



**Australian Government**

**Comcare**

# Managing Change

to avoid negative health and  
safety outcomes



## Managing Change

Over recent decades, public and private sector workplaces in Australia have been undergoing significant change—including changes to organisational structure, the introduction of new technology, and changes to working practices. And it would be reasonable to predict that there will be even more changes in the decade to come.

Yet evidence suggests that change management processes often fall short of best practice. Where this occurs, organisational change efforts do not always yield the desired results, and may produce unintended and costly outcomes. These can include staff hostility, low morale, turnover, absenteeism, resistance to change and the limited effectiveness of change initiatives.

Adverse occupational health and safety (OHS) outcomes have also been associated with poorly managed change. International and Australian research supports a link between psychological injury and rapid changes for which employees are unprepared either because of poor communication or inadequate training. Career concerns and job insecurity, which may be associated with organisational change, have also been linked to psychological injury. An increase in the incidence of occupational overuse syndrome (OOS) may also follow technological changes that are inadequately modified to workplace needs or are not supported by appropriate training.

## Integrating OHS and risk management

To achieve genuine organisational or technological change, and to minimise its unintended consequences, it is essential to address the “people issues” that can otherwise undermine the effectiveness of any change initiative. And, it is important that occupational health and safety issues are given appropriate attention as part of an *integrated approach* to risk management and corporate planning.

Against this background, leaders of agencies that are considering introducing organisational or technological change should review their change management practices to ensure consistency with best practice. Cole's eight stepping stones to introducing lasting change may be useful in this regard.

## Cole's eight stepping stones to lasting change<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Sound preparation

Clarify what the change is intended to achieve. Establish clear, measurable and realistic objectives and outcomes. Identify risks and develop appropriate controls—including in relation to OHS issues. Choose incremental over transformational change if time allows. Aim to introduce change fast enough to give a sense of progress, yet not exceeding people's ability to absorb and control it. Where appropriate, trial changes before full implementation to allow development and modification. Consider what resources and training will be needed to make the change succeed.

### 2. Create a common vision

Help people understand the need for change and provide a clear vision of what will be accomplished and how people will be affected.

### 3. Clear communication

Communicate the vision clearly, and often, to everyone. Establish processes to allow ongoing communication so that people hear things through official channels, rather than "on the grapevine".

### 4. Address concerns and enable participation

Develop processes to bring concerns out into the open and discuss them. Participation in the change process can help to develop ownership and commitment and improve its effectiveness—so build employee feedback into the change process. Where changes have negative consequences for individuals, provide organisational support and assistance where possible (such as counselling, further training, redeployment, and treatments for any identified occupational health and safety risks). Also ensure that managers have the capability to provide effective support to their staff.

1 Kris Cole, *Supervision: The Theory and Practice of First-Line Management*, Prentice Hall, Sydney, 2nd edition 2001, pp.386-389.

## **5. Develop a clear action plan**

Involve people in developing clear plans about who will do what, when and how in order to achieve the vision and make the change work.

## **6. Celebrate progress**

Celebrate as stages are achieved to enable people to let go of the old and accept the new. Set short-term goals and provide a sense of achievement when they are reached. Aim to create a culture where change is about continuous learning and improvement and is viewed positively.

## **7. Create a climate of certainty**

Tell people what you do know, explain what will change and what will not. Establish processes to give individual and team feedback on how change is progressing, and how their efforts and support are helping. Do whatever you can to provide a sense of stability and routine.

## **8. Follow up**

Monitor how the change is progressing and review the adequacy of risk controls. Establish what is working well and what needs improving. Modify in the light of experience.

## Key messages for leaders

In introducing change, it is important to understand that:

- poor levels of employee adjustment to change can reduce productivity and increase the incidence of workers' compensation claims;
- employee adjustment to change is a partnership between the individual and the organisation;
- the quality of change leadership, and the communication of a clear understanding of the need for change and how change is to be achieved are crucial to the success of change processes;
- supportive leadership behaviours and the quality of an organisation's people management practices exert considerable influence on employee adjustment to change
  - supportive leaders are approachable, accessible, responsive, understand the problems facing staff, and communicate well with employees
  - effective people management practices are characterised by effective delegation, treating people with consideration and respect, encouraging staff to take initiative, actively seeking staff involvement in decisions, understanding the problems faced by staff, and showing confidence in their abilities;
- individual responses to change will vary, depending on past experiences, individual capacities and coping styles. So leaders should be prepared to expect a variety of responses to change, and be trained to cope with them as they arise.

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