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Man's primitive instincts – key to successful change management

Change programmes fail so often because of an over-reliance on management theory and best practice and too little attention to the fundamentals of human behaviour as revealed by anthropological studies. These are well-known but too little applied in the business environment.

This is the contention of Dr Leandro Herrero, the pioneer of the concept of Viral Change, who will speak on how to achieve sustainable behavioural change at the Institute of Internal Communication's annual conference in Bournemouth on 13th May.

Dr Herrero focuses on the value of making use of the strong human tendency to copy others with whom they identify – a concept discussed in his new book *Homo Imitans*.

A powerful form of 'social infection' is created by identifying a small group of influential individuals within the organisation to act as advocates and activists for new behaviours – these are often not individuals who are high up within the formal organisational hierarchy.

Once they understand and believe in organisational goals and associated behaviours themselves, this type of champion should be free to engage peers as they think fit, with formal leaders taking a backstage role and providing support.

Data indicates that around 70% of change programmes fall well short of expectations in terms of successful outcomes. Reasons identified by Dr Herrero include: over-reliance on the ability of the formal management hierarchy to influence; and on the ability of systems, processes, new technology and formal communication programmes to embed lasting change across the organisation.

He also questions undue focus on understanding and changing attitudes as a foundation for change programmes, commenting: "You can't really change a mindset, or indeed identify what it actually is. It is the behaviour you observe, and what you should be aiming to change. Trying to understand what is going on in people's heads is nice, but not the key to success."

Dr Herrero believes that more formal communication programmes support the process of social infection by raising awareness and understanding, and highlighting success stories for the purpose of positive reinforcement.

In his new book, Leandro contends that the failures of change management programmes, performance within organisations, and even government-orchestrated social change interventions, all have something in common.

He comments: "All these failures stem from the misunderstanding of the differences between two separate worlds, each with their own rules and their own tempo: the world of communication and the world of behaviours."

He believes that ultimate success "depends on mastering both the understanding and respect for the differences of the two worlds and the establishing of bridges between them without getting them mixed up. Management in particular cannot tell the difference. It muddles them together as if they were one single territory.

"The consequences are a series of messy and wrong expectations either about people or management systems."

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