

steps

Achieving Lasting Behavioural Change in Organisations

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARY



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Section 1.0

The Research

Steps has an established approach to behaviour change which we call “**Steps to Change**”. It works well and resonates with clients – and we wanted to be able to refer to the evidence available to support the advice and recommendations we were giving when discussing change programmes.

We were unable to discover anything that constituted research in this area.

There were many opinion pieces but no research, and so we undertook our own qualitative research project, conducting in-depth interviews with 14 senior leaders of major change projects across the globe.

In each case we asked them to compare a specific successful project with a less or unsuccessful project they had been involved in leading.¹

We mainly wanted to address TWO QUESTIONS:



¹ Full details of the research methodology, the interviewees and the types of project discussed are available in the full research report on the Steps website <https://www.stepsdrama.com/research-findings/>.

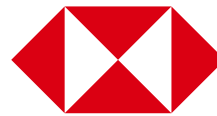
Our RESEARCH INTERVIEWEES were senior managers and directors at these organisations:



Change
Management
Institute

Dechert
LLP

Deloitte.



HSBC UK



ING 



NOMURA



Pearson

Penguin
Random
House



“There were many opinion pieces but no research, and so we undertook our own qualitative research project, conducting in-depth interviews with 14 senior leaders of major change projects across the globe.”

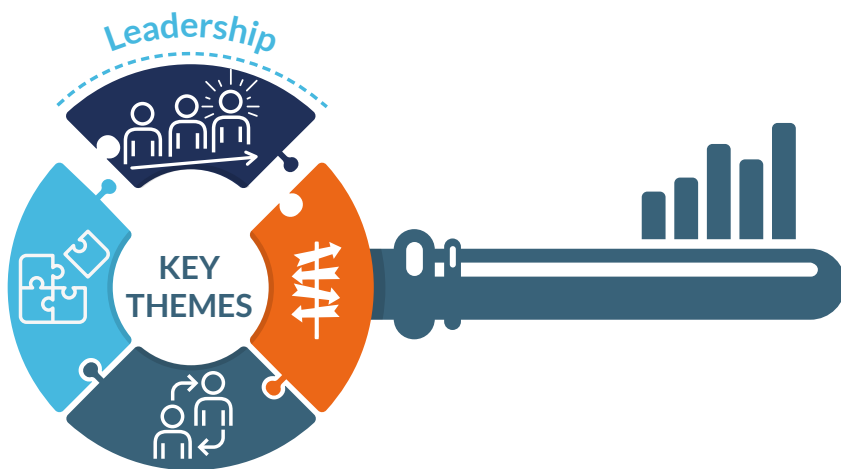


Section 2.0

Key Themes

A number of key themes were raised by respondents – both in what was a key to success, and what caused a project to be unsuccessful.

2.1 | LEADERSHIP



It was not a surprise to us that leadership was top of the list in what is required for a project to be successful, but the issues raised did have some surprises.

Senior leadership commitment was cited in almost every one of the successful projects as a key factor in its success. Either the project originated from the highest level or the time was taken to ensure that all the most senior people were behind the project and

supportive. Not surprisingly, in responding about the less successful or failed projects, the lack of senior leadership commitment was the number one cause of failure.

This may sound like a bit of a truism, and it certainly is a common aspect of change theory, but it still is the case (as the unsuccessful projects prove) that many projects are undertaken without this level of support.



There were also some issues mentioned with leadership that were seen as most likely to damage or wreck the change programmes:

- **Individualism:**

Individual members of the leadership team who were not bought in and were allowed to get away with not supporting the project.

- **Lack of leadership skill:**

- Leaders who liked the idea of a particular change but had not actually built the commercial case to persuade others - and were expecting a project team to make it happen anyway.

- Leaders who saw the commercial case and understood the change that others need to make, but were unable or not helped to recognise the changes they themselves needed to make.

- Leaders who believed that they could just mandate the change and expected others to fall into line without building the buy-in.

