

Case study: Understanding the players in change

This is a case study collected in 2012, as part of a research project by Alana McDonald, to identify and make available leadership experiences from LDC alumni.

The purpose of the case study is to stimulate reflection and discussion on your leadership practice. A case study provides an opportunity to ask yourself 'what would I do in the same situation?'

If you have any comments or feedback, contact toolkits@ldc.govt.nz

Resistance to change

I was called into a role which was to be responsible for the formation of a new branch out of two existing branches. There were some consequences for one of the branches in terms of loss of status, but it was a viable, efficient and economical shift to merge the two branches. When I began to communicate the change within the two groups, it became obvious that there was some significant resistance. The change itself was not a direction from me personally, I was simply directed to make the change; yet, staff were blaming me for what was occurring.

It was personally challenging and confronting to know that some staff just simply did not like me, and were completely opposed to the change. We all have a natural desire to be liked and well regarded, so my first instinct was to invest heavily in these people to try and establish relationships and encourage them towards accepting and embracing the change. Months later, there was no progress with these individuals and it had become apparent that some of the advocates for change had slipped into being impartial, and some of those who were initially impartial, were now opposed to the change as well.

Investing time wisely

This very quickly taught me an important lesson on leading change. I discovered that there were three types of people when undergoing and embracing the potential for change. The first type of people, are wholly on board, eager to move forward and want to get on and make the change happen. These people need very little, if any, convincing about the benefits of the proposed change. The second type of people, are those who are open to the possibility, however need more convincing. They need to understand the logistics, the rationale and thinking behind the change; but most importantly they are genuinely interested and willing to be convinced. The third type of people however, are inherently negative toward the change and will oppose what you are doing regardless of how much investment

you place into explaining the benefits and opportunities of the upcoming change. This revelation made me realise that I had been incorrectly focusing my efforts in trying to successfully establish the new branch.

From that point forward, I decided to make a very explicit choice to stop focusing all my efforts on those that I couldn't change, and instead put more of my investment into the second type of people, those who needed the convincing to become advocates. I redirected those who were already supportive of the change to leaders and implementers of the change. I gave them responsibility to carry out the changes and to be the change agents I needed to make the new branch a success. From this simple switch in focus, I was able to bring the two branches together and gain the buy-in from people who not only initially needed convincing, but that of those who's confidence and inspiration I had lost.

This experience taught me that sometimes part of being a leader, is accepting that you are not going to be everyone's best friend and there are always going to be people opposed to what you are trying to achieve. You have to have the self-confidence and maturity to accept that. There is still a need to treat those people who are opposed with respect, and give them the opportunities to contribute and accept the change; but everyone is entitled to their own opinions.

There needs to be an understanding as a leader not to obsess about those individuals, and consciously focus your effort where it's needed to get the results you are setting out to achieve. You should never pretend you will have everyone on board, but being able to identify where your investment should go is vital.

Questions

- What leadership lessons can be learnt from this case study?
- How have you approached focusing effort on people during change?

Message from a leader

Accept that at times you won't be liked

- This experience was the first time I was able to simply accept that at times people just won't like you. When undergoing change, people can react in all different ways. None of that is wrong and often as a leader you will bear the brunt of it. You have to understand that people can't react that way to change, and to not take it personally, respect their concerns but stay strong to what you are achieving.