



# Organisational change?

## “No big deal!”

Andria Wyman-Clarke reflects with Andrew O’Keeffe



Thales succeeded in implementing a challenging organisational change by taking account of human instincts.

Thales is a global engineering and manufacturing company employing around 3,500 staff in Australia. In late October 2009 the country HR teams around the world were asked to implement a significant change to the organisation’s performance system. Not only did the new system contain ideas that managers might not fully grasp immediately, it was also to be implemented in a tight time frame – two months.

Although the existing performance system had been in place globally for ten years, it had been operational in Australia for only two years. The probability was relatively high that some staff in Australia would be critical of us deploying a revised system, with a different underlying logic, so soon.

The review of the current system had been carried out in April 2009 by the Global HR team based in Paris. A key element of the review was a survey of managers and staff, covering people’s likes and dislikes with the system. It was this review that resulted in the decision to implement the change, and to do so immediately.

### The challenge

The most sensitive element of the change was that the new ratings were to apply to the current year. This meant that the rollout of the changes in November and December 2009 would apply for the 2009 performance

year. We were concerned that managers and staff would complain that the goal posts were being changed just before the end of the game. Understandably, they might argue that making the change at this point would disrupt their already formulated opinions regarding employee performance and how those ratings should be managed.

A further challenge was to overcome the reservations of the HR team itself regarding our ability to lead the change, given our anticipated concerns about changing the goalposts.

The timing also could not have been more challenging. We were making the change during the busy end-of-year period, and we did not want the organisation distracted from core activities.

### The positives

On the positive side, there were attractions about the new system. The most significant change was that the performance ratings are less judgemental. The new system puts a much greater focus on *learning* and *improving*, and shifts the focus away from *evaluation* and *assessment*.

Specifically, the new ratings focus on where people are up to in their career progression, with the four ratings in the new system being “build”, “consolidate”, “master”,

“excel” and “mismatch”. “Mismatch” doesn’t necessarily mean that the person is performing badly, just that they might not be a match for their current role and that their skills could be better used in a different role. The aim is that all staff progress, or have the opportunity to progress to “master” – a key aspirational goal that accurately categorises high levels performance and promotes the skills and confidence necessary to move to greater responsibilities.

### Our solution: connect with human instincts

The HR leadership team and some broader HR team members prepared for the change in a two-day workshop with Andrew O’Keeffe of Hardwired Humans. The focus of the workshop was on the hardwired instincts of humans and the implications of these instincts for leadership of organisations, including for managing change.

The workshop was the result of a close collaboration between Andrew O’Keeffe and Thales Training & Consultancy, with the specific goal of discerning the likely reactions to the change initiative. What were the likely responses, behaviours and potential impediments to delivering the upcoming changes across the organisation?



The workshop was held at Taronga Zoo in Sydney. Being an ideal place to take a zoological view of humans, we gained fresh insight into our animal instincts by looking at the behaviour of chimpanzees. We heard from the chimpanzee keeper and the Jane Goodall Institute about the parallels between chimpanzee behaviours and those of humans, and we visited the chimp community at Taronga.

Both humans and chimpanzees are social, hierarchical animals. The comparisons between chimps and humans are numerous and revealing, and the insight provided a whole new perspective on solving challenges in the workplace.

### Guarding against loss

One of the key insights for managing change is that the conventional wisdom that claims people resist change is wrong. We learned that humans, rather than being resistant to change, are actually hardwired to avoid loss. Upon hearing about a proposed change, people instantly screen for loss. If we detect loss we resist the change. If we detect gain, we support the change.

If we are unsure about the impact of the change, then we assume loss. This means that for organisational change we often have people unnecessarily erring toward loss and resistance, merely because at the moment they first learn of the change, people are unable to make sense of the impact of the change for them.

We learned that humans first and foremost screen through our emotional radars. So the influence of the first emotional response to change is critical.

We learned that humans naturally gossip, and that our opportunity as change managers is to use this form of social grooming positively and proactively.

We learned about the use of empathy – the need to acknowledge people’s understandable concerns.

After learning the nine human instincts we workshopped our change situation. The focus was to use our new knowledge of why people behave as they do by making intelligent choices in how we would manage the change.

We left the two-day workshop confident that we had the preparation necessary to manage the change in a better way than we had previously conceived.

The next stage was to share our learnings with the broader HR team to equip our colleagues to be as skilled and as confident as we now were. After a full-day session with the team we found that the wider team gained in confidence about the direction we were heading.

We also used the senior executive team to support the change and to communicate constructively to their people.



### Change without fear

The change was managed so effectively that it became, in everyday parlance, “no big deal”. HR implemented the change in world-record time, with solid acceptance from managers and staff. And we succeeded in ensuring the organisation was not distracted from serving our clients.

HR colleagues were proud of our ability to successfully manage change, and forged an even closer connection with each other through succeeding in a significant challenge. On the other hand, managers were satisfied with having an improved system implemented in a constructive way.

Staff see the value of the new performance system – one that is less judgmental and more responsive to delivering accurate ratings and, over the longer term, one that offers more fulfilling career paths for them.



### Two lessons

We drew two key lessons from the experience.

1. Aligning change to human instincts absolutely works. I regret that I have not had the benefit of the insight before now – I could have used the framework many times in the past to implement change faster, more smoothly and so that it was better embedded in organisations.
2. An awareness of human instincts provides a different, and much more constructive, approach to managing change. Change doesn’t have to be based on the assumption that it is hard, or that it will be resisted, or that leaders need to be apologetic about change.

Indeed, change can be implemented as an everyday part of business – without disruption, controversy or resistance. ■

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