- **Role modelling:**

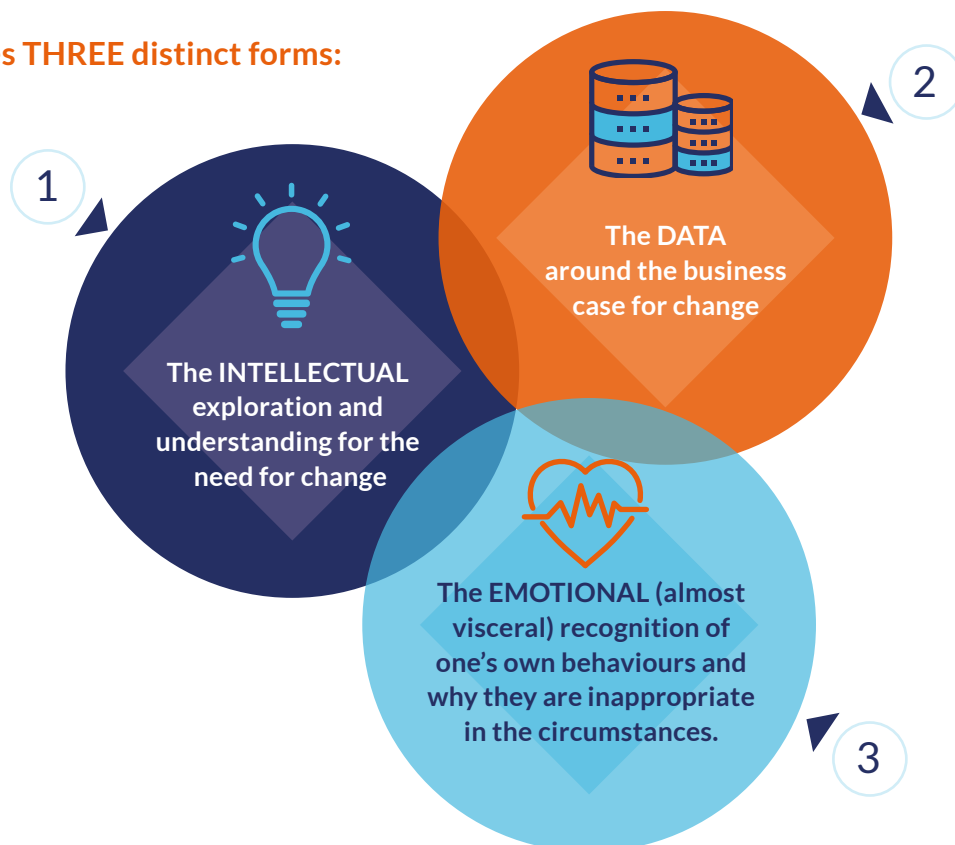
Failure by leaders to role model the change required.

2.2 | RECOGNISING THE NEED TO CHANGE



The research strongly bears out that a critical KEY TO SUCCESS is to recognise what is inadequate, inappropriate or can be improved within the current behaviours exhibited.

It takes **THREE** distinct forms:



People need to see the present and the future under these three forms. What is the current reality (the data, the ideas and the behaviours) and how will they look like in the new world post the change?

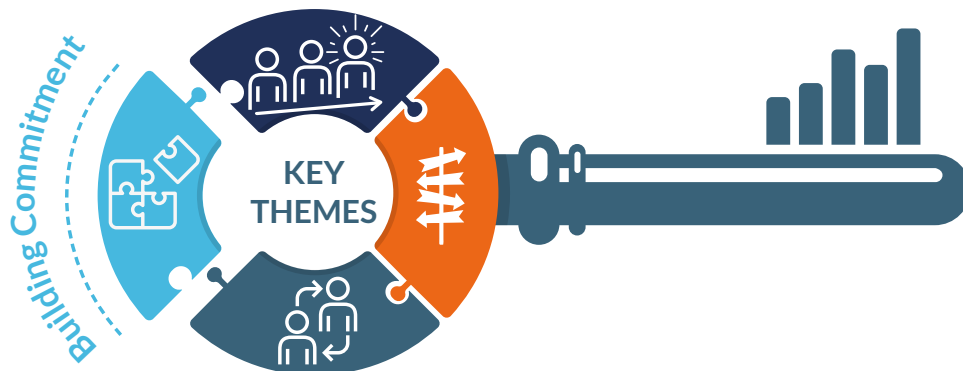
Respondents identified some specific BARRIERS that hinder people recognising the need for change:



