Surviving change in social housing.

Part 1 - Leadership and it's role in business change projects.

Over the years, both within social housing and also in other sectors such as oil and telecoms, I have witnessed a wide range of leadership attitudes towards change projects. My aim in what will be a small series of change related articles is to share the lessons I have learned, the practice I have witnessed (good and bad) and hopefully some anecdotes as well.

Change is obviously a scary concept for some, especially in companies that are resistant to change. There isn't always a desire for change, but one thing we know for sure, that even although the appetite may be low, the actual need for change is almost certainly a lot higher.

Don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting that change should happen for the sake of it. There is certainly never the need to change for change's sake.

One thing that I would also say at this stage is that if you look honestly at your business then you would be ahead of the curve if you said that there is always something that needs improved. Nothing is perfect, right?
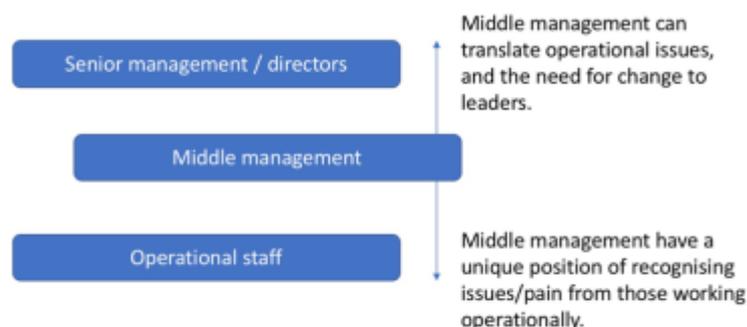
If you do not agree with the last part then please stop reading.

So, to the role of leadership and the spark of change.

If I take the traditional hierarchy of a company, unless of course you are a tech or creative startup who believes hierarchy is a negative approach, then we find three typical layers of employees. They are senior management, middle management and the operational staff.

Of course, the spark of change can obviously come from anywhere, however, our experience tells us that those projects that start off the most successfully are those that are ignited from middle management. We have highlighted this in the simple diagram below. We are not saying that an idea for an improvement or the need for change should not be encouraged from anyone in the organisation. They should! In fact, we encourage this. Treat all staff with the ability to think and to create that spark.

What is important however is to recognise that operational staff are rarely equipped with the ability to kick it all off, to get the fire burning after the initial spark. It is those sitting in the middle that have this ability.

Senior management / directors

Middle management

Operational staff

Middle management can translate operational issues, and the need for change to leaders.

Middle management have a unique position of recognising issues/pain from those working operationally.

The leader's role in, well, being a leader.

That's it, right? We are all ok now!

You can imagine lines such as that below being uttered:

'Great, now we've agreed change is needed, go away and make it happen, and tell me when it is done'.

Ouch!

This is not ideal. There is absolutely no leadership skill here. In fact, it sounds like they don't care. A vital lesson that I have learned is to never underestimate the role of leadership in making a change project work. There are also some instances where leadership needs to take a more active role. There are some instances where your leadership needs to carry out some PR exercises in order to give it traction. In some recent discussions I have seen senior staff themselves recognise this and are changing their approach to change, taking a more involved role and certainly in the area of communicating.

Right, the spark has happened, and middle management have kicked it off, and senior management have agreed it needs to happen and support it.

The leaders role in ensuring their people 'get it'.

Another early challenge, and indeed a risk, is some staff not embracing this change. I have seen on too many occasions the manager, a director, or even the chief executive actually supporting that something needs to change and then they have to get on with it. But what about the rest of those that would be affected.

There are two groups of people who are critical in making change a success: Staff who are affected by the change and also the customers who should see the benefit of said change.

Let's cover the staff who have to live with this change. They are the next critical step in ensuring it gets off to the best start, giving it an overall better chance of success. However, and here is the thing, getting the staff or let's call them 'stakeholders' on board is somewhat challenging. The leader should be able to let all their staff realise what this change means to the company, the customers, the staff and so on. It is words of support that they not only believe in the project, but that it really will make a difference. And to the doubters, again, there is always the fear that by being the negative one's all they will do is damage the chance of the changes being a success.

Change works best when the collective works together and the required change project does not become a 'them and us' initiative. Leadership in this instance is again about clarity, roles and responsibilities and a clear plan.

The leaders role in making the overall project a success.

The above points are all about kicking off a change project and what a leaders role should be.

However, the next risk is that said leaders then disappear into the background. Regular, not constant involvement is required.

Reading of the occasional project reports, attending the odd meeting for 10 minutes for the update part are all useless. The real difference is that staff and the company as a whole sees that the main sponsor, your leader, is caring and wants to know how it is going on, and then relays this message to the company, the customers, the board and so on. It does not take a lot of time if done properly, and it makes a difference.

Finally, for Part 1, I like to think of the following in ensuring leadership plays its role in change.

A leader in change projects should 'show' the way and embody confidence. They should lead from the front and trust their troops, and they should show up!

In Part 2, I will cover the role of governance in change projects.