magazine. He is CEO and founder of The Chalfont Project, an international consulting firm focusing on organisational innovation, behavioural, change management, leadership and human collaboration.*