

Managing Change -Taking off in the wind

“When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it! ”

~ Henry ford

Change is the only word which is permanent. Today we are witnessing changed management in all avocations which mainly comes due to technological advancement, introduction of artificial intelligence, new product launch, mergers, acquisitions, competition, demand and supply.

Change is ongoing process in aviation

When we are talking about aviation sector, the change is inevitable because of tremendous growth witnessed during last one decade. Astronomical figures are coming for two decades ahead both in terms of rising passenger traffic- domestic and international sector across the world. In aviation industry, change management is always in practice in one way or the other. At times, we confuse, between transition and change. The change is a shift in the external situation, whereas, the transition is the psychological reorientation in response to change. The nature of change comes in any alteration in the work environment affecting the ways employees must act. The airports tend to achieve an equilibrium in their social structure and aviation personnel.

What is Change?

When we are talking about change management, it is important to know the practical aspects of it for better understanding. It is a systematic approach to deal with change, not only from the perspective of airline and airports but also of individuals. The organization undertakes an initiative to improve performance, seize opportunities, to address key issues which requires the changes in processes, job roles, organizational structures and uses of technology.

Change began with Technological Advancement

I would like to narrate an old example based on my experience as HR Manager. Down the memory lane, I recall in the middle of 80s when I was at Bombay Airport, there used to be typewriters for official work and there were about 100 typewriters of different types, like Remington, Godrej, Facit and Olivetti etc. ‘The computer’ was a new word. It was basically, data operating system with a D-base III plus, but to introduce this technology at the airport was a difficult task because there were large number of typists, stenographers who used to work on typewriters. With the strength of 3000 employees at Bombay Airport, with 11 main departments of international

Airports Authority of India, we had around 100 typists, with 30 odd stenographers. The typewriters were having annual maintenance contracts and there was regular purchase of new typewriters. The moment, the talk about computer was heard by the union, a great amount of agitation cropped up with the fear that there will be reduction in manpower and it will affect the recruitment of new typists and stenographers for the vacancies arising out of retirement and resignations. It was difficult to remove the fear psychosis generated in the mind of unions because it was common knowledge that computerization will speed up the work of typing with better efficiency. Even the typists and stenographers were not willing to learn computer. They agitated separately in different departments with many excuses. It was hornet's nest for them.

I was heading the industrial relations and it was my responsibility to calm this change. i.e. computerization in a phased manner. It was herculean task to touch upon this issue of introducing computers. Even the higher management preferred to turn nelson's eye and shouldered the entire responsibility on me. I was motivated with confidence that being a professional from a private sector joining the government, I will be able to manage the change by coping up with the resistance from employees.

Initiating the process of computer introduction, had to face many psychological aspects since the opposition was not logical. Therefore, I studied the under-currents and found out some new recruits who came from private sector for doing the job of typing and stenography. In a very secretive manner, I had meeting with 10 employees from different departments who were not only eager but quite enthusiastic for acquiring the computer knowledge. Let me be brief in my narration with regard to my strategy that I contacted Xavier institute at Mahim and allowed those employees to attend the computer classes there in fore-noon shift and report office post lunch. Somehow, they cooperated too. The unions were not aware about this whole exercise, since it was a normal late coming by a very small fraction. Concerned employees helped in making their learning process a secret affair. To cut the long story short, my strategy worked after 3 months, when they came with the certification having acquired the knowledge of data operation and d-base III plus since there was no concept of MS Word, Excel etc. The main issue was to utilize the knowledge.

Three computers were procured, to be positioned in the offices where the volume of work was very high. The unions came to oppose but they were assured that there will be no reduction in manpower and no employee will be forced to learn computer. It was word of mouth publicity when request came from other typists and stenographers to learn computer because the computer was handy and reduced the repetitive task of typing again and again with corrections overcoming the herculean task of creating data files. I had regular meetings with the unions and somehow, I was successful in convincing them for organizing in-house training programme in association with Aptech. It was vindicating the employees when they got certification and liberty to use computer and typewriters simultaneously. It took a long period to introduce computers in almost all departments and another two years to do away with typewriters. It was a learning experience of affecting change and coping up with the resistance from the employees.

Willingness of Stakeholders is necessary

In today's scenario in aviation sector, the change management is a requirement. Traffic jams, long queues, competition, privatization, need for introducing artificial intelligence has come in a big way. There is a sea change in human resource management. The manual task of ticketing, recruitment, basic passenger facilitation, has gone into modernization process. The car parking, food and beverage, retail shops, commercial activities, all required the change. Computerization is the key word with automation and multiskilling in a wide range. The air traffic control, communication systems have become advanced. We used to have airport hostesses for flight information, the bay allotments for aircrafts used to be done by apron manager by communicating to traffic controller for information of pilot. Today, we have Airport Operation Control Centre AOCC and there is no need of deployment of manpower in these areas. Digitization has come a long way for flight information. The Bombay and Delhi Airports are handling more than 1000 movements everyday and the credit goes to change management in air traffic control.

