

Change is risky

By David Hillson, The Risk Doctor

Everyone would agree with Karl Marx when he said ‘The only constant is change.’ This is particularly true in the world of projects. They are characterised by change and are themselves change agents. As a result there has been a strong emphasis on change management as an integral part of managing projects.

There are many models of change, each describing the way that people respond when they encounter change, and outlining an ideal journey from the first idea through to final implementation. Figure 1 uses a modification of the Patterson–Connor Commitment Curve to illustrate the change process, with six steps that people typically pass through when facing change:

1. **Contact.** This where the person or group first hears about the need for change and discovers that it is either necessary or mandated.
2. **Awareness.** Here the details of the change become more clear, answering the what/when/how/who questions.
3. **Understanding.** At this point the reasons for change are understood and the details are sufficiently well established that people know what is going to happen.
4. **Positive Perception.** Now the change is accepted and seen as a good thing that will bring benefits.
5. **Adoption.** The individual or group take active steps to implement the change in their own area of responsibility, and begin to act in line with the new situation.
6. **Internalisation.** The last step is where people genuinely believe in the change and make it their new way of behaving, doing it naturally without thinking.

These six steps can be grouped into three distinct phases. The first two steps of Contact and Awareness form an initial Preparation stage, with the middle steps (Understanding and Positive Perception) being where Acceptance occurs, and finally Adoption and Internalisation being the place of Commitment.

This is all very good, and it would be wonderful if every change situation followed the six steps laid out in Figure 1. But reality is often different, as individuals or groups either get stuck at some point in the change process, or even fall off the curve completely. Change is a risky undertaking, and we need to identify the points where it might fail and address them proactively.

Looking at the three phases in Figure 1, the Preparation stage seems to be neutral and low-risk, since it simply involves finding out about the proposed change, discovering that it is about to happen and becoming aware of what might be involved. Likewise if the final Commitment phase is reached, then individuals and groups have bought into the change and are prepared to adopt it into their routine practice, behaviour and thinking. The risky place is in the middle, during Acceptance. If this goes wrong then the change process can fail completely, with Adoption and Internalisation never happening. How might this occur?

The first important thing is to recognise that Figure 1 only tells half of the story because it only maps positive support for the proposed change. There is of course a negative space where the change is not supported, and where it may even be actively opposed. But what could take individuals away from the desired path of the change process and into negative territory?

The two steps in the Acceptance phase each represent potential points of diversion from the positive support pathway. The first of these is Understanding. If people fail to pass this step then they will not develop a Positive Perception of the proposed change, and they will be unable or unwilling to progress to Adoption. There are two risks associated with the Understanding step:

- Failure to understand the change
- Misunderstanding the change

While these may seem similar, they differ in an important respect. If someone simply does not understand the change, what it involves, why it is needed, or how it will happen, then they are unlikely to support it, but they will probably not be hostile to the change process. On the other hand, if a person or group develop a misunderstanding about the change, then it may lead to a negative view of the change and lack of support for the change process.

If the Understanding step is successfully achieved, another risky place comes next, which is the development of a Positive Perception towards

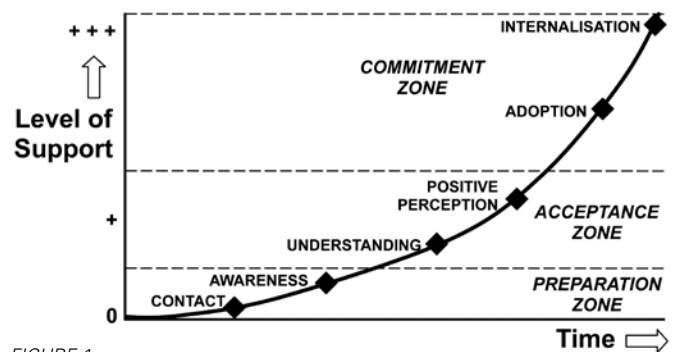


FIGURE 1

the change. This represents an even greater risk to the change process, since its converse of Negative Perception will create real problems. If people understand the change but do not see it as a good thing that will bring benefits, then they can turn into active opponents who may campaign against the change or even attempt to sabotage it. This needs to be taken seriously and actively avoided if possible.

