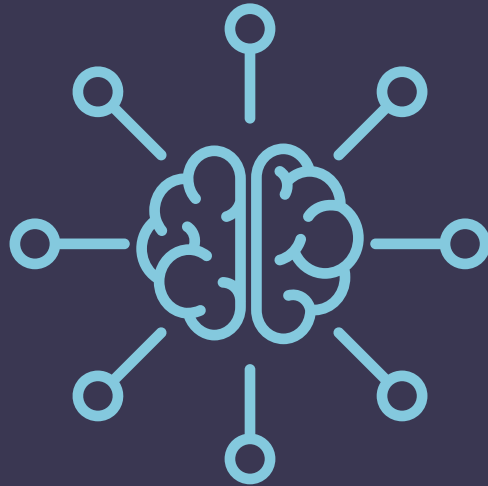# TruemanChange.

LESSONS FROM LOCKDOWN

Managing Change During the COVID-19 Crisis

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AUTHOR:

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Lucy Trueman

In terms of leadership, there was a **real need** to have a great deal of **emotional intelligence.**

Tracy Manning,
Director of Resources, Fylde Council

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Executive Summary.

The COVID-19 crisis has served as a catalyst for re-thinking change leadership in organisations. Many organisations in all sectors had to quickly and effectively respond to huge changes quickly and effectively in business models, ways of working, and relationships with staff, partners and customers.

Historically many organisations have allowed significant time for change to happen and become fully embedded. It's not uncommon for people to buy in large management consultancies to drive change on their behalf, a process which often takes several years and costs millions.

Common large scale programmes have been around:

- Changing culture
- Becoming a more agile organisation
- Digitalisation
- Re-structures to reduce silo working
- Developing mergers/partnerships with others
- Developing new operating models

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, organisations were forced to respond overnight, and these long-term change programmes were put on hold to deal with the immediate response. For many organisations, particularly in the public sector, their ability to respond effectively to the crisis lay within the challenges they had been trying to meet for some time, around agile, flexible and digital ways of working, and yet suddenly they were able to make things happen quickly.

Organisations whose cultures had previously been described as bureaucratic and risk averse, overnight came alive with passion, purpose, and a laser focus on delivering services and making a difference. Managers who had previously resisted agile and flexible working achieved remote working across entire organisations within days. Teams who had been battling with partnership working, unable to fully embed them, suddenly came together with people from other agencies to respond to a crisis by putting residents at the heart of every decision they made.

The speed and effectiveness with which organisations responded was unprecedented. And yet, when you look under the surface, although the threat of COVID-19 was new, the challenges to overcome were not. Becoming more agile, more purpose driven, more digital and more people focused were well established solutions that many had been discussing for some time. What successful organisations managed to do was accelerate these changes at exceptional speed. Not everything was perfect, rules were stretched and even broken, staff worked harder than ever before, risks were taken, and some may look back with hindsight at what was achieved and do things differently. That said, the pace and urgency presented a unique environment for driving change.

It also presented a challenge to change leaders – what were we doing wrong? Change programmes that took several years failed to deliver what small teams with a can-do attitude achieved in days. There wasn't time for the usual decision-making governance, planning and risk management that is normally accepted as best practice.

Although the global pandemic was a unique situation, having to respond and make change happen isn't. All organisations, public, third and private sector, must adapt and respond to their customers, communities or marketplace. We live in a fast paced, changing world. Technology, market forces, competition, and changes to society and how we live drive change from all directions. All organisations must be able to respond to this.

Amidst the tragedy of COVID-19, there is a unique opportunity to take stock of how change happened when the pressure was truly on, which can enable organisations to better manage change going forward.

At Trueman Change we went on a mission to talk to the people driving change during the pandemic and explore these issues. We ran a series of online panel discussions, involving over 50 people from 44 different organisations. We looked at what they did differently, how they maintained pace, and what the future looks like for them.

Change needn't be long and drawn out, it shouldn't be boring or bureaucratic.

During COVID-19 these organisations managed to turn change management on its head and work with small, agile teams, focussed on making a difference **fast**. This paper summarises that work, what we found and what was key to success.

Let's do change **differently.**

Our Research.

During June and July 2020, we ran a range of panel discussions with organisations to understand how they have responded to COVID-19 from a change perspective.

We spoke to over 50 people from 44 different organisations, including:

- Local government
- Higher education
- Community businesses
- NHS organisations
- Private sector organisations
- Leisure services
- Consultancy services
- Charitable organisations

The people we spoke to were from a variety of job roles, including:

Chief Executives •
Directors •
Consultants •
Psychologists •
Board Chairs •
Change Managers •
HR Specialists •
Political leaders •

Each discussion had a small number of panel members describing their experience and learning whilst being part of change programmes during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Attendees also contributed their perspectives and learning from their own organisations. Our themed discussions were:

Theme	Discussion
Harnessing the Power of the Community	How have we managed to set up multi-agency community hubs practically overnight? What can we learn from this? What is the role of community groups and public sector going forward?
Getting Stuff Done Quickly	How have we managed to make change happen so fast? What barriers did we have and how did we remove them? Was there a change in behaviour/culture driving this? What's changed all of a sudden?
Leadership in a Crisis	Have you seen a change in leadership style? Have you changed your own style? What different leadership skills should we be developing going forward?
Remote Working	How did you successfully drive the transition from office-based to home-based? What can we learn from this? Will the way people work change going forward?
Culture Change and Context	How has the drastic shift in context affected your culture? What changes in behaviour and ways of working do you anticipate going forward?