The rudimentary radars are replaced, today we have Area control, Reporting, Approach and Fundamental Radars at the tower. The entire sky is before the air traffic controller to track the aircraft movement for ensuring separation. The check-in counters are not dedicated to one airline. There is no deployment of regular staff by individual airline. These are mostly outsourced because today the passenger comes with a boarding pass and goes directly to the security.

Change is Time consuming

I must say that change management because of artificial intelligence was never anticipated because today we are talking about robotics. The interactive robots are going to move around the airport like a man for passenger facilitation replacing "May I help you counters". The day is not far when we will have remote air traffic control with no air traffic controller and robots doing the job. The airlines got the maximum benefit of modernization because due to technological advancement. Moreover passengers can now book their ticket with no requirement of contacting anybody.

The change management in aviation sector, is going to have its way ahead. Tomorrow you may find a mobile phone handing over the ticket, boarding pass in it with a message that taxi has arrived at your home followed by continuous messages welcoming you at the Airport and the trolley operator waiting to receive you, and direct access upto aircraft with bio-metrics. Everything will be taken care of by the messages on your mobile and you need not ask for help. I cannot forget the instance of losing my way at Singapore recently when I came out from red line metro at Orchard street station and lost the way to my hotel. Nobody was there to guide me even the taxi could not be hired when the GPS guided me to find the way by walking and within 5 minutes I reached the hotel. It is all change management in transportation.

No one likes change – Resistance is natural

Coming to the core issue of resistance to change whatever I said has not come automatically. Inherently nobody wants change. As human being we don't want to change our habits, our way of working likes and dislikes. We feel quite comfortable the way we are and now when it comes to our job the change looks like a compulsion rather hindrance to our efficiency. In the aviation sector, the resistance comes not only from the individual but it is a group resistance and also organizational resistance because of policies, hierarchy, resistance to new ideas, threat to power, and specialization added with resource constraint.

The individual resistance for managing the change is the most difficult task mainly because it resides as basic human characteristic such as perceptions, personality and need. The employees have fear of loss of status and influence, there is a lack of confidence about the change as to whether they will be able to perform with the new techniques or not. They do not know how to change. Not being able to change and once they are not willing to change, they feel that they are being compelled to change. And that is a matter of grave concern.

We need to justify change

It is not an easy task to cope up with resistance to change from the employees in aviation sector unless we know the sources of this resistance. One way it is rational resistance due to lack of proper knowledge or information among employees on the other hand, its emotional resistance arising out of psychological problems of fear, anxiety, suspicion and insecurity. Moreover, perception of employees as to how the change will affect them.

It is not only their individual resistance which comes in the way of managing change but there are other factors such as acquisition mergers, divestiture etc. Most importantly, in aviation sector, we must think about why we want change? What is our goal and objective for affecting the change? Basically, it is to keep business running while changes are in process and to maintain momentum for setting the changes in motion. The main aim is to minimize resistance with human touch.

Get ready and make it steady

As an effective manager, we can cope up with resistance for change once we undertake the exercise step wise. First to determine the need for change, then tackling obstacles to change for implementing. It is necessary to evaluate the change. The change management is successful only when we are aware that change was necessary because of gap between objective and actual performance. Finally, I would like to emphasize the most important aspect of this article that is philosophy for change. There was a traditional approach of analyzing, thinking and change with mind and not

heart but the requirement is to see, feel and change because thinking and feeling are essential but the heart of change is the emotion.

When we are talking about group resistance, it is resource constraint, bureaucratic resistance, non-availability of financial material and human resources. The change becomes necessary and mandatory due to regulations imposed by BCAs, AERA, DGCA and AAI.

Anticipate resistance for change

This article on change management can never be complete in all aspects since it is a continuous process because ways and means to cope up individual resistance will be situational in nature. We need to anticipate the resistance before planning for change. At times, it is inevitable and mostly it is circumstantial. Today we are witnessing closing of flourishing airlines in spite of tremendous growth, the jet airways example is well before us. Leasing after leasing the aircrafts, increasing manpower, systematic growth but end of the day a big loss resulting in financial closure with a little hope to survive. We have to debate where the concept of change management was relevant when there was no resistance among employees. Again, we come to equation which has not been thought about as to why the resistance is important for change, because it gives alternatives. Forget about the days of Kingfisher, where the transparency was missing but the change management was relevant and important for survival.

I am ending this article with a note that managing change is as important as managing the resistance among stakeholders which is necessary for implementation in aviation sector.