AGILE CHANGE
management limited

# Managing high volumes of change.


Author

Melanie Franklin

Director

Agile Change Management Limited

## Introduction

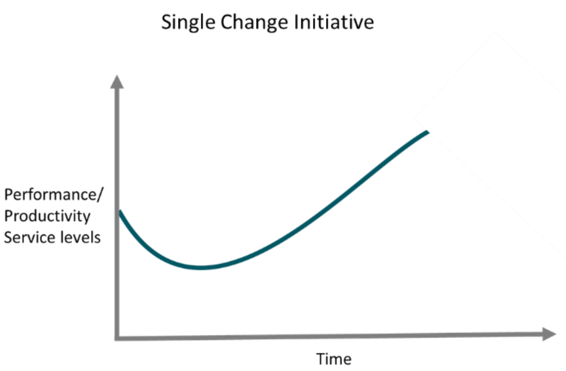
One of the most well received sessions in my Change Management Practitioner course is a debate on the practical solutions for addressing the challenge of managing multiple changes. The change management profession continues to evolve, and we can no longer rely on techniques that manage only singular changes. We cannot ignore the reality that at any one time there are multiple changes taking place, in different states of preparedness but often impacting the same staff over and over again.

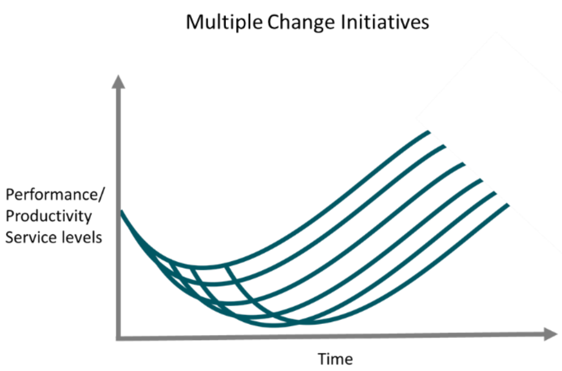
I think the skills and priorities discussed here are relevant for anyone who is involved in identifying, managing or sponsoring change, at whatever level you are in the hierarchy of your organisation. This includes Programme and Project Managers. Product Owners (from Agile environments) as well as functional business leaders sponsoring change for their departments and teams.

## Managing multiple changes

The age of individual change initiatives, tackling one issue at a time, is over. Every day we are experiencing multiple changes, some of which we are responsible for, and others that we are impacted by, originating in other parts of our organisation or from external parties.

Instead of gearing up for a single change, we are in a constant state of transition. One of the things that as leaders we have lost in this environment of constant change is being able to mobilise everyone towards a single objective, and to easily track how much of that objective we have achieved. I always joke that I miss the last century, when as a leader I would be managing just a few initiatives at a time, which gave me the space to see the progress we were making and to enable the team to rest after a period of significant change effort, before asking them to commit to the next initiative.




*Source: Melanie Franklin 2018*

In the 21st century, constant change leaves us at risk of change fatigue, with everyone trying to juggle multiple changes and where each of us at different levels of awareness and involvement for each of these changes. It is also the unrelenting nature of these changes, with no rest in sight that creates a feeling of hopelessness, with no chance to get on top of the 'To Do List' that can lead to high levels of stress.

I think this environment of constant, high volume change creates the following challenges for leaders:

- Being able to explain what changes are going to happen
- Describing the current status of change
- Knowing what to prioritise

I am going to describe my solutions as they apply to a Sponsor of change, but these remarks are equally valid for a Head of PMO, a Programme Manager or a Change Manager leading a specific change initiative.

## Being able to explain what changes are going to happen

In an environment of constant change, it is vital that the Sponsor can articulate the end goal or overall objective for their area of the business, to which all the changes are contributing. This gives everyone a solid and stable end destination which they are heading towards and is constant irrespective of the change that is taking place. The destination enables all those impacted by the change to understand how individual changes are needed to achieve this bigger picture.

