

Barbara Heitger/Alexander Doujak

# Managing CUTS and New GROWTH

an innovative approach  
to change management



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# TWO EPISODES

## **(1) “Flirting in february, engaged in march, married in april — and top results in december”**

A regional branch of an international software corporation is undergoing fundamental change — from software supplier to “solution provider”. Instead of relying on the historically successful traditional software sales, its new business process model banks on holistic solutions for customers.

This new marketing approach makes comprehensive know-how a prerequisite for the units with direct customer contact. Moreover, a new management level is taking over domestic business control, and the “old” management team has been given responsibility for an entire region.

A diversely staffed change team is commissioned to implement the new organizational structure and anchor the new processes. A further, clever condition set by corporate management adds even more suspense: the business results of the ongoing year must not fall short of the plan.

One thing is clear: renewal of this kind calls for immense innovative power and, at the same time, hard cuts – abandoning the previous self-image and the strategy and routines of everyday business. Inciting radical renewal in times of success while venturing into unknown territory: this is a real management challenge.

## **(2) The old masters become production managers**

The small subsidiary of an international production group specializes in the development and production of custom orders in an economically shaky product line that has been operating in the red over several years. A major turnaround project in the production line is anticipated with deep anxiety by the “old masters”.

Radical repositioning is called for: the new strategy – converting from piece production and custom craftsmanship to small series for specialized products,

means organizational restructuring: less development resources, new business or production processes, coupled with a change in self-image of those involved. “The old masters and experts” who control the product from A to Z are to become part-specific serial workers. Job loss anxiety increases tension, as there is no definite guarantee that the new product will be a success. The results requirements, in contrast, are clear and demanding. Hope for a secure future and concentration on results improvement alternates with doubts and feelings of helplessness and loss regarding previous successes and the “industrial artisan identity”. Hard cuts need to be made as an economizing measure, and positioning for new growth needs to be developed.

Two episodes that reflect the change circumstances in many enterprises: both management situations are highly demanding – not only in terms of growth and renewal objectives, but also hard cuts – accompanied by emotional turbulence.

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# CHAPTER 1



# SAME OLD TUNE OR NEW COMPOSITION?

*Change projects aren't what they used to be – gone are the days of clearly defined projects focusing on a single topic, on strategies, downsizing, organizational development or IT matters.*

This statement was made by a top manager in a freshly merged enterprise to whom we spoke during post-merger integration. Is he right? Have the topics, requirements and dynamics of change evolved and does change management, if it is to be successful, need to come up with a new composition instead of playing the same old tune? If – and only if – this is true, does it make sense to rethink the self-image, concepts and toolbox for managing change – and in particular “transformation”, its more radical and all-encompassing variant.

We will begin by elucidating this central question – “Do we need a ‘new composition’ for successful change projects?” – from two perspectives: firstly as seen by top executives and change managers, and secondly from the point of view of our own experience as change process consultants.

## 1. What change & line managers think about

The following quotations represent a distillation of the most important results we gathered from interviews conducted with top managers during and after change projects.

*“On the one hand we have the hard-core restructuring specialists with their radical clear-cutting methods and their figures – and on the other we have the gentle organizational developers, heading into the void with their humanitarian touch!”*

This quotation clearly demonstrates the divide between hard-core downsizing and change projects that focus on evolutionary development. The marked derision that is often felt by the proponents of the one approach for the other stands in the way of the integration or the temporary interlocking of the two that is necessary in certain phases. Whatever is not part of one's own approach is rejected in that of the other.

*"It's best to just shut your eyes and take the bull by the horns – get it over with quick – it's just part of my job."*

This quotation from a manager given the responsibility of making radical cuts is symptomatic for a behavior pattern that can be described as "blind charging". In critical, emotionally unnerving phases of a change process, this leads to negative experiences in personal relations that undermine the future of new growth instead of promoting it. The pressure on individuals becomes so immense that, at first glance, burying one's head in the sand seems the most rewarding of options. Conflicts become acute, "cooperative capital" is "destroyed", and employees' commitment to the company suffers a hard blow. Particularly when proper communication of hard cuts is neglected, the psychological contract between employee and company becomes brittle.

