Successfully achieving organisational change
- a metaphorical look at some of the difficulties

The metaphor



Many organisations are trying to make changes that will enable them to compete more successfully. These changes often fail to deliver the anticipated benefits. Why is this so?

Changes are commonly built around elaborate implementation plans that include goals, timetables and expectations laid down at the start. These plans often pay insufficient attention to other changes that will inevitably occur on the 'journey'. They fail to account for the daily realities that face organisations - including uncertainties about the market place, the political scenario, technological advances or the people involved.

This paper is based on an idea from Andrew Pettigrew from the Warwick University Business School, that change programmes resemble - and suffer similar problems to those of - a 'Wild West Wagon Train'. We develop this idea here, identifying key roles and making some suggestions for overcoming business problems.

The wagon train and organisations making changes face many things in common. The early wagon trains set out not knowing exactly where they were going, how they would get there, what they would find and what difficulties they would encounter along the way. They trusted in themselves, in their hope and in experience to carry them through. They **believed** they could create a better situation than the one they faced at the time.

Throughout this paper the various roles relating to the wagon train metaphor are described in italics. The similar roles, behaviours and activities found in organisations are shown in normal type.

Do these roles and situations occur in your organisation? What are the implications? What can you do about them?

Key roles

The initiators of change



Visionaries - *saw the opportunities of moving west across America. They found ways to describe the desired situation, using words like "picture this..." "imagine that..." -* ***they imagined the possibilities and inspired others to act.***

They visualise or imagine new products or services, systems, processes or structures that offer improvement or advantage. Vital for initiating change, they can sometimes be out of touch with the feelings and expectations of others.

Pioneers - ***extended the boundaries*** *in relation to how things were done. They led others into uncharted territory to overcome problems of terrain, weather, wildlife and conflict.*

People who won't accept "can't be done". They will always go the extra mile to get something to work. They do not give up and are sometimes intolerant of others that lack their commitment and drive.

Dreamers - *talked about how things could be better and* ***didn't act.***

Colleagues who moan, wish for better and never do anything. With good leadership they can be valuable people. They need to be encouraged to act on their ideas. If left to operate in their natural style their impact can be damaging.

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The 'Players'

The Wagon Train Boss - *responsible for getting the wagon train to its destination.* ***In charge*** *once the party is underway. May have values and expectations different from other 'travellers'.*

Often more concerned with the project in hand than with the people. Typically, task oriented. Tough, energetic, even necessarily ruthless. Respected rather than liked, they are essential for success. When 'the wrong person', disaster is often just around the corner.



The Travellers - *who put up with* *the hardship and uncertainly of the journey into the unknown* **-** *they* ***'bought the vision'*** *and were excited by the possibilities of a better future.*

Absolutely critical to the success of any change project. They need to be engaged with the vision so that they will put up with the difficulties and uncertainties. They need confidence in their leaders. Time spent helping them to understand what will happen, where they are going - in building team spirit and mutual support - is time never wasted.

The Scouts - *operate* ***out in front*** *of the main body. Aware and sensitive to local conditions, able to move confidently in territory unknown to them and the main party.*

On major change projects this role is often taken by consultants with little connection to the organisation. They are invaluable if committed, skilful and supportive. Whether external or internal, they have specialist skills. They help to anticipate difficulties and make changes in direction.

The 'Red Indians' - *their land was crossed and occupied by the wagon train.*

Those who face having their work changed, altered or taken away and who typically regard the change as unwelcome.

The 'Mayor' - *Often the Mayor of the departure town. Able to make things happen, identify resources and provide credibility. Enjoyed the glory of success by association*.

An essential role. Often called Champion or Sponsor. Someone who can get things moving, clear blockages and offer political support. If this person becomes detached from the project and loses interest a key role is lost. Typically a senior manager or director who may be working on a variety of agendas.

Supporting roles



The Outriders **-** *normally selected from the travellers. Help the 'boss' to control and guide the wagon train. Trusted and reliable people.*

Operate at the boundaries, keeping things moving along the desired path. Usually internal people, experienced and committed. Often not listened to quickly enough, so projects get into trouble. Sometimes less well regarded than scouts.

The Military - *sent there to protect the travellers and may disagree with the objectives of the wagon train.*

Who is responsible, to whom, for protecting people exposed on difficult projects? What is their agenda? How committed are they to the success of the project?

