

CHANGE MANAGEMENT: SHAPING NEW STRATEGIES IN A TIME OF TURBULENCE

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AS South African companies seek ways to survive the financial crisis, they would do well to study the lessons of a previous period of upheaval — the transition to democracy 15 years ago.

Practitioners of the art of change management say the key to successfully shaping new strategies in a time of turmoil is to ensure everyone, from the cleaner and messenger to the CEO, is consulted.

Kobus Opperman, who describes himself as a change facilitator, said the human dimension was critical.

"I do change management with an unusually high degree of involvement from the stakeholders, so that there's ownership, so that the whole thing is sustainable, so that people jump for joy at the initiative and all the stakeholders in the company actually make it work," he said.

Opperman counted organisations like the Rand Water Board, the Central Energy Fund and Arivia.com among clients he said he had helped in their efforts to meet the challenges posed by South Africa's transition in the '90s.

"At Rand Water, for instance, the organisational imperative at the time was to stabilise a very turbulent environment," he said. "At the time it was an IFP-ANC violence kind of situation. Potentially, the water supply to the whole of Gauteng was under threat. So there was a major imperative to change that."

Opperman said that when a company set out to make changes, management had to seek the active participation of everyone on the staff, no matter how lowly. "Management should certainly set the tone, and say, 'This is the kind of end result we have in mind'; That's very much management's job. But exactly how to go about it, who knows best? Management, or the people who are supposed to do the work?"

Another change management consultant, Ruth Tearle, said she had helped the National

Solidarity is the key

Intelligence Agency negotiate the tricky path of getting spies from the former apartheid government to join hands with their former enemies from the liberation groups.

"It was fascinating," she said.

"They had to work together as a team and develop new strategies. I didn't actually help them develop the strategies, but I trained the leadership how to do it, how to develop a common team with common values," Tearle said.

"Those guys were sharp. If you've got highly intelligent people, and you give them the tools, then they just go with it."

Tearle said specialist change management skills were needed when a company or organisation wanted to break out of its normal way of operating and achieve something new.

Such skills were particularly needed in the current business climate.

"Whenever the world around you changes and the rules for success change, then you're going to have to have a new way of doing things," she said.

"A new strategy, a new way of working. We have to look at new ways of delighting customers who have less time, less money; we have to be more competitive if we're going to survive. We're going to have to do a lot more with a lot less."

Tearle said this meant changing the mindset of a company's workforce. "You're going to have to get people to do things differently."

Many staff might resist the process.

"They don't see what's in it for them because they fear change, so you're going to need a whole different set of skills from managing in a routine environment," Tearle said.

"Most leadership programmes do teach those skills and many managers who go on leadership programmes would learn that, but if you're used to working in a routine environment it's very different from working in an environment where you have to achieve something different, and where the rules aren't always that clear."

One consultant working in change management, who did not want to be identified, said the field had attracted much meaningless business jargon. "I describe what I do as change management, simply because it's ambiguous and it allows you to do anything," the consultant said.

"I attach no meaning to the words — I'd rather see what the client needs, and then let's address the need. If you do research on the Internet, you'll come across a mind-boggling amount of jargon and buzz words, it's enough to make you want to throw up."



CHOOSE THE RIGHT TEAM: Ruth Tearle has helped many companies manage transition