Chapter 22
Managing Change Within the UK Chemical Manufacturing Sector

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ABSTRACT

Set within a UK chemical manufacturing plant, this reflective case history account upon culture change, identified as fundamental if a range of structural, technical, and process changes were to be achieved successfully. Conversations about change were extensive, increasingly inclusive, providing a basis for critical connections to be made regarding workforce involvement, values, learning, and knowledge flow. This case history reveals how the organization's leadership enabled the emergence of a more collaborative approach to the management of change.

INTRODUCTION

This case history offers a reflective account of practice in relation to the leadership and management of organisational change. Respecting concerns over confidentiality we cannot reveal the exact name of the manufacturing plant nor its parent company and so will simply refer to it as 'CaseX' throughout. The case history first seeks to explain, in outline terms, the culture change journey taken by CaseX between 2013 and 2016. It then seeks to move the account from a record of the journey to a more reflective discussion of key issues and themes, tensions and questions regarding the change. The concluding part presents a Discussion which seeks to draw a summative interpretation of this account of organisational change. The paper is sourced from discussions with three members of the senior leadership team formed to drive the change at CaseX, the external change agent engaged on the change project, and relevant company documentation produced during this period.

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OVERVIEW OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE INITIATIVE

Background

The parent company of CaseX operates in over 80 countries worldwide. CaseX is a large well-established plant in the UK but one with a recent history of takeover and acquisition. When acquired by its current owner in 2009 it was a site with a workforce of approximately 950. The plant is engaged in the manufacture of products used to enhance industrial processing in various industries.

Whilst CaseX's corporate Head Office (located in mainland Europe) acknowledged that the overall performance of the plant was poor and had been starved of investment, it recognised its potential within its business strategy of the future. But, major change was needed. However, whilst investment and restructuring were deemed necessary, there was a level of uncertainty as to the detailed nature of the plant's problems and thus no clear basis from which to develop a plan on how best to move forward.

A review of operations from corporate head office had effectively identified the main technical, process and investment needs for the site to be profitable. However, senior management within the UK recognised a different approach to implementation was required. The appointment of a new site director (SD) in 2013, recruited from another company site in the UK was both symbolically and strategically significant. It was an acknowledgement from the most senior levels of the company that change at CaseX required leading from someone experienced in the sort of site reflected in the case history plant. Strategically, the new SD established certain 'modus operandi' principles in negotiation with the corporate head office. The history and the current characteristics of the site had to be acknowledged and taken on board. Critically the SD and the leadership at CaseX would be given autonomy. Change would not be imposed via a consultant led, corporate approach to the organisational change needed. The SD would determine the most appropriate leadership team to operate over coming years and any change programme would be internally driven. CaseX would be the 'masters of its own destiny'.

A three-year operational improvement programme (and based on the technical review of operation noted above) was announced in 2013. This signalled the commencement of significant change at the site. The improvement programme's objectives were to achieve a transformation of the site to become a lean and reliable supplier and successful cost leader (constantly improving the cost structure to keep ahead of competition) with the agility to respond to customer and market needs. A significant capital investment programme was earmarked to replace outdated equipment, introduce new technologies, change operational processes and make the site safer. The introduction of 365 day working combined with a significant headcount reduction was a further key element of the programme's objectives and aspirations.

Culture Change

The announcement of the operational improvement programme saw the start of an intense period of 'conversations' about change. The SD formed a small leadership group to brainstorm the way forward. This included the improvement programme manager (also an émigré from another of the organisation's UK plants), the HR manager and a consultant who had worked extensively with the two senior managers in the years preceding the acquisition of CaseX by the parent company. Whilst organisation culture had featured – almost as an afterthought – in the original head office led review, it quickly became central to the leadership group's thinking. Culture change was where the change programme needed to start….