*"Anxieties and opposition were blocking everything. To be honest, I didn't know any more what we could do."*

Understanding, coping with and working with the emotional intensity of the radical change processes managers experience in their environment – and in themselves – is definitely one of the greatest challenges of change management. As a manager, how do I deal with critical and highly emotional change situations, given that management is traditionally expected to reach rationally defined objectives, provide security, know the best way forward and communicate all this with assertiveness and consistency? Dealing with collective uncertainty is anything but trivial – especially if one is directly involved. A strong sense of self and knowing one's own patterns in dealing with change are absolute necessities. That is the one, very personal side of the matter, which concerns one's own resources and also one's own limitations in dealing with changes. The other side is about acquiring new knowledge about managing changes: managers need an "inner map" that shows them which dynamics to expect when making hard cuts and which to anticipate in the case of new growth. Un-

derstanding the logic of feelings in such processes is extremely beneficial – it enables managers to proceed constructively and accelerate the change process.

*“There is a huge contradiction here. On the one hand we’re always hearing ‘people are our most important capital’, and three sentences later comes the statement ‘the only thing that really counts is shareholder value’ – and that means downsizing, dismissing employees.”*

This quotation is one among many that demonstrate how the polarities that need to be brought together in change projects keep getting more extreme. Both statements are true: human resources are indeed enterprises’ most important capital and, in the end, effective change is always expressed in employee behavior. At the same time, market success is measured in performance figures or share prices. Everything that increases employee productivity – and in the short term this includes staff reduction – registers positively on the stock exchange. We do not believe that these polarities can be stabilized and balanced. Like surfing, it is more a matter of utilizing the waves that generate imbalance to get ahead and to find a balance in the midst of motion.

The trick lies in working with these contradictions in their polarity and with all their pros and cons, and deciding one way or the other as the process moves ahead. For managers, this is easier said than done: the “good old” hierarchy calls for directness, clarity and objectives free of contradiction. The more turbulent and fast-moving the corporate environment is, the less feasible this becomes. Managing more contradictions requires more open change processes – making space for “changing change”.

*“It’s all well worded and glossed over, but nobody believes it” (And a few sentences later): “Internationalization is our only chance”.*

*“There are constantly new change projects underway here – I can’t even count them all. Then, at some point, they quietly fade out.”*

How can companies succeed in making clear why and in what direction changes need to be made? Clear orientation in terms of “why” and “where to” is a must for generating change energy. When change projects are carried out at increasing shorter intervals and under ever-changing banners, it becomes very difficult to activate staff. Mistrust increases, and an attitude of: “Look, another

new cow is being herded through the village, but this change, too, will pass” sets in. The inflation of change initiatives creates “change resistance” – neither managers nor employees take announcements as seriously as before. Stability is anchored in the informal networks of long-standing collaboration: so we get a lot of waves on the surface, but calm and stability in the deep. Why does this happen?

We believe that the initiators of change programs overestimate organizations’ capacity for and capability of change, and that “creating a sense of urgency” (Kotter) should not be overused as an initial impetus if it is to remain convincing.

*“Then, all of a sudden, the machines came to a standstill – the warhorses and the old masters were gone, and nobody knew what to do next.”*

This quote is typical for projects with simultaneous hard cuts and new growth, and shows how rapidly “organizational memory” and important tacit knowledge can be lost in the endeavor to achieve short-term economizing objectives at full force. This is a frequent side effect of the “grab the bull by the horns” attitude that endangers projects’ long-term success.

*“Our situation was totally different – incomparable with change projects in other firms. We just dove right into the deep end.”*

Here one’s own change management is described as being absolutely unique. Exchanging experiences and best practices with other companies is not on the management agenda. This is an attitude we have often encountered, particularly in projects involving hard cuts. Clearly, a great deal of apprehension exists about learning from the experiences of other firms that have been in similar situations. We have identified three reasons for this. Firstly, the pressure for change is so high that companies do not allow themselves much time for planning. Secondly, there is a prevailing belief among companies that systems are rapidly changeable – comparable with mechanical adjustments, where the engineer turns a screw and the change is effectively managed. Thirdly, hard cuts generate negative emotions such as fear, embarrassment, guilt or failure – the desire to exchange experiences such as these is limited.

*“We were completely trapped in our internal struggles. What was happening on the market, the goals we wanted to reach with customers – this all faded into the backdrop.”*

This comment substantiates how strong the pull of internal dynamics is when there are contradictions to be managed and the hot phases of change projects are underway. A strong orientation on internal processes is, of course, repeatedly necessary and does not pose a problem when it is consciously set as a priority. But if the market and the original goals of the change project move out of focus for a longer period of time, this becomes hazardous.

