



Is that a change?

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1 Introduction

I work for a global IT company in the part of the business that designs, builds and implements major programmes that can result in transformational change for our clients. Having been involved in these projects for twenty years, the subject of managing scope change intrigues me. Not the procedure, the best practice in the procedure of managing scope changes is well understood. It's the human behaviour that accompanies it that I wish to explore.

Our major programmes are predominately contracted under a fixed price basis. A fixed price is charged for a fixed scope of work. Delighting our clients is in our organisational culture, but the one downside of this, is that some of our senior staff find it a challenge to manage change and hold that 'difficult' conversation with a client e.g. *that's a change and so we need to charge you more*.

Uncontrolled change is known as 'scope creep' and is a major reason that a minority of projects become troubled, leading to a financial loss for my company and damaged client reputation.

A description of project

The aim of the project is to model exemplars who successfully manage scope change. In particular, focussing on the first step - how do they detect there might be a change that has a commercial impact. Having conducted three interviews initially, I generated a lot of data and guidance. That's when I decided to narrow my focus on what triggers an exemplar to explore and consider whether a change may be required. I discovered that this was tending to happen within a few seconds of receiving an input. Focussing on these few seconds I discovered something that occurs at the unconscious level that surprised me and many other colleagues regarding the emotional reaction the exemplars have to change.

The importance of this project to my work and life

Our Vice President of Delivery Excellence in the UK sponsored the development of a three day training course to cover three major topics. This topic – how to manage change was a third of the course. I invested twelve months of my life developing and rolling out this brand new training course. Training and development has been my full time role now for five years.

2 My Models of Excellence

I identified six individuals who are highly respected delivery executives for their ability to manage and control the scope of our large complex programmes, and deliver the programme successfully. I have changed the names of the exemplars in this report to preserve anonymity.

Model A - Robert – Delivery Executive

I've observed Robert in action handling a simulated client meeting and a subsequent supplier meeting. The primary method I used was a 90 minute face to face interview. I asked him to re-live a recent example of a challenge on a project that lead to a significant scope change.

The example he cited occurred during a programme board of a Government System Integration programme meeting that Robert was presenting. The client made a seemingly 'throw away' comment implying that real client data will be used for the testing phase. Robert had made an assumption in the test plan that it would be artificial data.

The model I gleaned from Robert

1. A^{ext} and V^{ext} - external auditory and visual input received from the client.

Robert notices both **what** is being said and **how** its being said (tone of voice) and shift in client body language. Robert thinks that if a client is trying to add more scope at our own cost, then their body language / tone of voice can change. E.g. one client would not look Robert in the eye and his voice would be slower in pace and hesitant, indicating a lack of confidence.

2. K^{int} – Feeling in the gut. And accompanying auditory 'alarm bells' sounding.

3. A^{int} – Internal dialogue reflecting on what this could mean. Asking himself the likely implications. In this example, the client declared assumption that live data will be used for testing, the data would need to be accredited, security implication, development of a Database... (very quick in < 5 seconds)

4. K^{int} – worsening gut feeling. 'Horrible'. This change is significant

5. A^{int} – Internal dialogue thinking I need to ‘put down a marker’

Robert concerned that the client may minute the comment and the wider client team’s expectation becomes set. If real client data is used, the project will have to incur the additional cost and complexity hence Robert is keen to signal to the client that this may be a scope change.

6. A^{ext} – Auditory external and puts down a marker.

“That’s not in our current plan. We’ll look at the implications”. Hence he is not calling this out as a scope change yet, but signals that this could be a scope change depending on the implications’

Capabilities:

- Being reflective. Robert is happy to sit with silence and think and analyse before responding. He gives himself time. He only looks to cover the key points of the presentation and does not feel that he has to present every slide. Hence remains flexible and present. Reading client’s body language.
- Getting your message across clearly. Calmly counter / push back when required. e.g. Robert cited an argument he has used with clients that: “Yes you could contractually push me into a corner here. But recognise that if we go down that path, my company will fail and you will fail. I don’t wish to be associated with failure. Let’s find an alternative way forward”
- Has an ability to switch off from work and sleep well. Also can shift from one ‘difficult’ meeting, and into another meeting with a positive state of mind.

