

Caret - Local Government Catalyst article

Getting on the 'up' escalator

WHAT DO YOU DO TO OVERCOME THE SHOCK OF A LESS THAN FLATTERING CATEGORISATION AFTER A CPA? THE GOAL OF COURSE IS TO FIRST ACCEPT THAT SOME THINGS HAVE TO CHANGE - AND WORKING THROUGH THAT IS NO MEAN FEAT FOR SOME TEAMS. HOWEVER, AFTER YOU'VE ACCEPTED THE COMPELLING CASE FOR CHANGE – WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Start from where you are

Following acceptance of the need for change, the route should be proper planning, through to effective delivery and on into mainstreaming of a recovery effort, sustainable improvement and then excellence – the 'holy grail' of our current categorisation methodology, CPA. As a leading officer piloting improvement this will require you to help colleagues to push the boundaries of performance and raise the expectations of service deliverers and citizens alike.

Learn from the past and shape a new future

To shape this excellent future, one has to first learn from the past - and then leave it behind. Too many plans, by necessity or design, dwell in the past, sometimes due to the 'politics' of an organisation. To disengage from the past we have to create a baseline, the 'line in the sand', that encourages us then to look forward and contemplate achievement at new levels of competence and quality of outcome.

Recovery planning is about shaping that new future and performing to higher standards. Ultimately this is for the public good in its own right but it is also about persuading the regulators that there is both sustainable improvement and the future need not include some form of intensive oversight. Experience is showing however that in certain cases oversight by an external body, and one with some 'teeth' can be instrumental for critical self-analysis to take place, followed by improvement.

In my experience this was certainly the case at Walsall MBC, with its Interim Board posing some searching questions to politicians and the (interim) management team about the journey from denial to recovery.

Recovery starts with leadership

Leadership from the corporate team and the Cabinet, perhaps via a steering group role for the recovery programme, is a critical pre-cursor for recovery to take hold. Without effective and pro-active leadership, preferably from around the whole Council, recovery simply will not take hold.

Sufficient project and programme management resources need to be vested in a senior manager, who has been freed-up to lead. This is a moment where giving a job to an already overloaded person, however able, is definitely not the way forward.

The leadership role must also encompass a continual working and re-working of the alliances required to bolster the change effort to create the critical mass for change that failing organisations must have. Momentum is all and the effective leaders do not sidetracked on searches for cash to fuel recovery, or small-scale pay-offs – the task is to lead the organisation from recognising what needs to be done to wanting to do it.

Create projects or use the mainstream?

Planning for and creating a range of improvement projects could be seen as hiving-off important matters into the 'long grass', absolving line managers from responsibility. However for some organisations this may be the only guaranteed means of bringing sufficient attention and focus to critical matters. What happens though when these improvement projects need mainstreaming? Can sufficient focus still be guaranteed from within what is probably already an overstretched line-management structure?

This dilemma needs to be addressed by the corporate team and other managers involved in creating the recovery and improvement projects. They are dependent on the culture of the organisation. Effective leadership and managerial cultures, i.e. open, challenging and communicative, tend to create the conditions where the 'long grass' has been cut, - focus and accountability are part of the 'way things are done around here'.

Communication – Get the 'whole system' into the room

Alert people to what's going on; don't leave recovery as the name that can't be mentioned or the substance of rumour; ensure there is understanding at all levels of the relevance and importance of the recovery plan and the wider recovery process. If you have a built the plan from various points around the whole organisation, e.g. front, back, top, middles, bottoms you will not need to 'tell and sell' the change effort, people will recognise it. Pose the challenging questions and see what the whole system has to offer.

Draft assistance in from outside if necessary to facilitate this sort of interaction. Role model some of the changes required to leadership and management behaviours. Use technology, the intranet and web sites, and make them interactive, always responding to those colleagues motivated enough to pose questions and seek further information. This will promote broader engagement with the change effort. In Walsall, recognition rates for the recovery plan and the process were very encouraging because of the communication methods used.

Training

Change will not be universally welcomed by all within the organisation; for many what they have carefully crafted over years, if not decades, represents their values, beliefs and effort however it's portrayed by external inspectors or assessors. They didn't come to work to deliberately do a poor job.

Training for key role holders in those circumstances can't be underestimated, whether that is project management training, facilitation skills, conflict resolution, even negotiation skills would assist in certain circumstances. And include your Councillors in this too.

The Champions

Identify your champions of change; those at all levels who can promote, exemplify and positively critique the change effort. Nurture, develop and recognise them and use them to test material, check responses to messages and critique planned communications. Never stop innovating and testing, and don't be afraid to push the boundaries of the inspectors' understanding of what constitutes transformation.

No Single Quick Fix

There is hope without there being a single, quick fix to the dilemmas we all face in our organisations, whether striving to hold onto high performing status or struggling to escape the 'down escalator'. Most often 'failure', whether it's relative or absolute, represents a failure of the whole system, so changing and improving the whole-system will represent a significant challenge. Recognise that and your recovery has a better chance of succeeding.

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September 2003