MANAGING CHANGE
in the Fashion Industry
There are several change management models available, such as the comprehensive eight-step Kotter Model, to guide an organization through change. With slight variations, these models speak to the same classic change management issues—the need to align and secure buy-in, communicate, create short-term wins, embed the change in the company culture, etc. Change management in any industry implies the same basic process, but since change in Fashion can be particularly challenging, it is essential that a change management model is meticulously applied in order to identify risks and optimize success.

THE DECISION TO CHANGE DIRECTION

The very first question leaders in fashion retail and manufacturing need to ask themselves before considering the implementation of a change initiative is simply if they are willing to commit for the long haul. Changes involving implementation of new tools and systems such as design software, 3D prototyping technology, or a PLM all impact process, and subsequently roles and relationships. Designers can no longer work in silos, pattern-maker roles...

If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading – Lao Tzu.

Things will never change unless you change direction.
may shift, and relationships with suppliers may change. Transformational change does not happen overnight; it requires a deep dive into the current way of working, and depending on scope, can take 6 to 18 months to bear fruit. Even after completion of the initiative, when the technology is implemented and change is embedded, it will continue to resonate throughout the organization—perhaps resulting in new competency requirements from profiles for new hires, or new ideas for marketing strategies based on capabilities made possible with new technology. Leaders must be willing to make the patient commitment to see the process through, and embrace with flexibility where the change will take their company. Leaders must also ask themselves what are the business objectives they expect to see from the change, and ensure that there is significant evidence that the change process will accomplish this goal. There needs to be a clear link between the concrete actions of the change initiative and bottom line results. As the driving force responsible for the change, they must not only provide the broader vision to their teams, but be able to demonstrate clear business outcomes within defined timeframes.

**CHANGE AMBASSADORS**

The bedrock of any large-scale change management project, such as the implementation of a PLM, are the change ambassadors, who form a representative group of change catalysts. They are responsible for leading change within their respective groups by communicating goals and supporting the change manager in mapping out new processes. They can also prove instrumental in managing resistance. Who will be your change ambassadors? Depending on company structure, change ambassadors should represent each team or department affected by the change, such as pattern makers, designers, developers, product managers, etc. Sometimes, it is advantageous to have two people representing a particular role, such as designers, who can pose a particular challenge because of their tendency to work in a silo. It is also wise to select a mix of genders and ages, as well as time served in the company. Logic dictates that one would select positive-minded natural leaders when possible, but there are examples of successful exceptions. One fashion retailer cleverly involved a highly skilled pattern maker who was respected on her team but notoriously resistant to change. By listening to, and addressing her push-backs—and most importantly winning her buy-in by making her an integral part of the change—she became a very successful change agent, and helped to thwart potential resistance in others from her team, especially since the particular initiative involved changes to the teams’ future roles and responsibilities.

Change ambassadors must be very motivated as they will be expected to set aside time each week outside their normal role responsibilities for the change project. This commitment often brings career benefits as change ambassadors are often viewed as “high potentials” in a company and can experience significant evolution when the project is complete. It is important to communicate what the ambassador role involves in terms of time commitment and tasks, and involve them as soon as possible so that they can experience being at the launch of an important change for the company.

One cautionary tale is the story of a change ambassador in the development team who shirked his ambassador responsibilities. Rather than replace him, the change manager strived to pick up the slack. The result was very successful behavior change in all teams, except his. If a change ambassador is not motivated for the role, replace him!
What is the change ‘story’—what will the future look like and how are we going to get there? It is crucial to clearly communicate the company vision at the start of the change initiative. Creating a sense of urgency is also essential—what will it look like if we don’t change? Communications should also outline the roadmap to change and the ‘asks’ of each employee, which are best explained in clearly defined, measurable actions.

One fashion manufacturer’s creative solution for a successful awareness campaign was to hang posters around the office which outlined the objective of the PLM and contained colorful flow charts. This was an easy way for users to become familiar with their ‘color’ in the chart, as well as with terminology so that everyone could start communicating with the same vocabulary.

