

Successful change a case study

I mentioned earlier that I was part of this Demos team that did research into organisational change at the RSC.

So although the examples I'm going to quote might come from a different context,

I hope you won't dismiss them

but see their relevance

to your own situations

and make those bridges

between what you're doing

and what I'm talking about.

So here, then, are some suggestions about things that can be done.

But as I talk about them

please bear in mind

that the purpose of changing these things

is not as ends in themselves.

These changes are meant collectively

to alter the way

that people think and act.

Now the RSC's an organisation

which, in spite of its reputation,

its fame, its size, its historic success,

was some years ago in a state of crisis,

almost terminal crisis.

They faced a massive deficit,
staff morale was at rock bottom,
relationships with funders were very poor
and, worst of all, the critical reputation
of its work was falling.

A decade on from being in that situation
everything has changed.

My question is; "how did that happen?"

"How did they sustain
that organisational change?"

There are many answers to that question.

When I've spoken about this research,
about the RSC to the media
and at conferences, I've often, in fact,
almost invariably been asked

"What is the one big thing that they did?"

"What's the one big thing that makes
sustainable change possible?"

And of course it's not a question
that can be answered.

There are lots of small things
that combine to make things better.

There's never just one thing.

So here are some of the things
that the RSC did to transform
the way that it operates,
to restore its finances,

to restore its artistic success.

An important first step was creating
a clear and agreed mission
that everyone understood
and could subscribe to.

That mission was and still is
to be the best theatre
for Shakespeare in the world.

It's ambitious,
it's achievable, and it's clear.

It's also brief.

Too many organisations have missions
that cannot be memorised
and are written in language
that most people can't understand.

I'm very proud of the fact
that when I was a chair of a concert hall
some years ago, we managed to get
our mission statement down
from a whole page
to three words, 'great music live'.

Which all of the staff can understand
and communicate to everyone.

And of course once you have
a mission it has to be agreed,
otherwise it's not really
a mission at all.

It has to be discussed

and its implications understood.

The clear mission gives people courage

and it also helps everyone to pull

in the same direction.

And it's important that trustees,

volunteers and staff subscribe to it.

If they don't then why are they there?

The clear mission has to be achievable.

There's nothing worse than having

a big gap between the fine words

of what an organisation says it does

and the reality of what it actually does.

There should be no gap

between rhetoric and reality.

So the RSC had a mission that everyone

could understand and get behind.

The second step they took

was to improve governance.

And the third was to improve

communications and to release information

so that everyone knew what was going on.

This meant more meetings, more emails,

more newsletters, a better website,

everybody seeing the budgets.

Of course there were complaints

that this took up too much time,

and at first it did.

But clear communication is essential

to making an organisation work.

How are people meant to operate

if they don't have the right information

and don't have the full story?

Information and communication

are also vital to achieving the third step

and that is making people

responsible for themselves.

At the RSC financial

and HR responsibilities

were given to individual departments

and managers, backed up with training

and specialist knowledge of course.

No longer could individual managers

shuffle off responsibility

to the finance department

for their budgets.

They had to run their own budgets.

No longer could people complain

that dealing with personnel problems

was entirely someone else's job.

People had to start taking responsibility,

not only for themselves,

but for each other.

One method of improving communications

at the RSC was to create
more opportunities
for people to meet informally
and many more opportunities to learn.

This was done in a number of ways:

The design of the premises was changed
to ensure that people
could meet by chance.

A new space has made it easy to have
a coffee or a sandwich together.

Lots of clubs started,
there's a gardening club,
yoga club, choir and so on.

And these helped break down
hierarchical barriers and create links
between different areas.

And perhaps most effectively
departments went to other departments
to explain what they did
so that people actually understood
the intricacies of each other's jobs.

In this way the finance department
got to realise how what they did
affected scheduling and work allocation
in the set-building area.

And the box office staff learned
from the voice trainers

about how to speak clearly.

It's amazing in how many organisations

one person doesn't know

what another person does.

It's so frequent

and it's so easy to rectify.