



## Establishing the conditions for change success

It is widely acknowledged that only a very small proportion of large-scale change programmes are successful. In fact this figure is only 5% according to John P Kotter, author and professor emeritus at Harvard Business School. Yet over the past 30 years there have been thousands of papers and books published on how to manage change. So what's going wrong? Are we not following the methodologies described in the books, or is there something more fundamentally challenging about the very nature of change?

Whilst there are probably as many reasons for this situation as there are change managers – and change gurus who write the books – it is my contention that there is one underlying reason change initiatives rarely meet expectations, and that is because the necessary *conditions for change success* are rarely identified, established or maintained.

### Good gardeners understand conditions for success

One of the best ways of describing what is meant by *conditions for success* is to draw upon a gardening analogy. For those of you who know about gardening you'll understand that certain conditions need to be in place in order for a garden to flourish, fertile soil being the most obvious. The more successful gardeners know that some of these conditions can be controlled and others cannot. For example, they know that soil quality can be improved and that particular plants will never do well in certain types of soil. They also know that some plants need to be pruned in spring and others in autumn.

If these conditions are not understood or are ignored, gardening can be a costly and disappointing pastime.

### Identifying the conditions for change success

A good place to start when looking for the necessary *conditions for change success* is to begin by fully understanding the target outcomes and then asking "what needs to be in place to ensure that they are achieved?". Whilst they typically include things like management sponsorship, governance and engagement they could include more context-specific conditions like cross-functional collaboration and working relationships with off-shore partners.

## Why big IT projects fail

In a recent *Computer Weekly* article Karl Flinders asked an academic, a lawyer, a professor of outsourcing, a consultant and an investigative journalist why big IT projects fail.

He also cites research undertaken by Oxford University's Saïd Business School, which found that IT projects are 20 times more likely to fail than large projects in other sectors, such as construction. Their research analysed 1,500 global projects worth a total of \$245bn, with an average cost of \$170m. They found that large IT projects are on average 27% over budget and take 55% longer to complete than planned.

And the views of the experts? IT projects fail for a variety of reasons, including unrealistic budgeting, their context changing, poor governance and simply being too big.

To read Karl's article, click [here](#).

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## Changing for the better

In an interview with *Business Strategy Review*, Michael Jarrett, Adjunct Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the London Business School, argues that more leaders need to take a lesson from Charles Darwin who noted, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."

Michael believes that change causes people and organisations to classify themselves into one of at least three categories. The first are the change avoiders who are so stuck in their status quo that they can see no other way to behave. The second are the change analysers, who debate, study, discuss and think change, but never come to act. The final group are the change adapters who combine an openness to change and a willingness to take prudent risks to act.

To read Michael's article, click [here](#).

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## About Formicio

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Typically there would be between 7 to 12 *conditions for success*. If there are more it suggests that the key conditions have not yet been identified. One of the benefits of having a small number is that they can be easily monitored over time.

Whilst not trying to stretch the gardening analogy too far, in my judgement all too often the focus is on doing change stuff (the equivalent of buying and planting) rather than spending time understanding what *conditions for change success* need to be established and maintained.

If you would like to read my full article where I describe a generic set of conditions for success and ways in which they can be assessed, click [here](#).

I welcome your thoughts.

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our clients around the world address tough strategic problems, and develop the insights and organisational capabilities needed for them to successfully implement their chosen strategy.

We use innovative experiential learning approaches to develop the insights and capabilities needed by today's business and technology leaders. Our focus is always on outcomes, not process.

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## Parting thought

"Things do not change; we change."

Henry David Thoreau  
US author, 1817-1862