*“The external experts brought in clever concepts and developed new ideas – which they couldn’t have come up with without our input – and then they left. Since then, it’s all been just gathering dust.”*

This statement demonstrates how demanding it is to effectively link truly innovative – or even radical – input from the outside with the company’s internal knowledge capital. Quite frequently, external experts are called in for a pilot project, and implementation is initiated separately – often much later as a “re-launch” – and in some cases never. Many other interviews also showed that decision-makers frequently delegate hard cuts and innovations in their own business or new organizational concepts to external consultants. Confidence in the innovative competencies of one’s own corporation is low. Skills for strengthening the innovativeness of organizations and teams have yet to become standard management know-how. Still, most managers we talked with declared themselves in favor of joint control of hard cuts and new growth.

*“It was change per decree – like a Potemkin village. Nobody believed in it and nothing happened!” or: “There were two worlds: my day-to-day business, where I was sorely missed while the workshops were going on, and the change workshops, which were like being on a cruise ship, totally surreal and detached.”*

These statements represent two different approaches to change process management. The first reflects a directive approach “producing” words but no action – perhaps due to the initiators’ lack of readiness for change, or to their lack of knowledge on how to implement complex changes. The second quotation betrays an understanding of change that sets aside both time and a place for

making changes, but fails to make a productive connection to daily business and is not really supported by commitment. Both approaches fail to grasp the entire complexity of hard cuts and new growth, so that lasting implementation is doomed to fail.

## 2. Three images of change management

On the whole, we encountered three prevailing images of change management in the interviews:

**Change management as announcing and calling for change.** This understanding of change emanates from the idea that the initiator acts like an engineer applying a lever to the organizational machine. The organization is altered externally by employing the right procedure (confidence in the expert – everything depends on having the right lever in the right place). The chances of this type of change project failing rise with its complexity, because the focus on traditional hierarchy and bureaucracy as steering principles poses a further risk factor. Typically the concept for change is finalized and announced – and then nothing happens.

**Change management as a “series of workshops”** is based on the assumption that the company changes when its people are involved in working on the change. Here, the attention of change management is focused on the “sum of people who need to change”. The connection to the company as a “system” is neglected. The main emphasis is placed on relying on individuals and the security of relations to make the change succeed. In this approach, implementation and transfer of the change to the entire system and daily business are in danger of failing – particularly when dealing with radical changes.

The third view, which we feel does the complexity of current changes the most justice, sees **change management as a self-relational process** within the company – a process that requires a stable architecture. Self-relational means that every intervention generates reactions that, in turn, influence the change process itself. When one changes the shape of something, one is also being shaped by that action. A stable architecture makes it possible to mold the course of the change – which is subject to contradictory turbulences – into stable and reliable process elements (“process security” instead of mere expert security – i.e. sta-

bility in the social architecture and the process, not in the absolute validity of concepts decided once and for all).

### **3. Negative statements predominate**

If we look at the overall picture that emerged from the evaluated manager interviews, one aspect becomes particularly clear. In the course of the frank discussions, we asked about the ups and downs of change processes, images and effects, “lessons learned” and personal outcomes. Critical and negative statements about change were significantly predominant. We presume four reasons for this:

1. Firstly, an understandable counter-reaction to the general public euphoria regarding change. Seen in this context, the discussions also had a “venting” function – which is important in change processes.
2. Secondly, changes of this intensity are new territory for everyone – both consultants and managers. Knowledge, experience and fine-tuned models are still being developed. Change management competence is a new field of general management.
3. Thirdly, managers in change processes are doubly affected. As both drivers and participants, they are also involved in all of the cognitive and emotional turbulences triggered by such processes. At the same time, by virtue of their function, they are called upon to provide orientation and to effectively organize changes.
4. Fourthly, we believe one needs to ask whether many of the positive changes that take place in companies are even perceived as such or labeled as “change”. Reports from innovative companies (3M, Microsoft and St. Luke’s) or startups show how much positive change simply happens – without being identified as such.

### **4. Change management as daily business – our experiences as consultants**

What developments have we as change project consultants observed in our clients’ companies in the past years?

The **number and variety** of change management projects requiring simultaneous control is on the rise – and their inter-dependency is also increasing as a result.