Gun Runners - *took advantage of the situation, to deal with anyone,* ***if it suited them.***

Opportunists who see profit in going along with things at the time. They do not actively commit themselves. Others may experience them as cynical and untrustworthy.

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The environment



*In wagon train terms **hostile people, weather and terrain** provide the most significant factors, coupled with a desire to get to the West Coast. Expectations will be significantly influenced by the **'settlers' - t**hose that make it and flourish and those who **bring the story of success, hardship and heroism** back to the starting point.*

In organisational terms key factors are market, competitive position, **organisational culture, structure and leadership style.** Organisational 'settlers' and 'story tellers' are those people who have experienced change and spread messages about their experience.

Considerations

- **Do you notice people like these in your organisation?**
- **Are they helping or hindering change?**
- **Is enough being done to ensure you get the positive benefits of the roles?**
- **What else could you do to ensure change is successful?**

Scenarios and suggestions

The circle of wagons

When attacked they formed their wagons into a circle. They looked inwards for support and encouragement, defending themselves against the outsiders.

Beware closing ranks inappropriately. Project teams can close ranks and stop listening to feedback and outside information when they feel attacked. They can become reliant on information and leadership exclusively from within. There are times when closing ranks and feeding off internal morale is important. At other times it is essential to have ears open to suggestions and feedback. Remember that outsiders are not necessarily the 'enemy'.

Lost in the wilderness

The Scouts and Boss take the 'wrong' route. Everyone has to backtrack and find a new way. Morale and commitment diminish. The leaders strive to make up lost time.

Ensure someone is thinking well ahead and communicating back to the team.

You need good processes for review and evaluation. This enables prompt and effective action to cope with the unexpected. It is in the nature of change that unanticipated situations occur. Good teams manage this well.



Scouts get killed

The Scouts are killed or captured. The wagon train loses direction, together with an inevitable loss of pace, energy and performance.

Make sure that you have plans to deal with any sudden loss of skills and expertise that is unique to the specialists, for example, when internal people or consultants get taken off the project. Is the specialist knowledge needed elsewhere, inside or outside this organisation? Why does this happen? Are the scouts operating too far ahead?

Maintain good relationships with the scouts, whether internal or external. They deserve special attention. They operate in vulnerable and exposed positions.

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The Military won't allow the wagon train to follow their chosen route

The scouts have found a route, the boss agrees and then an outside agency (usually the military in the wagon train) say you can't do that or go that way.



Changes to plans and schedules are inevitable and cause confusion and frustration. **How** people are informed of changes - as well as the **what -** is vital to the smooth running of a project. If people understand what is going on and how it will affect them there is a much higher chance that they will accept the decision. Put it to them appropriately.

People often want to know why decisions have been made. Who does the decision benefit most? Them or us? Is it reasonable? What is the impact on the project? Does it mean that a lot of work has to be scrapped or redone?

Ensure that communication with the 'outside' is well maintained.

Weather and terrain prove much more difficult than expected

It was impossible to be sure about weather and terrain in advance, especially when entering uncharted or unknown territory. Sometimes it was necessary to stop and camp through the winter before moving on again the next spring. It was important to stop early so that arrangements could be made to survive the weather and shortages of food.

Slower than expected progress, for whatever reason, needs early acknowledgement. This enables plans to be amended and new possibilities explored.

Plans need to be created with sufficient flexibility and adaptability to cope with and cater for changes, including late or partial delivery and new or changed circumstances.

The Mayor loses interest

In a wagon train scenario the Mayor, at the starting town, was keen to help the people get underway. Once it had left he often moved on to the next idea that gave him visibility.

Ensure your sponsor receives regular updates on progress. Keep him /her actively involved. Have them help overcome blocks and barriers. Find a successor if the champion/sponsor moves on or has to refocus their efforts elsewhere.

Implications

We often have a desire to tie things down, make them certain, **be in control.** The consequence is often the reverse of that intended.

When making changes it is important to -



- realise you may not be where you expected and it may look different from that imagined.
- listen to ideas and feedback with an open mind. Give all ideas due thought and consideration. People at the edges often have a different view of things which may be important and can cast a valuable new light on things.
- ensure you have the necessary flexibility and adaptability.
- keep everyone well informed and involved.
- trust people to do their best. Support and encourage everyone.
- be prepared to enjoy the journey.

Such change is difficult. If you have found the metaphor useful we would welcome your comments to build on it. Please tell us about examples you recognise and additions you would like to make.

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