



Corona pandemic -
An example of challenges in change management

Introduction

Anyone who has already worked on projects knows that the implementation of a project is usually not purely a technical topic. It often requires a parallel change management process. Of course, the need for this is not given in every project. It depends on various factors, such as the strategic relevance and size of the project or the extent of the change that the project entails. Likewise, not every change needs a planned project. Sometimes, changes come suddenly and unplanned, as is currently the case with the corona pandemic. Nevertheless, the corona pandemic clearly shows the typical situations and challenges that need to be overcome in a change process in projects.

Dealing with change

For example, there are supporters of change who support the measures for the planned change from the beginning and are actively involved. These are the people who e.g. follow the recommendations of the experts directly, keep a minimum distance and wear mouth-nose protection in required places. Often, however, changes initially provoke fears about the future and uncertainties, which initially express themselves in resistance to the new. For a change to succeed, however, everyone involved must be convinced of the future scenario. Here it helps to create transparency at an early stage and to use regular communication channels appropriate to the respective target group to regularly raise the questions that arise regarding the change.

In times of Corona, this early transparency, depending on the country, was hardly or not possible at all. The “future scenario” was sometimes suddenly there, but it was not and is not as defined as in projects, but was based on assumptions in the past weeks and months at short notice and due to a lack of knowledge and experience. This meant that these had to be corrected again and again and were therefore quite variable. It is not easy for everyone to deal with such a scenario with uncertainties. The resistance of these people can be seen in quite different ways, from denying a pandemic to supposedly personally better assessing the situation and its context than, for example, virologists can do as subject matter experts. Convincing these people of the necessary measures is extremely difficult and requires regular, empathetic dialogue. This cannot be achieved centrally but means in the further course that also people who have already accepted this new situation with its challenges convince others and can thus have a positive effect as multipliers.





The ridge between success and failure

The focus of the pandemic spread from the Asia-Pacific region to Europe and North America. Several countries in Central and South America are currently severely affected, e.g. Chile and Peru. Although these countries took measures at an early stage with severe restrictions on the population, they have not yet had the desired effect because they have not been implemented as planned. People can e.g. often not stay at home and work from there to make a living. In this case, one cannot speak of the urgency of the action being perceived too late as the cause, which prevents the success of the measures. On the other hand, early measures in countries such as New Zealand, to curb the Corona virus, have been successful so far, since most of the measures adopted have been accepted by the population, but could also be better adhered to in comparison to the developing and emerging countries of Latin America. However, no final success can be ensured here, either. Firstly, the virus is still in circulation. On the other hand, man is a creature of habit and even with convinced people who accept and support the change, there is a risk of falling back into old patterns and undoing the success of previous measures. Last but not least, it shows that there are no universal measures for the same change that work equally well everywhere, but have to be adapted to the respective target group.¹

¹cf. Kalisch, Muriel und Stotz, Patrick: <https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/corona-das-virus-zieht-weiter-die-weltweite-lage-in-zahlen-und-grafiken-a-fcfd77fe-2b11-402d-96f8-30b7f80a6cba>[04.07.2020]. solutions for any challenges that go beyond them and thus to meet your needs holistically.

Change takes time

Also in Germany, where the restrictions have already been relaxed, at least temporarily, is e.g. wearing a protective mask still necessary and it also happens to supporters that they find on the way to the bakery that they have forgotten them and therefore have to go back home and start again.

Previously it was also evident that change takes time. Companies that did not give their employees the opportunity to work from home before the pandemic, suddenly had to clarify legal, organizational and technical aspects. As a result, this often did not work fully and required temporary interim solutions. In contrast, the change caused by the pandemic did not affect the companies that had already created the prerequisites for this as strongly and with such pressure to act, since they had already used the required time in advance.

Furthermore, the time required for change became apparent in supply chains, which now no longer functioned and had to be adjusted in the usual way due to changes in consumer demand behavior and temporary reintroduced border controls.

In addition, the need for time for change is still evident for many people, also in the private environment, after employees suddenly no longer have the available childcare options for their children and are still available and the everyday life of families has to be reorganized. It will take a while until a new rhythm has been established.

Conclusion

A change management process can be observed very well using the example of the corona pandemic. While in projects change can often be seen as an associated opportunity, in this case it is more the need to protect the population. Once again it shows how advantageous it is to take measures at an early stage, but also to take a critical look at their accuracy of fit right from the start and to regularly check their actual effectiveness later on. It is also important to keep in constant dialogue with everyone involved and to deal with changing or complementary aspects in the course of the change until it is ultimately internalized.

In terms of working remotely, you can see how important it can be to respond to emerging trends at an early stage and, at the same time, be well prepared for an emergency. It is therefore advisable for companies to continue working on and establishing this model, despite the current easing and a return to local jobs, if this has not yet been done. The necessity and advantages of this have already been described in detail in our previous article.

The experts from our HCM team will be happy to support you with your projects, both in terms of establishing remote work in your company, and in terms of change and communication management. We would also be happy to call in other experts from our broad network to find solutions for any challenges that go beyond them and thus to meet your needs holistically.