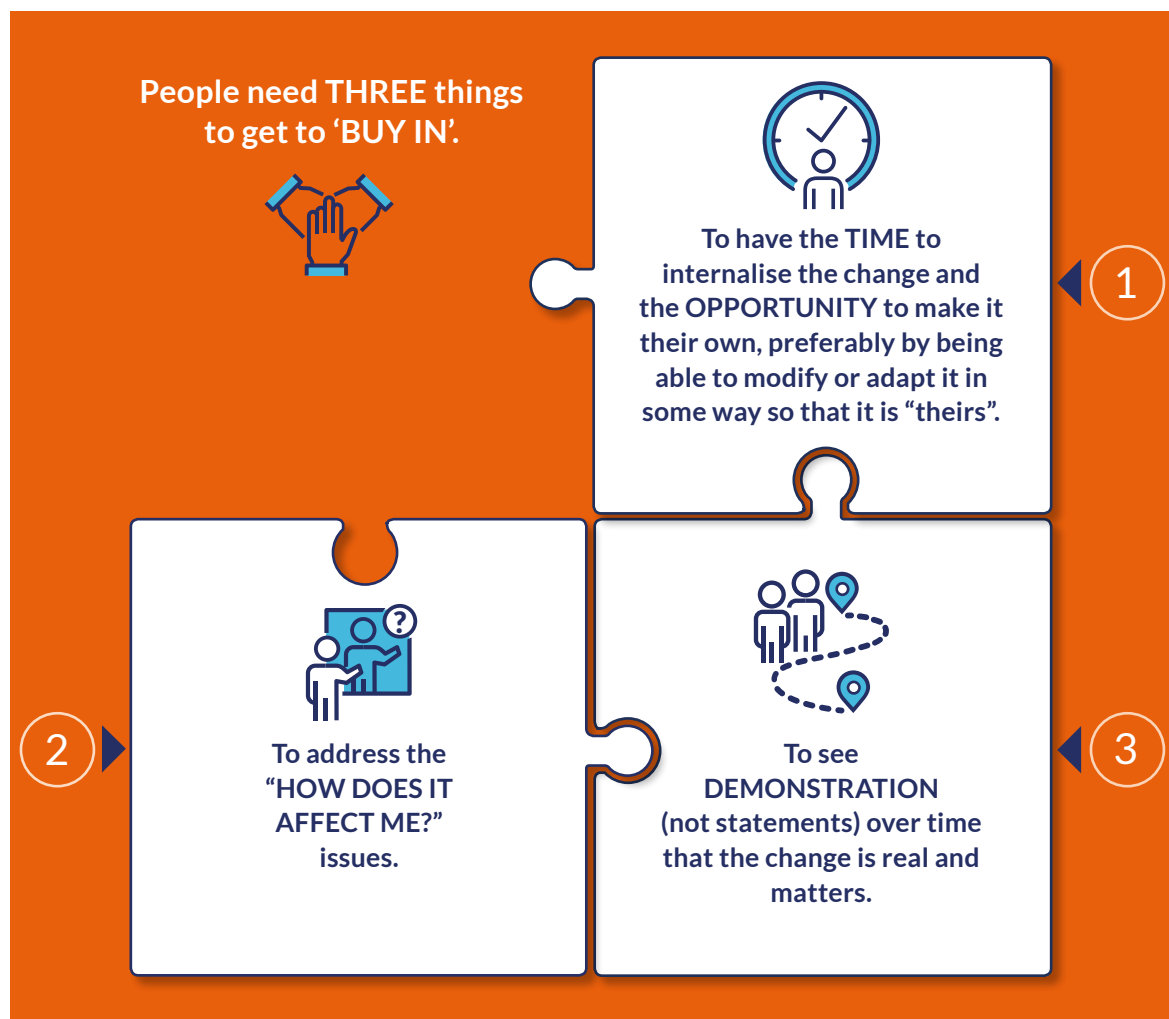
One of the distinguishing features of the successful projects appeared to be the focus on building a credible and evidence-based case for the change so that it was not just seen as fad or whimsy or one person's good idea.