Sponsors need to be able to explain what they understand to be all the required changes need to achieve this end goal, so that all those impacted know what new ways of working they will need to prepare for.

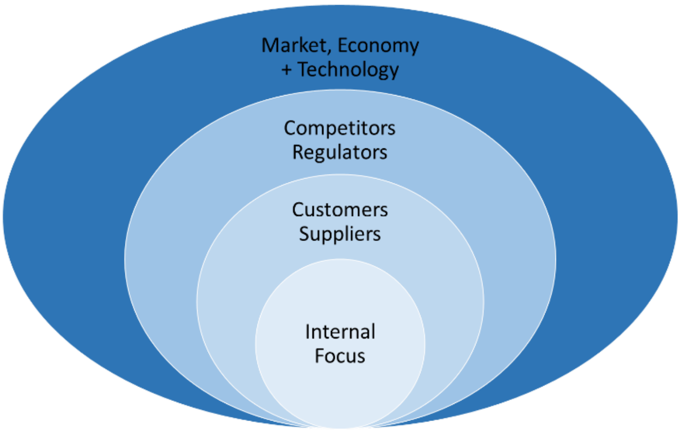
Sponsors must accept that this in itself is a changing picture, because as early changes are completed, their impact will affect what changes are needed next, along with changes to the business environment, which constantly evolves and affects which changes are needed and which are no longer required.

This can trigger credibility issues for Sponsors, who are hesitant to share what they know about potential changes for fear of being proved wrong as circumstances change. I think the way to overcome this concern is for Sponsors to be transparent about the ambiguity of the future, and to regularly update staff on what they see as emerging priorities. This enables them to be authentic, because in a fast changing environment, an effective leader creates certainty by sharing not only what they know, but also their hypotheses of what might happen and the reasoning that they have used to make these assumptions.

One communication strategy that is doomed to failure is waiting until there is certainty before addressing staff. We are in an uncertain world and a characteristic of effective leaders is to maintain credibility, trust, empathy and authenticity when what you announced last week has changed this week. I think the answer is to keep talking about the wider context and all the different forces at work, any one of which could knock what you are saying off course. But the destination/desired outcome remains stable, it is how it is achieved that will change.

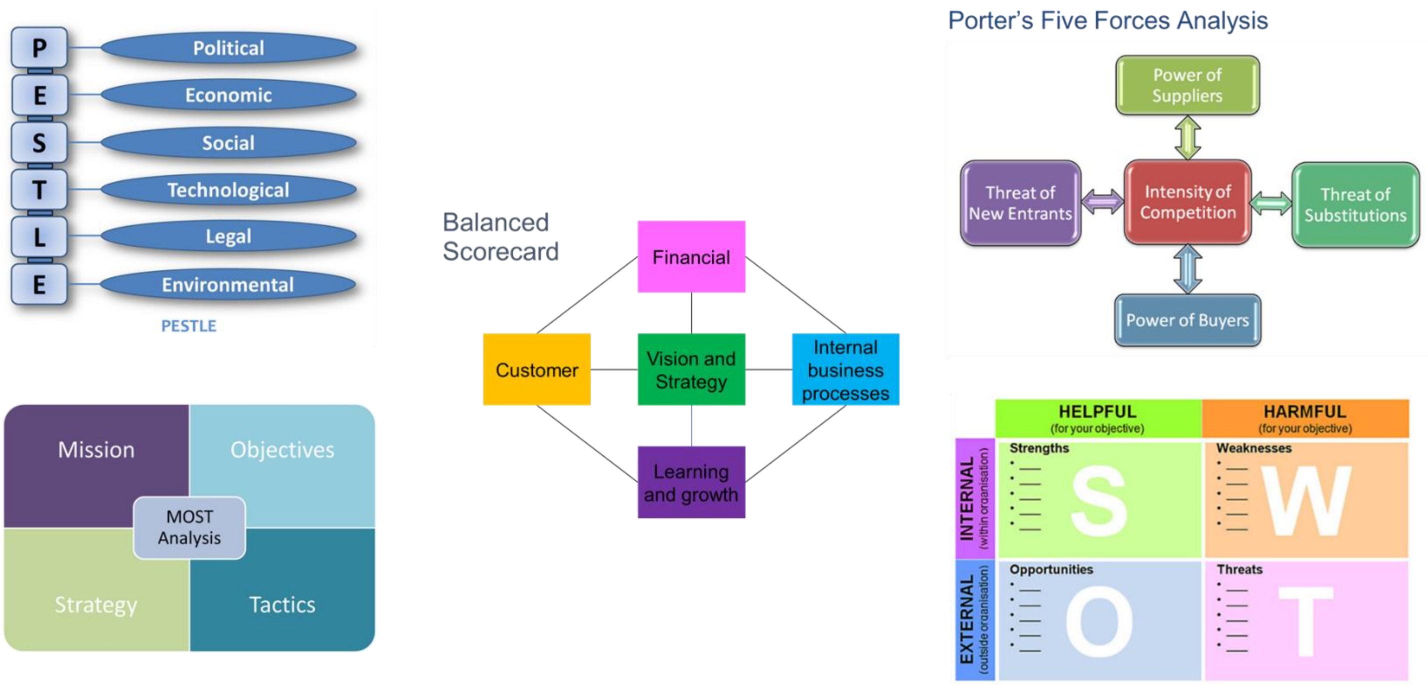
To be able to do this, Sponsors need to instigate a regular and frequent process of 'horizon scanning' where they assess external and internal factors to identify potential future changes. Horizon scanning requires a curiosity about the factors that affect the organisation, using models and assessments to try to identify what might happen in the future.

