

Business Leaders Forum

The Business Leaders Forum is organised by Obsidian Consulting, a business consultancy, and the British Antarctic Survey, a world leader in research into global environmental issues, acting in partnership. It was formed when a group of interested senior figures from businesses based in the East of England attended a seminar run by the partners called “Adapt and Prosper” in Cambridge, in November 2007, which explored some of the potential impacts of climate change and other environmental considerations on companies. Further meetings have taken issues forward, exploring how organisations can effectively be aligned to new strategies, be they environmental, CSR or driven by other priorities.

Meeting No 5, on October 14th 2009 was the first event to be organised in Suffolk and enjoyed additional sponsorship from Herbert Industrial and Denny Bros..

The following summarises the debate:

“Evaluating Change”

Having considered planning and managing change in previous Forums this session concentrated upon evaluating Major change programmes both before their inception, by way of justification and during their implementation, to assess progress and value.

The Forum focused on aspects relating to meeting this challenge:

1. What are the key components that require evaluation? What has worked? What has not worked?
2. Sometimes it takes longer than planned to achieve the target outcome (particularly financial return) – how do you maintain shareholder / stakeholder support?

The organisers are grateful for the contributions of all attending. Companies represented:

Birkett Long
Birketts LLP
British Sugar
Cambridge Housing Society
Carter Jonas
COA Solutions
Denny Bros
Elogistics

Empark
Ensors Chartered Accountants
Handelsbanken
Hastoe Group
Herbert Group
Heritable Bank
Lloyds TSB
Mentfor

Nampak
Peninsula
Prettys
Qualcomm
Taylor Vinters
Thursday Cottage
UKTI
Wilkin & Sons

What could / should be evaluated?

The plenary and groups suggested the following as complementary to financial measures:

- Operating Efficiencies (OE)
- Time taken to produce goods or supply services
- All aspects of Performance, using a 'balanced scorecard' approach can be helpful.
- Waste reduction = Environmental impact
- Lessons adopted – evidenced by application, behaviours, business benefits
- Retention of key staff
- Staff perceptions through anonymous surveys

Key risks to success should be predicted and contingency planning adopted. Unexpected consequences and failure to take **people** with the project were perceived as the main risks to success.

Some projects start without the key players having a common view of what success or achievement will 'feel like' or how it will be measured.

What works and what doesn't?

Engagement is key – of management, staff, shareholders, customers, suppliers. Monitoring this engagement continuously is important so that weak-spots can be addressed. In any major change there will be self-perceived victims or resisters who will need to be addressed, not ignored. In downsizing, the survivors self-esteem and engagement can and should be measured because on them depends on ongoing success. Selecting the management team for a change project should take into account whether the individuals will be 'winners' or 'losers' in the process.

Assessing engagement needs to be done meaningfully – staff really need to be and feel consulted not just offered a route to comment.

In many cases, change is driven by a believer, who champions it and overcomes objections? Objectives and vision need to be shared universally so that buy-in can be to something believable. This should be sustainable – though forecasting the future in which this must be achieved is problematic. Visionary change is different to cost-cutting change because it generally paints a picture of a better future in which to invest rather than mere survival, which tends to be short-term.

Measurement of change can be done against milestones established (albeit by guesswork/forecasting) before the project starts, so that there is evidence of drift which can be addressed.

Assessing customer reaction and satisfaction is frequently given too little thought – if the questions are not appropriate and the differences of opinion within a customer body are not adequately understood the project can go off-course.

In the Public sector priorities are often hard to pin down in objective terms. Politics between the stakeholders is an important dimension to understand.

It was commented that many businesses evaluate change that is facilitated by outside parties much more rigorously than where the change has been facilitated internally.

Further events are planned.