Implementing a change is not just about creating new flow charts; the daily lives of employees are affected, often starting with the first thing they do each morning. The implementation of a new technology often results in significant changes to job roles and responsibilities, particularly for designers and pattern makers. With a PLM, for example, the designer can pre-define the blocks that the pattern maker uses, giving more responsibility to designers. At the same time, because pattern makers have more information earlier, they can suggest changes when a design is not technically feasible before it goes too far in development.

Only by carefully listening to pain points can the issues involving role changes be accurately addressed; intensive interviews during the scoping phase are often the best way to understand and handle the issues. It is important to understand the details about how the various roles work, what they think about their performance, the end customer, and what is important for their brands. With the implementation of a PLM, some team members may become disconcerted at what is perceived as a loss of control over their role, particularly in long-standing companies where ‘we have always done it this way’. A simple one-way communication of the necessity for process and role changes can result in the missed opportunity for an enriching dialog and lead to only superficial buy-in.
Change is fantastic an opportunity to bring a company together. By strategically creating focus groups, not only are impacts better understood by the change team, but new collaborative relationships can be fostered. For instance, in the first phase of change management, focus groups are formed to map the overall development process with representatives of various functions. Often this is the first time they are actually in the same room together. The outcome is that they not only develop an understanding for what others are doing, but they build a sense of community, and equally important, a sense of shared ownership for the entire process.

It’s also valuable to bring all those performing the same role together. One change manager related the story of bringing all the designers together from the various departments to discuss how they would like the user interface of a software to look (placement of software buttons, the most intuitive way to retrieve information, how to classify the different denim washes, etc.). The designers were very excited to all be in one room together for the very first time, and after a successful focus group meeting, continued to collaborate outside the scope of the change project, sharing simple tips such as the discovery of an interesting trim. A year after the deployment, the change manager conducted individual interviews to assess the impact of the change project. Most said that the best thing was how it federated the team—the greatest impact was beyond the software, it was about the improved human relationships.

Focus groups involve and motivate. They also create awareness of the importance of sharing information, and to share everyone must use the same vocabulary. By implementing processes that the users themselves define, they become owners of the change, thus reaching the objective of turning everyone into a change agent.

DON’T FORGET ABOUT SUPPLIERS

It is important to identify everyone affected by the change, even those outside the company. For a PLM implementation in particular, the challenge to suppliers is that they will need to learn a new way to work, and may be given more responsibility. To ensure supplier buy-in, wise change managers reach out during the initial phase of a project to share plans and gather the thoughts and concerns of their suppliers. One change manager reported that she was able to easily implement a few simple supplier requests into the PLM, such as a particular exported report that a supplier wanted to provide to an agent in Hong Kong.

By engaging with them early on, change managers find that suppliers are more willing to accept the change, which comprises consistent technical specifications from all departments, because they have the opportunity to become more involved with their customers. Many suppliers ask for read & write access in the system so that they can comment directly on designs. Good supplier management performance is no longer just about sharing planning and data, it can also require sharing common methodology and practices, as in the case when working with 3D prototyping technology.

It is important to periodically check in with suppliers on how they are managing with the new system after implementation is complete. A properly managed change implementation is an excellent opportunity to transform a supplier into a trusted partner.
Vigilance is required after a new system and process are implemented in order to sustain the change, and middle managers are key to overseeing sustained change. One change manager tells the story of discovering, quite by accident, a whole two years after a PLM implementation, that one department was still surreptitiously relying on spreadsheets, while simultaneously half working in the PLM. The cause was an earlier change in staff, resulting in a lack of follow-up after training. This situation was remedied by additional training and the team was quickly back on track, happy to give up the paper files and save time by working exclusively in the PLM.

