

Why change fails

So let us turn then to the reasons

why change initiatives fail.

The most obvious is that many fail

because they are imposed.

In big corporations change initiatives

often mean that the CEO or the director

tells everyone else

that they have got to change

without thinking that

they need to change themselves.

And they end up like a parent

shouting at a reluctant teenager

who is doing or not doing their homework.

In fact, this parent-child relationship

exists in many organisations.

Staff look to their leaders

to sort everything out for them,

to solve their problems,

and sometimes to make the world go away.

When I started the research with the RSC

I found many members of staff

referring to the company as a family.

I thought, "Oh, that is nice."

But then I thought,

"No, that is really not nice."

Historically it had been

run by a father figure, a paterfamilias,
but what it needed,
and what every organisation needs,
is for everyone to feel like, act like
and be treated as responsible adults.

We live in a time when
the heroic leader is a kind of cult.

And in these circumstances,
it is all too easy
to give the leaders too much power
and expect too much of them as well.

And then, when failure follows,
we blame the leader.

Rather than circumstances or ourselves,
and we repeat the mistake
by looking for the next
infallible candidate.

General elections.

Leaders are important
for all sorts of reasons;
they guide, they look forward,
they are accountable.

But they are not omnipotent.

And change has to come
not only from the top
but from across all the organisation.

We have to assume responsibility

for improving things

and not think that change

is somebody else's job.

Another reason for change failing to work

is a really legitimate one.

It is when push back happens

against a change

that is felt to be happening too quickly.

People in organisations

move at different speeds;

literally, emotionally and intellectually.

Not everyone is persuaded

of the need for change at the same time.

So there will always be

hares and tortoises.

This fact of life has to be

recognised and discussed

and the right pace, the correct momentum,

achieved through dialogue and agreement.

Third reason that change initiatives fail

is because there are things

inside organisations that cannot be said,

that are off limits,

that are too uncomfortable to discuss,

so they don't get discussed.

I used to work at this think tank

called Demos,

as Piotr mentioned.

In many ways

it was a brilliant organisation.

It was extraordinarily productive

and it achieved some outstanding things.

We used to put on

lots of events like discussions

and book launches.

But whenever we held an event,

it was impossible to criticise it.

All events had to be brilliant.

It was deeply ingrained in the culture

and nobody wanted to hurt

anybody else's feelings.

Well we did put on some great events

but we put on some events

which weren't great

and some were frankly a mess.

But we could never learn

and we could never improve,

we could never change

because we chose not to speak the truth.

So I think those then

are the three main things

that stifle sustainable change:

First, looking for change to be led

or to come from outside.

This means we are looking

in the wrong place.

We should be looking at ourselves

and looking inside.

Second, running out of steam

because part of the organisation

wants to change and the other parts don't.

In other words there are different

understandings and emotions about change,

fear being a very important one,

that need to be worked through.

And third, being unable

to talk about what matters.

You will find people

giving all sorts of other reasons

why they can't or won't change.

No time, no resources,

we did it ten years ago,

it didn't work then, so it won't work now,

it's not in my job description,

if we do "X", we won't be able to do "Y,"

and many, many more of the same ilk.

But it seems to me that those

are all issues that can be addressed

not reasons to resist

legitimate and useful change.

Sometimes they are simply

excuses to be lazy

or to hide our heads in the sand.

I know that is true because I have said

and done these things myself.

And I think that

in meeting these challenges

we have to work, not by overcoming them,

but by working with the grain

of how people feel, how they talk,

how they adapt, how they act.

If we are to be successful

in sustaining change

and building organisations that can

stand up to external shifts and shocks,

in making them enjoyable

and rewarding places to work.

Then that involves, not simply

doing a set of new things,

but doing things

in different and new ways.

So building the capacity

for on-going change

means combining changes

in the way that we do things

with shifts in the values

and the behaviours

that govern how we do things.

So we act in certain ways
and we behave in certain ways
because of what we believe in.

This has been very clear
in the care sector, for example,
where the difference between nursing
based on genuine care for the patient
differs in practice from nursing based
on simply carrying out procedures.