Effective horizon scanning look at the internal drivers for change as well as the external drivers:




*Source: Melanie Franklin 2018*

A variety of business models can be used for horizon scanning, as the most important thing is to ask questions about the potential future business environment, and from the answers, try to identify the changes that will need to be made to meet the future.




*Source: Melanie Franklin 2018*

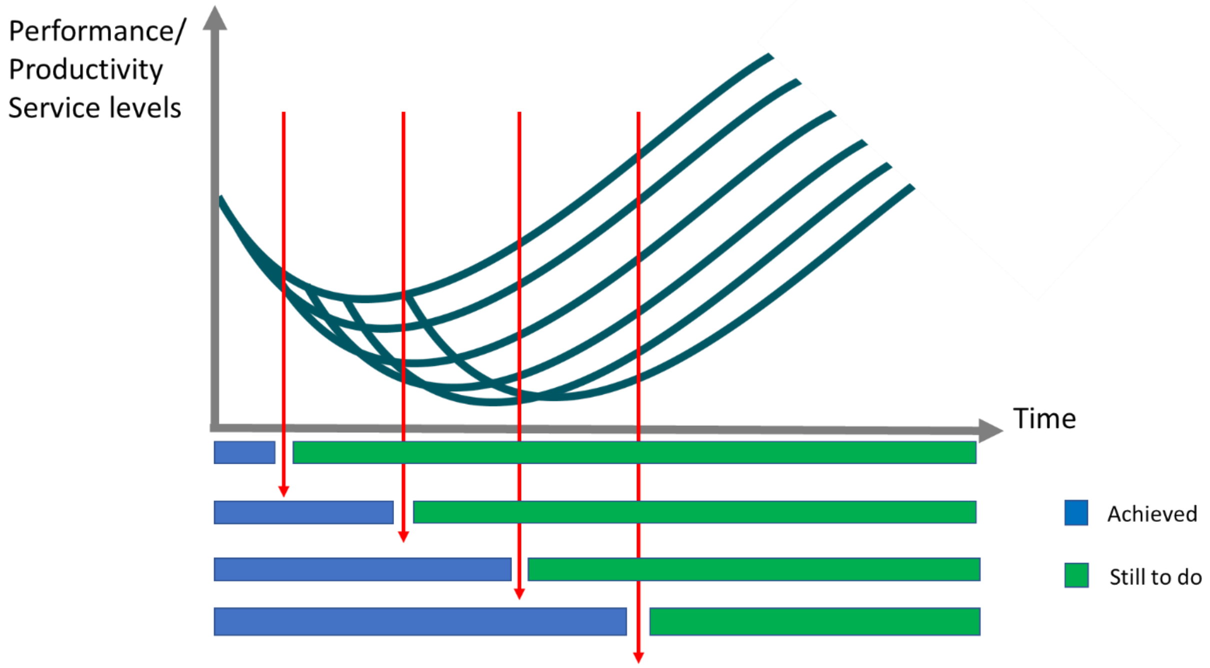
These models allow the internal and external landscape to be assessed using a stable set of questions/factors that highlight how the internal capability of the organisation and the external business environment is evolving, identifying new ideas and new priorities.