The project needs to be convincingly a “must have” not a “nice to have”. Large-scale organisational change of this sort is just too difficult and demanding to be worth undertaking unless there is a very demonstrable need for the change. This shows the importance in taking the time to build the metrics to be able to answer challenges about the why.

2.3 | BUILDING COMMITMENT



Getting ‘buy in’ was the most often cited source of challenges and failure. Even if people were able to recognise the value of the change proposed they were not necessarily ready to go along with it for themselves and their people. In few organisations will people just go along with changes because they are told to; and logic alone is almost never persuasive.





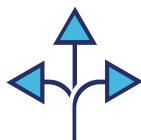
These issues are massive and the SOLUTIONS are surprising and challenging:



Communications – talk less: listen more

It is important to do a huge amount of communication: but success relies on building trust and people being prepared to work with the change, not against it. The way to achieve that is not to try and persuade people by talking to them, but instead to show that you are listening to them, respecting the culture of their part of the organisation. All the time you are talking at people they are judging and preparing their arguments against what you are saying.

While they are talking, they feel recognised and you learn what their concerns are so that you can respond appropriately – either to allay the concerns or accommodate them. This is definitely not how most communications streams of change programmes are envisaged.



Adapt – encourage co-creation

If people feel heard and they can see that their views have been recognised in the solution they will be far more committed. This is quite challenging for those running projects, as they are often part of a central team and working to a tight budget with a clear message about a solution which they have been involved in developing and therefore already have commitment to.

It's important to remember that one size does not fit all; people expressing concerns are not simply resisting change, they are often the people who run the business. They need to be listened to and the implementation needs to be adapted wherever it can to work for everyone because it'll work better and because by listening you will build the trust for it to happen at all.



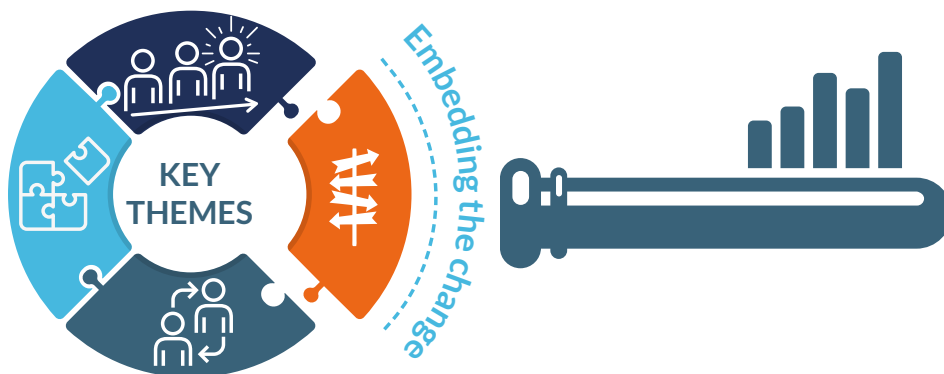
Commitment takes time

Several respondents focused on the importance of building buy-in over time; continuing to chip away at opposition and reluctance. You can't usually just run a change project and then feel it's done and move on to the next project - change is a long-term process and you have to be ready for that investment.

People need to see demonstration of progress in very visible ways. This is partly about communication of progress, but also about actions that fuel people's belief in the reality and importance of the change. For example:

- People leaving the organisation who were demonstrably not adapting to the change.
- Celebration of individuals or teams in very visible ways who had demonstrated the new behaviours.
- Other developments in the organisation which are consistent with the change, such as investment in new buildings and facilities.