Values: It is important:

- To provide the client with a clear and honest view on the status of the programme.
- To understand the other person’s perspective (second perspective): “By putting effort into understanding where they might be coming from”
- To be fully present and connected: “Being calm, otherwise your instincts are dulled down”.
- To develop long term client relationships, based on trust. Robert describes his behaviours as “clear, consistent, and fair”.

Beliefs: To do the right thing: “I want to be able to sleep at night. I want to be perceived by others I care about, that they think I’ve done the right thing overall”.

Purpose: Robert says he’s motivated by a broader sense of achievement. That the programme overall is a success. Not to achieve a ‘sell-on’ and financial bonus in a quarter.

Robert's experience of the process and how it added value for him

Robert's comments were:

"Fascinating how much we have gleaned in what probably took just five seconds of time.

I realise now that I'm using my instinct that has been shaped by my experience.

And how much I'm observing and reacting to other person's body language and tone of voice that triggers me to have my antennae up. To be extra vigilant. Also the importance for me to be calm, so I can listen to the messages / signs being given, rather than ignore them".

So the value of the modelling experience for Robert was in recognising the importance of him remaining calm, so that he can be extra vigilant to noticing subtle changes in physiology. Both in his client and in himself.

Model B - John – Delivery Executive

The method I used was a 90 minute interview with John. I asked him to re-live two recent examples of challenges on a project that lead to potential scope changes.

The model I gleaned from John

1. A^{ext} – Auditory external - **listens for key trigger words.**

"Often our staff may say the word 'change' in a sentence. So I look out for it. E.g. "we need to change the way" Or "We need to alter our approach...."

Situations that these can arise are: when project staff are discussing progress, or John is problem solving an issue, and during client meetings.

2. K^{int} – Feeling - John has a **kinaesthetic reaction**

He describes it as a 'sinking feeling in the heart'. With an accompanying internal auditory dialogue of 'Oh Crap'

3. A^{int} – Internal dialogue - **Inner thoughts patterns**

I observed John's head was bowed down and silent for 5 to 10 seconds thinking / analysing. John compares this new information with his current model of how this works. John advised that he has a visual model in his head, and accompanying auditory of questions in his thoughts:

- a. do I understand what is being said?

- b. Is my current model incorrect and so I need to amend it?
 - c. is this a significant change with a material impact? If not we could let it go?
 - d. How do I get out of it? 'Fight or Flight'. Fight means speak up now and contest / explain it's a change. Or flight is let this go, or wait until a better time to contest this
4. A^{ext} – Auditory external - **Action plan**

John looks for agreement to an action plan. He checks the quality of the action plan with further internal dialogue: 'Can I articulate the merits of this change to stakeholder's e.g. senior stakeholders in my client or my company'.

Skills: Rational thinking. Ability to understand the full implications.

Values: Fair day's work for a fair day's pay. Wants to be able to metaphorically look at himself in the mirror. The decisions that John takes must be fair given the situation

"So if we have screwed up then we should pay for this. Or if both parties are at fault then split 50/50%"

Belief: John's instinctive reaction to a client funded change (e.g. request for additional functionality) is to resist it. *"Why put the delivery schedule at risk"*

John's experience of the process and how it added value for him

John's view is that it was useful to work through and analyse decision making processes and to understand how you reach a decision and the factors that influence them. This helps in reviewing the decisions being made and whether alternative approaches will get alternative outcomes as well as the way that his actions influence his broader interactions with his team.

Model C – Sanjay – Associate Partner

I observed Sanjay negotiating with a client and I was impressed how he handled a change.

Subsequently other executives confirmed that Sanjay is an exemplar of managing change. The method I used was a 90 minute interview.

The method of modelling used

Partly from my own observation, but mainly from a subsequent in-depth 'face to face' interview.

Interview with Sanjay – extracts

Example programme:

Sanjay communicates with a broad number of client stakeholders with regarding managing scope.

Contract payment: Time and Materials basis with incentives (upside and downside linked to cost)

The example change is a client request to take on the System integrator (SI) role.

Qu: When did you first detect that you may have a challenge with a scope change?

Sanjay: “During a project board meeting and the Client asked ‘*So who is the System Integrator (SI) on this piece of work?*’ I answered ‘*You are*’. My first instinctive reaction was ‘good’, as I’ve known for a while that has been an issue, and I’m worried that it will impact our dates. We have been dancing around this for a while. The client then asked me to undertake the SI management and take responsibility of testing role”

Qu. Can you re-experience how you responded?