These tools can be widely shared so that the process of horizon scanning becomes a collaborative exercise, with the more people involved, the greater the understanding that is created about possible changes that are needed.

## Describing the current status of change

Knowing what all the potential changes that are on the horizon is important, but so is being able to identify the current status of changes already underway. It is important to communicate what has been achieved and how far the team have come in achieving their goals and objectives are essential in being able to motivate them to do more.

This status update needs to be a regular event, as it provides a useful comparison for everyone involved of what has been achieved, and what remains to be done, knowing that new things might be added at any moment.




*Source: Melanie Franklin 2018*

I think there is value in undertaking informal "Achievement Assessments" where questions are asked about the following:

1. How many people have started working in the new way?
2. How many problems have we solved this week?
3. What positive impacts have we experienced since we moved to the new ways of working?

I like to get people to share their perspectives on what has improved as part of a regular team meeting. This keeps people focused on the 'good stuff', thinking about what has gone right, not what the problems are.

## Knowing what to prioritise

One of the most stressful and exhausting aspects of working in an environment of multiple changes is a nagging doubt that you are spending time on the wrong things. Most of us are worried that there is something else more important that we should be doing, so to minimise this risk, we end up 'spinning plates' i.e. doing a little bit of everything, just enough to keep things moving but not enough to get anything finished.

Clearly in situations where there are high volumes of change, knowing which is the most important or urgent initiative to tackle is an important skill. Many of us already use the MoSCoW prioritisation technique for helping us to consider which of initiatives are:

Must Haves

Should Haves

Could Haves

Won't Have…this time

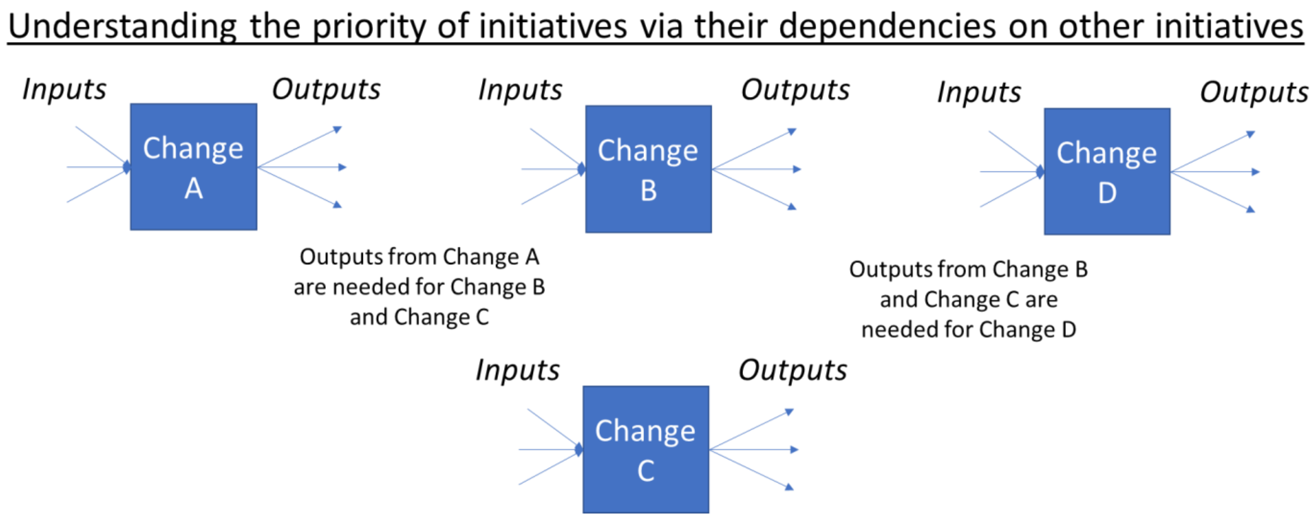
However, many of us end up in the same situation, in that nearly everything feels like a Must and at the very least, everything is a Should Have. So we are left the difficulty of deciding what makes something move from a Should Have to a Must Have?

