

Involving your staff in decision-making  
can take the pain out of change

# Strategic change *how I did it*



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After 10 years of successfully running my recruitment company, I thought I'd managed just about every business challenge possible. Whether dealing with the complexities of implementing the Working Time Regulations (and the myriad of laws, rules and regulations that followed), growing my team, buying out my business partner or opening new branches, I'd always personally handled it all, with great results.

So it was quite reasonable to feel that, whatever was thrown at me, I would simply analyse the situation, come up with the best solution and implement it, as I'd always done. After all, this had worked well for a decade and, as far as I was concerned, there was no reason to doubt that it would not work forever.

Then came a situation that I'd never been in before and, in one fell swoop, all my preconceived ideas were shattered. Because, rather than designing a solution and giving it to my staff to implement, horror of horrors, I had to learn how to manage a massive change consultatively. And the risk of getting this wrong could have been devastating for my business.

This is how I handled it...

## Background

At that time, my business dealt with temporary and permanent commercial recruitment through two branches. Having 'grown up' with a large high street company, it made perfect sense for us to have a Branch Manager (BM), Temps Consultant (TC), two Permanent Consultants (PCs) and

two admin staff in each branch. This worked well for 10 years, because the business coming in was split more or less evenly between the two sections.

The problem came when the permanent sections became busy in the extreme, due to a 40 per cent increase in permanent vacancies, whilst the temps sections decreased by approximately the same rate. I initially thought this might be a short-term phenomenon but, after careful monitoring, realised this trend could possibly continue indefinitely.

The effect was that the PCs and their administrators were rushed off their feet, the TCs and their administrators could put their feet up, and the BMs had a foot in each section, trying to maintain team harmony (which, as you can imagine, was a very difficult balancing act!).

## Clarifying the problem – and identifying the best solution

I initially consulted with my senior management team (SMT), to discuss and analyse the situation objectively. My SMT included a Finance Director and a Sales Director, both of whom agreed that it was unfair to leave the situation as it was, in the hope that balance would eventually be restored. We also realised that, even if it did change, the pendulum could swing to the other extreme and that balance might continue to elude us.

The more we discussed this issue, the more I realised that a major shift in our clients' needs was happening and that we had to make a fundamental change to the way we worked, if we were to accommodate this and enable our business to continue thriving. I also knew that we had the right

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number of branch staff for the amount of business coming in, but it simply was not distributed evenly.

In addition I realised that there could be one possible solution, but it was against my 'recruitment upbringing' we could amalgamate the sections, so the TCs and PCs handled both temporary and permanent recruitment.

The challenge was to investigate this, make it work and not lose a single member of staff.

The SMT were convinced that this change was the right one, but we were all nervous about how the staff would take it and if they would even accept it. We knew that they were capable of carrying out the new roles and that they would probably enjoy the added variety this brought, but we were also keen to ensure that they did not feel pressured into doing something they were not comfortable with.

So we understood that this was not likely to happen overnight and that it would take time and patience, something we'd have to manage in ourselves,

seeing as we were used to everything being done at 100 miles an hour!

### Gaining buy-in

At the next company quarterly meeting, I brought this issue to the agenda, as follows:

- I announced that we had been monitoring the split of business coming into both branches. This brought a barrage of comments and, in some cases, complaints about the imbalance of work. The TCs and PCs said they all wanted changes to be made, which was very encouraging.
- I told them that I had an idea that could not only resolve the problem but that might also enrich their jobs. Would they like to hear it (the answer was yes)?
- I described the idea, explained that this was just one option and that the SMT would be happy to consider other solutions. However, if they liked the sound of it, I would like a

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representative from each section to form an 'Action Group' to investigate it thoroughly.

The response was very positive and they immediately formed a group of four. I met with them after the main meeting to agree their tasks and deadlines. These were:

- 1 To look at what the new RC role should comprise.
- 2 To look at the strengths and limitations of working in this way.
- 3 To work out what admin changes would also need to take place.
- 4 To identify any other company-wide issues and suggest solutions.
- 5 To report to me with progress each week.
- 6 To complete the above and report to the SMT in three weeks' time.

implemented and the new way of working was started on a trial basis. One week later – just two weeks from my initial announcement – the staff agreed to keep it.

### CONCLUSION

I was so proud of my staff for what they did and how they did it. They took an idea, investigated it, enhanced and improved it, then implemented it very successfully, all within agreed timescales. They clearly enjoyed every minute of it, learning much about themselves and their colleagues in the process. I learned a lot about them too, so much so that two of them later became managers. Whilst not taking credit for their achievements, I am sure that the outcome would have been very different, had it not been handled in a consultative way. Since that first success, I have used a more consultative approach for major changes in each business I have run. Every time, the outcome was significantly better than I had initially envisaged it could be. In the right circumstances, I would highly recommend it – when it comes to big changes, teamwork works!

### The outcome

The Action Group carried out their task with aplomb. Within a week, following two meetings in their own time, they had agreed, without exception, that they would all like to work on both temporary and permanent business and that it would be good for them as individuals, good for the clients and good for our company.

As peers, they had 'thrashed out' all the issues, overcome objections and come up with a plan with which to implement the change. They identified a number of tasks, such as what training requirements there were, what contractual changes were needed, then assigned these to the most appropriate person, including me!

Within a week, everything had been

### ABOUT DENISE WALKER FREC

- Denise Walker owns and runs Absolutely Business, a specialist management consultancy, designed exclusively for the recruitment industry, delivering business consultancy, interim management and training services.
- For further information, please visit [www.absolutelybusiness.co.uk](http://www.absolutelybusiness.co.uk)