Sanjay: “Sure. I said ‘*No, you are responsible for those roles*’. I tend to lay facts first”

Qu. Can you show me how you said this?

Sanjay leans forward, and faces the client squarely.

Qu. The moment before you said that –what was in your mind?

Sanjay: “One of the first times I heard the client using the term SI. I felt comfortable in talking about this.

Qu: What’s important to you?

Sanjay: “I felt that the lights are on me. A self conscious moment. Say what it is – state the fact and follow the facts”

Qu: What does that say about you and your capabilities?

Sanjay: “I am comfortable saying the truth and keeping it short and simple’. Others spiel first, then the key message pops out in the middle, and spiel afterwards. If I have a fact I am confident about, I’m to the point. If I don’t, then I waffle. Feedback I’ve had is that I am ‘pointed’.

One client has previously feedback to me: ‘*how dare an IT organisation tell me I cannot do my business*’. I explained the logic and reasons. I’ll say the facts plainly. I say what it is”

Qu; I’ve noticed that you tend to pause. When you pause, what’s going on in your mind?

Sanjay: "I'm intrigued to see their reaction. I'm a visual person. I'm seeing what they are doing, Looking at their eyes, where are they looking. Visually 'cueing' to see how they are reacting. I have three different clients, and each have a different body language. I know them and look for changes in their normal body language. When I start with a new client I tend to use the first two to three weeks to soak things up. I'm much more effective after a couple of months.

Qu. When setting a goal what's that like?

Sanjay: 'I remember a visual picture of the date. I carry a plan on a page with me all the time. I memorise the end date. I invest my time in this.

I point to Sanjay's plan he has laid on the table and role play being the client – 'Sanjay we need to move this part. There are good business reasons for it'.

Sanjay looks uncomfortable, Body tenses. His temples are going up and down. Eyes are larger

Qu. What's going through your mind?

Sanjay: 'I don't want to move it. If I have to move it, how can I protect everything else. Why change? And how bad is it? Why do we need to do this? I'll explore alternatives. I generally don't want to change the solution / plan.

Qu. What are the reasons you are so keen to stick to the plan?

Sanjay: "The dates the date. I'm very achievement orientated. Get paid. I like sign offs, hitting dates/ beating dates. So a change usually means changing the date. I almost never want to move a date along. I like the principle of a 'Plan on a page'. Each year I set twelve things to achieve. I get really miffed if I don't achieve them"

Summary of what I noticed how Sanjay approaches scope changes

- Preparation: likes to know the facts and implications
- Carries the plan physically with him and the keys dates and schedule visually in his head. He has a strong visual preference
- Calibrates, notices and responds to a clients change in body language
- Uses Pauses – comfortable with silence and uses this period to look for visual clues as to how the message is being received
- Instinctive reaction is to resist changing the plan. Even if it means more revenue for our company.

- Analytical Skills: Prefers logic and rational to explain to a client
- Facts – delivered in clear and succinct sentences. Able to say 'no' dispassionately
- When challenged with a scope change: has a gut reaction, feels agitated. Then visually looks at the implications to the plan

Sanjay's experience of the process and how it added value for him

Sanjay: "I realise that I am a perfectionist in holding to dates. My son is very much a perfectionist. If his work or schedule gets interrupted he gets really agitated. So this is an interesting insight into my family history. I realise now that I also get agitated and where my son gets it from. I guess I'm passionate about the schedule. Dispassionate about the scope, cost"

Others Exemplars

Here are other key points drawn from two other exemplars I interviewed.

Laura – Delivery Executive

Laura explained a small example of a change where she was asked to run an additional workshop.

Laura responded to the client: *'That's fine, but you need to understand the consequences'*

I noticed a change in the intonation of Laura's voice, particularly on the word *'fine'*. In questioning her, underneath she was not feeling 'fine'. She felt uncomfortable because even if the client pays for the workshop, she's concerned about the overall impact to the delivery schedule and the precedence that is being set.