I think we need to move away from using the Business Case and the amount of proposed benefits to help us decide. I think that deciding what change initiatives to work on is a two stage process:

1. Use the Business Case to evaluate the viability of the change, to decide if it is something that we should be doing at all, but don't confuse that with deciding when it should be done. All the Business Case can tell you is that by looking at the change initiative in isolation, it is clear that it has business value and is something that should be invested in.
2. Use an understanding of how the change initiative connects to other things that are planned and already underway to decide on its relative priority, and therefore decide when it should be undertaken, considering everything else that people are currently involved in.

To achieve this second step, it is useful to decide if the change is an enabler of other changes, because if the change is not treated as a priority, then it is blocking the progress of other changes. The simplest way to do this is to map (at a high level to start with) the inputs and outputs of each of the changes.

Then look to see where the outputs from one change are used as the inputs to one or more other changes. Those initiatives whose outputs are needed for the most future work are the most important, and those whose outputs are not used by other initiatives are 'stand-alone' so you need to ask how valuable their outputs are. Just because they don't lead to other changes doesn't mean we can discount them, as their outputs might fix an area of 'business as usual' that will be greatly appreciated by the staff operating in that area.




*Source: Melanie Franklin 2018*

In some cases you will need to do a second pass at working out what outputs form inputs for which change initiatives. When I do the first pass it always triggers questions about the inter-connectedness of the various elements of the work and getting these answered through discussion with my colleagues always adds to my understanding of what it is I am trying to achieve and how the total picture of change fits together, so it is a worthwhile exercise. I find this is particularly true of any changes which involve data as there are so many users of common data in organisations that there are often dependencies that I do not know about until I show my picture of inputs and outputs to my colleagues and then they can spot the links very easily.

If your map indicates that everything connects to everything, then consider breaking some of your initiatives into smaller pieces of work. This is an effective way to break the deadlock, because by making a change initiative smaller in scope and more specific in what it delivers and for whom it is delivering reduces the inter-dependencies. The more connections and dependencies there are, the slower the progress as instead of getting things done, there needs to be consultation and compromise to align the outputs, so they deliver what is needed as inputs to other initiatives.

## Conclusion

These are just a few ideas that can help address the challenges posed by managing multiple changes, and the need to help those affected understanding the total picture and understand how each of the changes connects to the others.

When hiring for leadership roles, the ability to navigate through the maze of dependencies and be able to give a simple explanation of a complex picture are indictors of true greatness. This ability to simplify a complex picture is essential for motivating others and making sure none of us get lost on the journey, especially when that journey feels never ending!

For more practical techniques, have a look at this paper on Portfolio Management.

## About the author

I have been responsible for the successful delivery of effective change and for creating environments that support transformational change for over twenty years. I have an impressive track record of successful consulting assignments and I am an acknowledged thought leader in Change Management.

I am the Co-Chair of the Change Management Institute UK and a respected author of text books and articles on change, project and programme management. I am a talented communicator with a reputation for delivering complex information with humour and passion. I draw on my wealth of practical experience to illustrate concepts and to engage my audience in lively debates on advantages and disadvantages of each approach that I outline.

To access more resources about change management, connect with Melanie on LinkedIn
https://www.linkedin.com/in/melaniefranklin1/