Sustaining change requires periodic review and firmly embedding the change in the company culture, so that fresh challenges are addressed by the ‘new’ tools and process. One school wear company expanded use of its new design software to present entire collection boards to its customers, who reported a sense of increased confidence in their choices. As one change manager advises: “The fashion industry changes every two years. Workers should have the reflex that the tool can help with new challenges. Don’t forget about it, as it can answer the challenges of tomorrow.”

Another way to ensure momentum is to focus on continued success. As one fashion change manager pointed out “there are always ongoing challenges when implementing change. The important thing is to focus on everything that is working very well and communicate any short-term wins to the teams.” One example is to ensure that new reporting functionalities are known as soon they become available. Once an account manager brought a line sheet to an internal sales meeting. Impressed with quality of the report, at the next meeting everyone started to use them, which created a buzz about the PLM. Public recognition of key change champions is also a classic way to maintain momentum.

It is essential to put in place a communication plan, which utilizes several vehicles (such as webcasts, email newsletters, company intranet, etc.) at the beginning of the project. In addition to highlighting short-term wins or publically recognizing a change champion, it is important to provide frequent updates on the progress of milestones for all stakeholders. All communications should be monitored through a robust project management methodology with short intervals of control, escalation process and clear achievement status.

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Ultimately, it is more about maintaining behavior change than skills at the end of the day. A successful change management project will deeply impact the culture, not only improving collaboration but resulting in more data-driven and results-oriented team members. Such behavior must be monitored since it forms the foundation for future projects.
A successful transformational change initiative not only results in better bottom lines, it creates motivated, collaborative teams. As one project manager exclaimed, “We created a community around the PLM!” What is required is a sustained commitment from leadership and a robust change management plan. The decision to implement such a change depends on where your company needs to be in five years and if it is currently on a trajectory to attain this vision.

For companies considering a large-scale change management initiative, asking the right questions from the start of the project is essential.

**CONCLUSION**

**WHY LECTRA?**

With 40 years’ experience in the fashion industry, Lectra is in a unique position to support fashion and apparel companies in the numerous challenges they face. Our fashion-specific technology unites solutions that take an end-to-end approach to apparel development, covering fashion and textile design to product development to collection management to production. Lectra’s experience with a significant customer base composed of the world’s most respected fashion companies has fueled our ambitious and rigorous R & D development. Our solutions are driven by real client needs.

But technology is nothing without the robust consulting, training and support from industry and solution experts. Lectra’s experts come from all facets of the industry and cultures of the world and therefore bring a novel perspective to problem solving. Lectra’s experts help identify business goals and choose the right solutions to get there. They guide clients through the analysis process, while considering existing resources, to choose and implement the right technology and training program. With excellent distance support, including 5 international call centers and real-time remote assistance, we provide our clients with the keys to be off and running to achieve their goals of reduced time to market and costs and developing their business in their market.

Beyond helping with the planning, piloting and communicating of change, Lectra also helps ensure the change is sustainable, that technology is integrated into the company to reap long-term benefits. Recognizing that the human element is the key, Lectra’s experts help provide the connection between technology and customer teams, improving workforce behavior and skills necessary to attain the desired future state.

Please contact Lectra today to find out how we can support your change initiative.

**A FEW PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS**

- Is management fully committed and aligned?
- Who are the best people to act as ambassadors of change? Which roles must be represented?
- What does the ‘future state’ look like and how will this vision be communicated to the team?
- How can we understand the detailed way that people are working today—which focus groups should be assembled? Where would we like to foster collaboration and how can we get these groups to start talking to each other early on?
- How long will it take to see real results? What types of short-term wins could be communicated along the way to help build momentum?
- When can we start to inform suppliers of our plans?
Every Lectra Fashion Project benefits from Lectra’s 40 years of fashion expertise in the form of consulting, training, and ongoing support. Lectra’s consultants evaluate customer needs and process to propose appropriate solutions to support their unique business goals. Contact one of our global offices today to find out if a Lectra Change Management Project is right for your business.

Lectra has offices worldwide. Please visit www.lectra.com for more information.