2.4 | EMBEDDING THE CHANGE



There was no great surprise about the importance of embedding the change for a successful project.

The KEY ISSUES raised by respondents were:

Change Takes Time

Leaders need to stay focused on the change for months, even years, after. The actions needed for embedding are discussed in Section 3 but the most critical thing is keeping focused and not just moving on to the next big idea.



Provide Evidence of Change

This links strongly to the point on buy in; people need to see things changing around them in line with programme plans. They need evidence of change, evidence that “same old” is not acceptable.



Sometimes this is easy – for example where there are new systems or new organisational structures, - but sometimes the changes needed are less striking, more behavioural – and here leaders need to work hard to create visible stories and demonstration of the changes taking place.



Section 3.0

Steps to Change

What is Steps to Change?

Steps to Change is our road map for helping clients achieve lasting behavioural change. It is not an “X-step” process or methodology. It is descriptive of what needs to happen not prescriptive.

It describes the stages that people need to go through (individually and collectively) for behaviour change to happen and to endure. All of these stages are essential though the sequence may be iterative not linear.



See It

Own It



Change It

Live It



Steps to Change



See It

See It requires TWO ELEMENTS to be achieved.

People need to see:

- **Their own current behaviour and recognise the need for change.**
- **That there is a different and better way.**

There are also THREE LEVELS at which See It needs to be achieved:

- **DATA**

People need convincing data to demonstrate the need to change.



- **IDEAS**



People need to have the opportunity to discuss the current reality and what the new way of working looks like e.g. what will the new world look like and feel like?

- **BEHAVIOURS**

People need to be able to see the current behaviours and the way people are with each other and what will be expected in the new world. People need to recognise how their own personal behaviours will need to change.



Own It requires TWO ELEMENTS to be achieved.

People need to:

- **Personally commit to making the change.**
- **Understand the barriers to the change and believe they can be overcome.**

Own It



Change It

Change It is the stage of the behavioural change journey which is about acquiring the new way of behaving. It is very important to understand that this can be instantaneous and simple or very complex and protracted. It may just be a decision e.g. "I'll listen more to junior staff" or it could require a lengthy period of learning.

Live It is the stage of embedding the new behaviours so they become the normal way of working, and this always requires a significant period of time.

Live It



What we learned about our approach²

See It

- There was strong reinforcement of the need for this but a general feeling that not enough attention is paid to it. That is easy to understand because the people running and leading the project, and the business leaders, have spent lots of time themselves working through the need for change and what is going to be done about it. That means that by the time they engage with others they are already persuaded and therefore underestimate the journey which everyone else needs to go through. This can be thought of as the “familiarity problem”.
- While we have always been very strong on the emotional connection to **See It** (which is where drama is uniquely powerful as a technique), we also need to help clients build the intellectual case. Both are necessary, as change won’t happen if it is seen as just an idea, the latest management whim.
- People need to **See It** at every level. It does not work to invest in leaders and senior managers to the point that they **See It** and then expect everyone else to conform. Whoever needs to change their behaviour needs to experience for themselves the insight for them to believe the change is necessary.
- In building the emotional **See It**, drama got a very strong endorsement from our interviewees but other techniques are also helpful, particularly storytelling, personality profiling, honest feedback and surveys.

Own It

This is the area which threw up the most challenge for us and our approach. Even for the successful projects, respondents felt that relatively little was done in this area and there was little agreement on the best techniques. What is commonly done is felt to be inadequate – typically a communications programme with roadshows or other opportunities to hear about the project from someone senior and to ask questions.

The keys to success at the **Own It** stage, as discussed in the Building Commitment section above appear to be:

- **LISTENING:**

People need to feel heard not imposed on.



- **CO-CREATION:**

Not only being heard, but also having your views and needs reflected in the solution, has huge impact.



- **TIME:**

An important question raised but not answered by the research was how important it is to have ownership from the outset. Ownership grows over time as people experience the change and see it truly being embedded, and so while a certain amount of commitment is needed up front it may well be worth planning for this to grow and be reinforced over time.