Contrariety in change processes is a growing trend. An increasing number of projects pursue streamlining goals and repositioning, innovation or growth at the same time. More and more projects aim not only for evolutionary change (“We will become better”), but also radical change: a quantum leap (“We will become different”).

The pressure to implement – i.e. to quickly and effectively consolidate change in the company – is growing. The efficiency of change management is a success factor rewarded on the stock market. Only few enterprises also measure the outcome and the success of change projects. *What have we actually achieved with the change?* This question is demanding. It is rarely asked.

Openendedness and “moving targets” are increasingly characteristic for change processes. Unforeseeable external interventions, market developments or decisions affecting the project need to be integrated in the ongoing change process. “The changing of change” is a permanent issue. Hardly anyone believes in the simple feasibility of changes nowadays. That is the fundamental aspect of this development. In practical terms, it is a matter of building up process security in order to steer projects through the turbulence – to make sound decisions about when to bank on stability and when to bank on “changing change”.

The reaction of both management and employees is more and more frequently “*Oh no, not again*” or “*This is an absolute jungle of change concepts we’re moving in*”. This is an indicator for change fatigue in organizations, and also shows that change management resources – not only time and know-how, but first and foremost emotional change energy, the desire for something new – are limited, not inexhaustible.

Controlling the contradiction between internal and external orientation in change projects is demanding: Externally, it is often a matter of complying with the (short-term) logic of figures and maintaining focus on customer benefit – often this alone harbors ample potential for conflict. Internally, commitment and movement need to be generated. Internal dynamics – especially emotional escalation and blockages – bind a great deal of energy without bringing the pro-

cess forward. As a result, all attention is focused inward, and the original objectives are lost from view.

With the pressure for change and the necessity to achieve objectives, the development of change management competence within a company tends to fall by the wayside. Change management competence can be assessed by answering the question: “*What are the strengths and weaknesses of the way we initiate, conceptualize, launch, implement and anchor change concepts?*” On the personal level, this is a matter of the social and cognitive change management competence of the key players. On the organizational level, change management competence is determined by resources and the patterns of the organization’s behavior as a system in the process of change.

“Change is good.” Those in support of preservation and stability are readily labeled anti-change and conservative. Those rooting for change are progressives, the winners. The quote from Tom Peters, “*Nothing is more constant than change*” has become a firmly anchored ideology in many enterprises. This statement also betrays a belief in the rapid changeability of systems. The equally important need for anchoring and stabilizing is easily lost sight of. The consequences are change projects that generate lots of waves on the surface and are “sloughed through” without changing the enterprise’s in-depth structure, its entrenched action and decision-making routines. Core identity, typical patterns, positioning, the market, customers and partners are perceived and dealt with the same way as before. This may be a successful – even if unconscious – compromise (changing on the surface, but not in the core) if one wants to do the “change ideal” justice *and* fulfill one’s own need for continuity. But such a compromise hardly brings results. Many projects aiming for hard cuts and new growth separate conceptual work from implementation. They begin with analyses, data comparison, strategies and organization concepts developed by external experts and submitted to top management for decision. Managerial personnel and employees tend to take in this model with ambivalence – as perhaps innovative and well thought out content-wise, but little suited to the company’s deep-rooted identity and specific daily business, a judgement which of course also betrays the need to hold on to the status quo. The result is a lack of energy to implement changes and an absence of commitment. In the second act – often with a new cast – an implementation project is started, either internally by management or externally with new consultants. In the meantime, valuable time has passed and the chances for dealing with new concepts in a productive way have sunk.

Another separation we have frequently observed is the “split” into two types of change projects: those with “hard” goals, streamlining projects very much oriented on immediate economic success on the one hand, and on the other hand growth-oriented projects that concentrate either on a change in company culture or renewal and innovation. Each of these contrasting project types produces a management concept and criteria for success that cancel out those of the other. Streamlining projects focus on the reduction of “deficits” (lower costs, staff reduction etc.). Growth and potentials are not an issue (“*you can’t shrink to success*”). Growth-oriented projects tend to have difficulty focusing on measurable success and resource limitation. More often than not, “hard cuts” win out over new growth, because they are more radical and tend to make it difficult to maintain the delicate prerequisites and incentives for renewal. New growth as transformation – i.e. as “becoming different” and not merely “getting better” – also means, for all concerned, questioning and eventually giving up ingrained routines and stable patterns of cooperation and perception. In the first place, this must be really worthwhile and, in the second, it needs to be steered very skillfully.