So the idealistic change process depicted in Figure 1 turns out to be rather unrealistic, only showing the positive pathway of desired change. There are at least three points of diversion which can take people off the

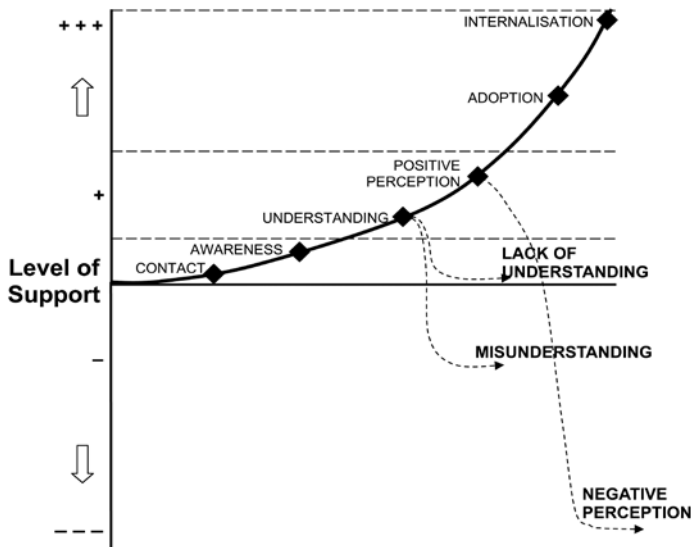


FIGURE 2

path and lead to lack of support with various degrees of negativity, as shown in Figure 2. Each of these three represent risks which should be addressed during the change process if we are serious about maximising our chances of delivering successful change.

The answer lies in careful stakeholder management by those responsible for the change process. We need to become and remain fully aware of the current attitudes of each key player in the change process, and pay particular attention to the development of a proper understanding of the desired change and creation of a positive perception of the benefits it will bring. Where we detect the first signs of falling support resulting from a lack of understanding, we need to intervene quickly and decisively to prevent people leaving the change pathway. This means a clear focus on communication and explanation during the early part of the change process. And if we see individuals or groups becoming negative about the change, especially if they understand it properly, then strong action is required to avoid the negative consequences. We should aim to return people to the path of positive support if possible, through persuasion and leadership, relating the change to the things that matter for them. If this proves impossible then it might be necessary to take drastic action including removing people from the situation so they do not contaminate the change process for others.

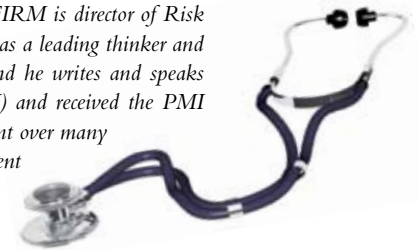
Change is risky, but risk can be managed if it is identified, assessed and addressed proactively.



About the author

Known globally as *The Risk Doctor*, Dr David Hillson PMP HonFAPM FIRM is director of Risk Doctor & Partners (www.risk-doctor.com). David is recognised internationally as a leading thinker and expert practitioner in risk management at both strategic and project levels, and he writes and speaks widely on the topic. He is active in the Project Management Institute (PMI) and received the PMI Distinguished Contribution Award for his work in developing risk management over many years. He is also an Hon. Fellow of the UK Association for Project Management (APM), and a Fellow of the Institute of Risk Management (IRM).

david@risk-doctor.com www.risk-doctor.com



© 2011 Project Manager Today All rights reserved. By downloading this pdf file the recipient agrees to use this information for personal use only and may print one copy. This pdf may not be copied, altered, or distributed to other parties without the permission of the publishers. First published in this form in Project Manager Today.