Paul – Delivery Executive

Paul's capabilities: Staying calm

Trust – building relationship on trust. 'Change requesting nicely'

Fact based rational logic

Paul's Values: Business Ethics – look at overall situation, from both perspectives and then consider what the 'right thing to do'

3 The structure of the generic model

The Model

- A^{ext} Notice an external stimulus – usually auditory. Also accompanying visual cues such as changes in body language and tone of voice
- K^{int} Reaction – gut feeling. Exhale breath, posture change.
- A^{int} Is this a change? What are the implications of this on the overall programme? Is this really necessary?
- K^{ext} Inhale breath - gain resources
- A^{ext} Become curious - Ask questions to understand how this compares with the current plan.
Signals to the client that this is not in our current plan and that the implications will be explored

Curiously the model happens to have some symmetry: A K A K A

Behaviours common to the exemplars

- Be comfortable with pauses and silences. Give yourself time to reflect and think during meetings
- Notice and respond to the changes in tone of voice and body language in others
- Notice and respond to kinaesthetic reactions you have in meetings
- Holding fact based discussions.

Capabilities common to the exemplars

- Strong logical thinking and analytical skills.

Being a global IT company it is not a surprise to me that these exemplars have strong analytical skills. What is a surprise, is that they have, and notice, an emotional reaction to change. They notice their kinaesthetic reactions which triggers an internal dialogue.

Values common to exemplars

To do the right thing - is a common value. An intrinsic value of fairness. Rather than view the change from your own perspective, take an imaginary third party's perspective – what's the appropriate thing to do in this situation.

Beliefs common to exemplars

- That delivering to schedule is more important than gaining a short term increase in revenue.
- That delivering a successful project is more likely to enhance our company's reputation which will lead to further business opportunities.

A common belief that surprises many people, is the intrinsic inner resistance exemplars have to a change. Delivery executives are incentivised to enhance project financial revenues. Yet even if a client is willing to pay for a change, the exemplars interviewed are instinctively reluctant to embrace a change as they immediately think of the risk to the successful delivery of the programme.

Results of my experience of using the model

How I know in measurable terms that I have the model

I have noticed a significant reduction in my overall inner levels of frustration when handling project changes e.g. a reduced tension in my face, neck and shoulders (I no longer suffer from aching shoulders). Plus I'm able to think more clearly. Recognising that masters also initially feel frustrated was a great help. It's subsequently what I do with this inner frustration that seems to be the key; through internally acknowledging it and then moving to a state of curiosity. I've noticed I'm much more willing to embrace change and am calmer in exploring the implications.

How others recognise that I have the model

This change is part of a wider personal development journey that I'm on. I've received feedback from individuals that they have noticed a change in me. I'm more relaxed, more connected and more able to think strategically.

One person said he saw this change in my face and eyes. I feel it.

How I know when I have imparted the model to others

I have incorporated the principles of the model in the training course that I've developed. The course includes various client handling role plays.

The example of a client offering to pay for an additional change in scope is explored. I watch to see how the person reacts:

- If the person accepts the change eagerly - this is an indication that they **don't** have the essence of the model
- If the person takes a questioning stance and explores the implications – this is an indication that they **do** have the essence of the model

What is your 'gut' reaction to this client request?

***"Please include this additional functionality.
I'm happy to pay for it via our Change
process"***



**The instinctive gut reaction of our highest performing
Project Managers of large complex programmes is to resist
change.**

- How will this will increase the risk of a successful delivery?
- Why do you want this?
- What is the compelling reason?
- How will it impact the overall business case?
- Is there a better way to meet this need?

The results of others having the model

The model has been incorporated into the training course called 'Beyond the Twilight Zone'. I've not yet managed to isolate the effect of the model from other topics included in the training course.

Anecdotal feedback for the overall course has been overwhelmingly positive. For example

Great content. Great structure. Learnt so much and the method of delivery was first class. The group work was relevant and pitched at a really good level. Length of time was right. I learnt a great deal from my peers on the course. Great session. Delivery exec

Master NLP Modelling project

The formal course evaluations used are based on Donald Kirkpatrick's learning evaluation model. Levels one and three are used. For level three, (the degree to which the skills learnt on the training course have been applied / used in practice), the Beyond the Twilight Zone course scored 100%. This is amongst the highest performing courses.



Please note:

The opinions expressed in this article are the personal opinions of the author and not those of his employer.

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