² Detailed research findings about each stage of the Steps to Change are available in the long form research report available on our website.

Change it

There was one extremely interesting and important lesson which emerged from the research about the **Change It** stage. Most projects are well-conceived (not all of course!) and the systems, processes, planned behaviours etc are all carefully considered and largely practical. The **Change It** stage involves implementing these plans which, for the behavioural aspects, usually involves training, coaching, support materials, etc.

“...perfectly well conceived and designed projects failed or were problematic because of lack of focus on the other three stages.”

Rarely in our research were any of these elements cited as problematic. What was very strongly observed was that almost all the programme effort of both time and budget were focused here, and so there is a huge mismatch or misallocation of resources with not nearly enough time or budget being focused on the stages of **See It, Own It** and **Live It**. In other words, perfectly well conceived and designed projects failed or were problematic because of lack of focus on the other three stages.

Live it

There was agreement about the critical importance of this stage. In the successful projects, respondents were able to point at a significant range of activities with some approaches recurring with considerable frequency to embed the change. In order of mention these were:

- **Leadership continuing to demonstrate focus on the change and monitor progress.**
- **Reinforcement and continuing communications for the long term.**
- **Celebrations of success and consequence of non-adoption.**
- **Coaching and support groups.**
- **Related process and organisational changes.**

These all reinforced the recommendations built into our approach to the **Live It** stage.

However, one interesting question was raised (but not answered) by the research to do with the trade-off between a hard stop and ongoing modification. While several comments stressed the importance of continuing to adapt and modify to build continuing support, others see a value in setting a cut-off date by which compliance must have occurred.

“In the successful projects, respondents were able to point at a significant range of activities with some approaches recurring with considerable frequency to embed the change.”



Section 4.0

Conclusion

This research involved too small a sample to be considered conclusive, although since the research was done, we have discussed the findings with large numbers of leaders and change consultants³ and the findings have been strongly endorsed.

In summary, the KEYS to SUCCESSFUL LARGE-SCALE BEHAVIOUR CHANGE are considered to lie within the areas of:



“ We have discussed the findings with large numbers of leaders and change consultants and the findings have been strongly endorsed. ”

³ Particularly through workshop events at the Change Management Institute and IRM UK.

We believe there are some **IMPORTANT** and **SPECIFIC MESSAGES FOR PROGRAMME LEADERS** in managing such programmes and in advising their senior stake holders. Most notably:

1

GET ALL KEY LEADERS ON BOARD. Ensure there is a convincing and measurable commercial need.



PLAN COMMUNICATIONS, meetings and events around **LISTENING AND HONESTY.**

2

3

Set up activities that **ENABLE PEOPLE TO HAVE A CLEAR “ASPIRATIONAL VISION”.**



PROVIDE THE OPPORTUNITY FOR EVERYONE TO EXPLORE FOR THEMSELVES their own current behaviour and the need for change.

4

5

WORK ON THE BUY-IN.

Take time, listen, allow co-creation, and revisit.



BUDGET APPROPRIATELY. Don't over-focus the budget on “Change It” activities.

6

7

EMBEDDING IS KEY. Don't do the project if you are not able to follow through.



In terms of our own approach to behaviour change – **Steps to Change** – the research strongly endorsed the key elements and principles but there were some important learnings for us, and some significant questions raised.

There is plainly a huge need for further research in this field and we would greatly welcome hearing about or participating in any such research that is undertaken.

We ourselves are currently working with a university research department to investigate, using more quantitative methods, the impact of an effective **See It** phase and, specifically, the power of drama to achieve that.

Full details of the research methodology, the interviewees and the types of project discussed are available in the full research report on the Steps website <https://www.stepsdrama.com/research-findings/>.

Steps

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A large background image showing a group of people sitting at tables in a meeting or conference setting. The image is partially obscured by a dark blue diagonal overlay.

Inspiring people to act differently

steps