## 5. What follows from all of this?

On the basis of our experiences, interviews and compiled survey results, we can draw the following conclusions:

In addition to result-oriented performance indexes, qualitative factors such as consistent strategy implementation, management quality and innovative strength are becoming increasingly important criteria for companies’ success. Change management generates more visible value creation than before.

The readiness and ability to conceive and realize complex change projects effectively and quickly are success factors for managers, and represent a competitive advantage for companies. This particularly applies to projects that make hard cuts and at the same time aim for innovation or new growth. Contradictory dynamics are typical for these change projects.

Change management requires professionalization; in the past, this area of competence was not a standard item on managers’ and consultants’ “agenda”. The need for orientation and repertoire in this area is growing.

As managers and consultants, we need to develop an understanding of how organizations can change in a way that does justice to the complexity of turbulent transformations (neither change by decree nor change as a series of workshops). Once we have mapped this out, we can develop structures, designs and interventions that do justice to hard cuts on the one hand and innovation and the typical dynamics of the different phases of change on the other (Chapter 2).

How we picture change determines how we act, how we as consultants and managers “navigate” and control change. Naturally, this also determines our perception of success – our self image is a vital factor as well. A realistically positive image of ourselves, our company and its potential is a considerable source of energy.

We need a better understanding of what constitutes hard cuts and what characterizes new growth. Only then can we decide where within the change process they can be linked, and where it is advisable to let them run on their own, in parallel or one after the other (Chapter 3).

Change is a highly emotional issue. Changes spark off turmoil in organizations – and in individuals. Understanding the pattern and “identity” of their own organization is important for managers and consultants, as is understanding themselves as individuals in the change process. Perceiving the logic of feelings in others and ourselves, and utilizing this understanding with “empathetic distance” as a motor and a resource is highly productive – and often makes the difference between success and failure (Chapter 4).

## **6. Same old Tune or new Composition in change management?**

We believe that managers and consultants wishing to make changes that aim for hard cuts and new growth will depart from long-standing ideas about how change can succeed. We have experienced this in a variety of situations, and this has prompted us to develop our concepts for systemic management and systemic consultation further, to prepare and test specific instruments for change projects that aim for simultaneous hard cuts and new growth, and to write this book.

## Thoughts of people affected by change

### (1) change manager

... My assignment is so vague ... I'm going to be confronted with horrible emotions ... this is going to be a real downer ... corporate management has no idea what's really going on down here ... how am I supposed to keep track of the big picture? ... of course, the assignment is challenging, and I do enjoy taking on new tasks ... there's a lot of potential for me personally, if I do manage to bring the organization up to par ... but my standing will really suffer if I don't ... What can I actually achieve on my own? ... I need a good team to support me ... how can I involve customers ... but it's way too early for that, anyways ... water cooler gossip is reaching storm force, there's talk of entire departments being shut down ... even if I do have an opinion of my own, I can't say anything about it officially ... the first pilot projects are touching down ... there's a few good results already ... customer feedback is encouraging ... no idea how I'm going to manage my private life in the next 6 weeks ... I've got to call my wife ... How can I get some quiet and stability? ... but this is an appealing task, after all ... it's not my first project, I've accomplished a lot in the past ... but this one is extremely complex and challenging ... what will things look like in 5 years? ... everything will be entirely different ... I'll probably be working on another project by then ... what criteria do managers use to measure performance, anyways? Who evaluates this? ... staff, management ...? ... How do I bridge the gap between staff and management? ... this is a real sandwich position I'm in ... who were my role models before? ... which role model fits this situation? ... How do I organize this process so that I don't have to do an 80-hour week? ... I'm looking forward to the next team meeting ... the subprojects in downsizing need a lot of emotional support ... how do I treat the losers? ... how do I curb the euphoria, or is it a bad idea to dampen enthusiasm when we're aiming for growth? ... What were the real crises in my life, how did I overcome them, what coping strategies did I have? ... I've accomplished so much already ... the next large-scale event – just thinking about it gives me heartburn ... I'm used to speaking in public ... but it's all so emotional ... I hope they'll be able to keep it under control ... on the other hand, it's always a thrilling experience to surf through those big events ... it's exciting to be at the center of attention ... I think my presentation will go really well ... I've always been good at the informal networking part afterwards ... so many questions ... what really keeps me going is this basic feeling of strength ...