5 Ways to Facilitate Change in Your Business

What would you change, if you could, in your business?

I hear the same themes voiced by the owners of growing SMEs – and not just in certain sectors. Broadly they sound like this:

1. How do we get our staff to feel the same about the business as we do?

2. How can we get people to share information across teams without heavy handed processes?

3. How do we avoid any duplication of effort?

4. How can we get new employees up to speed and productive more quickly?

5. If only we could get people to take personal responsibility and suggest improvements or new ideas where they see the opportunity – or even to answer a ringing phone when it's not theirs!

6. We know we don't spend enough time thinking strategically but how do we break the cycle of being driven by day to day operational tasks?

7. How can we reduce the amount of time spent 'just' managing people?

Do any of these resonate with you?

If we want to change behaviours and perceptions and create a powerful culture which doesn't purely rely on injections of energy from the top then involvement is critical – and this is where facilitation can be your most powerful ally.

Similarly, while we may want to reduce the amount of time spent managing people the answer is often in harnessing the strengths and energy of the very same people. Building a business where people are engaged and good processes support the right actions is key to being scaleable for SMEs.

Some of these challenges, by the fact that they involve people, mean they are complex. However, there are powerful ways in which we can start to facilitate the changes we want in our business. Here are 5 which I use and have seen to be effective in a range of ways:

1. **Create a clear picture of what is happening now.**
   Draw input from customers, employees, suppliers, Non-Exec Directors as well as from financials and other measures. Understand how people feel about your business and their experience of dealing with you. Both the exercise itself and the outputs often provide fascinating insights into the culture of your organisation – IE 'How we do things around here.'

   Perceptions can vary greatly even amongst team members. Creating a clear and current picture is a good way to arrest myths and unhelpful misconceptions and, in doing so, establish a common platform from which to plan and work together.

2. **Define your compelling future business.**
   When you set about building your 3 or 5 year business plan you don't have to do it by yourself or even as a senior management team. Valuable input can come from any part of the business: The guy on the warehouse floor who has noticed the inefficiencies of how stock is managed or the salesperson who finds they are coming up against a whole new wave of competition will have insights and ideas you may not have thought about.

   It's not necessarily practical or valuable to get input into every element of your business plan. What is important is that you have the best quality input for all components of the plan. By being open minded about where the insights and knowledge may lie you can start to engage those who you need to deliver it while building a better plan than you would otherwise have.

3. **Get clear on your company values**
   For 15 years I worked for Mars in a diverse range of functions: finance, logistics, planning, sales and training. Although the business had 35,000 associates worldwide the 5 Principles were – and still are – known by everyone. No matter what your role or level of seniority you would know how to apply the principles of quality, mutuality, efficiency, responsibility and freedom in your daily work. They underpinned behaviour and decision making throughout the business. This is what I mean by company values.

   What are the guiding principles for your business? How do they steer decision making? How do they influence behaviours? Sometimes these evolve organically and we are happy with them but, if not, take time to decide on them. Encourage discussion on how they play out at all levels, in all roles across the business. Weave them into team meetings, induction training, feedback and appraisals and dealings with customers and suppliers.

4. **Identify the full scope of strengths within your team**

   Focussing on strengths has become more popular as the realisation that no matter how much time, energy and money we might spend on developing our weaknesses they are likely to only reach an acceptable level. Provided that we have recruited well and the strengths required by the business exist within the team, harnessing strengths has the potential to multiply success. Consider this, a fantastic product designer hands over his concept to a supreme manufacturing team who produce a faultless product which is then marketed precisely to the target consumers and the distribution team deliver stock just in time!

   The art is in identifying those very strengths. People lean towards the tasks they do most naturally, even if it's not on the job description! Profiling helps to raise awareness. Facilitating projects and cross-team collaboration can help unearth real gems. However, don't forget to look beyond the office walls and find out what people love doing and excel at outside of work.

   As a word of caution, lack of knowledge or skill in a particular area is not the same as a weakness – it can be an undeveloped strength so don't always write it off!

5. **Create reasons to collaborate**

   'I wish they would work closer together or even talk to each other,' laments the beleaguered manager. So, how does everything we've already talked about help?

   a. Does the feedback from customers and team members shine a light on the gaps in communication? Have you used it to explore the potential to make business easier and better with more collaboration?
   b. Do the business goals clearly communicate the importance of collaboration? E.g 'To create a seamless experience for our customers which is reflected in an increased customer retention rate of 75%'
   c. Do the business values encourage collaboration? 'Collaboration' can be a value.
   d. **Do people truly know what their strengths are, what others' strengths are and how to use them all to best effect?**

Encouraging team members to contribute isn't a one-off exercise. In fact, that can have the opposite effect, raising suspicion and shutting down communication! Creating channels for regular feedback or ideas for improvements - and then acknowledging their value - is a smart way of working which taps further into the strengths in your teams.