

Timing is Everything

Planning when your investments happen for a successful outcome



STEVE BERNARD

OCTOBER 2013.

So when is exactly the 'right time' to change your business, improve your team performance, and/or create & launch your new vision? The truth is there is never the right or perfect time, but timing is nevertheless a key ingredient to successful outcomes and what your investments count for.

Managers and change professionals wrestle over both the timing and coordination of activity inside organisations almost daily. The reason is that 'being ready' is really tricky to gauge and therefore get right. Logically it's easy enough; if you have a sound business case / reasoned argument you're more likely to get senior sponsorship and investment sign off. But there are so many other, often hidden / more subtle indicators and resources that need investigation. Are the implementers of the change really 'ready'? Is there enough stability elsewhere to deal with this amount of change and disruption to the norm? Is there genuine alignment and commitment from key influencers to avoid a bombshell or sabotage attempt ½ way through? There is never a right time but with careful consideration and planning it is feasible to get the timing more right to achieve your desired business outcomes.

***The Secret Plan:** 2 Years ago we embarked on one of our largest programmes of work – a ££ six figure initiative on Engagement in the Heart of the Public Sector. There were many hurdles to contend with including an organisational restructure and the changing of the key client half way through the programme. During our recontracting, what became evident was that the real underlying priorities were actually different. The business really wanted to stabilise the operation first, then consider engagement and later work on managerial capability / succession planning. This still happens far too regularly – a programme with one set of priorities is secretly competing with another set. Luckily we were able to identify this quickly and challenge appropriately to 'switch' emphasis and rescue some value from the exercise. But without objectivity and some timely challenge, programmes will often just roll on, getting harder to stop or question.*

If the story of the secret plan was about not really having the full picture, sometimes timing is simply about agreeing what the minimum required resources or inputs are for success.

A few weeks back, I was supposed to run my first Half Marathon of the year in Windsor, Berkshire. I pulled out about two weeks prior. The timing simply wasn't right as I didn't have the miles in my legs (insufficient training and preparation). While my commitment was there I had suffered a cold at the wrong time and just couldn't get my act together when increasing the mileage at a critical stage. The easy option would have been to let the ego carry me to the start line; I would probably have finished but been highly likely to have picked up injuries and not enjoyed the experience. In business, people often don't feel able to 'call it' and say we haven't got the minimum requirements to do this.

Passive Resistance: My running partner wasn't ready either. In the key preparation months I noticed it becoming increasingly hard to 'talk about' the lack of training we were doing and key milestones slipped by easily while we were both 'preoccupied' with other things. Ignoring the issue or the shared lack of confidence in the ability to achieve something happens regularly in organisations too. Successful teams and work groups rely on an 'honest broker' role – someone with the ability to 'call it'.



When this voice isn't present or isn't seen as desirable, that's when the worst disasters can happen. In the health / social care sector we supported a leadership conference – one of the themes was 'One xxxCompany Namexxx' – it was a divisional business and it was clear on the day that the Board had a lack of alignment on key strategic questions. Nobody called it and on the day it was hard not to sense that in the room. Without the right leadership organisations are never far away from collusion or 'Group think'.

Kicking into the Long Grass: This begs the question- why is it that resistance creeps in with no name and the underlying motives / real measure of belief goes unspoken? In our view one reason is confidence. At a personal level leaders will often push away or resist things they feel least confident about; they may either believe they personally don't have the skill required to handle it well or they may not feel able to challenge another powerful voice or stop something once its gained momentum. When we don't feel confident / or in control we can sometimes 'seize up' on the inside but it's another skill altogether managing that and not simply deferring a decision or ignoring the issue.

Change and developing your business requires a myriad of resources and many of them are relationship based resources that affect real world decision making and activity on the ground. So how do you get the timing (more) right? Here are some simple things you can do to moderate the fact that there really is no absolutely perfect time for anything:



- **Create some diversity** around the decision making table; encourage an 'honest broker' or antagonist to challenge the thinking (as long as they have the right skills / intentions)
- **Check and re-check** the buy in / alignment: Don't accept the first answer at face value, especially if it feels too easy. Go deeper and ask the awkward question.
- **Get Clear:** Spend time understanding why something is truly important and equally why you are 'pushing on' at pace or 'pausing' / stopping. Go beyond the numbers; like statistics, financial cases can hide a host of nasty surprises in terms of the ability to actually realise the results.
- **Dream & Worry:** Explore positive & negative scenarios including the 'do nothing' option. This will encourage more genuine debate and should flush out key criteria or evidence that will help you figure out questions of timing / momentum.