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Findings.

During our conversations, there were a series of themes which shone through consistently. We have collated these into the following lessons.

Lesson 1.

Passion and purpose drive change

There is already considerable research and materials around the importance of passion, purpose and shared values during change journeys. Often people pay lip service to this, they rarely get it right, with absolute clarity and focus, in a way which resonates throughout the whole organisation. COVID-19 established that clarity and focus. It created a common purpose with an immediate requirement for action. Some public sector organisations described it as a "humanitarian response," the need to support vulnerable people was so clear and strong.

The immediate nature of the crisis in many cases also re-ignited passion within many organisations we spoke to. People described how they were finally doing what they came into their role to do 30 years ago: help people. The theme of teams coming together to focus on doing what was right came up again and again. In all our conversations people described how managers saw how the passion and purpose in their teams empowered people to act fast.

One risk for this lesson though is around resilience. It is easy to be on a high of passion and empowered to take action during a crisis. Although change leaders will do well to emulate this going forward, they need to do so in a controlled way. The downside of passion and purpose ignited by crisis is resilience and burnout. The challenge going forward is keeping the passion when we're not in a state of crisis. This means leaders must generate the passion through inspiration, not fear, going forward. Ask your teams why they come to work and ensure change programmes link back to your core values.

"Everybody for the first time, you think of the NHS as the largest employer in Europe, people had a single issue that they were all working to, and a sense of common purpose."

Edna Robinson,
Former NHS CEO

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We did actually **reinvent ourselves** in about **three days.**

Kieran Keane,
Chief Executive, Lancaster City Council

Lesson 2.

Take action

The single biggest difference in change during the first few months of the pandemic compared to other change programmes was the speed in which it happened. Speakers described this as people focussing on what needed doing that day.

Although many organisations had experience of crisis response, there was no by-the-book guidance or detailed plan in place on how to deal with the virus and national lockdown. People had to just come together, take risks, and try. Some organisations had brief daily meetings to keep on top of pace, and speakers also described a complete culture shift around permission to fail. They didn't wait until they had perfectly detailed plans before acting.

This is a crucial learning point for change leaders. Although it's important to act with thought, it's crucial not to fall into a trap of 'paralysis by analysis'. To lead change quickly you must act now. What can you do today to take a step towards the change you want to see?

"We set our sights on thinking about what the problems were straight away and how we might solve those, and no idea was hit on the head."

Carol Costello,
Director of People & Services,
University of Liverpool

The **strategic focus needs to shift**, and we need to **harness that enthusiasm**, we've seen which staff members have shone through, and it's not a hierarchical thing.

Mark Davies,
Director of Communities & Environment, Lancaster City Council

Lesson 3.

The importance of partnerships

When the crisis hit, it was those organisations with pre-existing relationships with partnership bodies that were able to quickly marshal and share resources. In the absence of bureaucracy, plans, paperwork and service level agreements, people came together and worked to achieve shared aims and goals. People were on the same side trying to achieve something (regardless of which organisation they were from), pulled together and led significant change at a core business level. This is a far cry from where partnership conversations often get stuck – around budgets, structures, agreements, and processes.

The lesson here is not to fall into these traps - focus on what's important.

Start the work by establishing what's important, and what the shared aims are. These need to be specific and all partners must buy into them, as this is what drives people forward, not back-office arrangements. As one speaker described it, make connections not contracts.

"What changed in crisis was **we became a community**."

Alistair Sinclair,

Cabinet Member,
Lancaster City Council

The ability of leaders to **release some of that power** and that decision-making ability to people across the organisation, has **allowed that business to stay alive**, to **progress**, to **flourish**.

Penny Strutton,
Business Psychologist

Lesson 4.

Be aware of emotions

Although different terminology was used, the theme around emotional intelligence and awareness of other's feelings and circumstances came up repeatedly. One of the unique aspects of the COVID-19 crisis is that it has affected everyone in some way. Although this helped to unite people against a common threat, (see lesson one) it also brought about a challenge of working amongst such high emotions. During the crisis, leaders of change who were able to spot potential emotional issues, who knew their team well enough to support their needs, and recognised who needed help and when, were able to progress much easier.

Whilst most changes do not have the large-scale emotional impact a pandemic does, they do cause stress and sometimes fear. It's worth ensuring you understand your people, invest in mental health awareness training, and keep in touch and connected with those around you.

Another aspect of this is being aware of your own emotions, resilience, and humanity.

Many speakers talked openly about their personal challenges, including managing their own stress and wellbeing. They described pressure, a sense of fatigue from being in 'crisis mode' and emotional roller coasters of their own, alongside a new openness about this with their teams. There had been an increase in focus on wellbeing. Increased remote working had allowed many to take more control of their working day, having walking telephone conversations, taking time out for exercise and balance their home lives better.

This was refreshing to see, as in our experience the role of change leaders is often 'dropped-on' individuals who already have 'day jobs' and are not well prepared for the emotional impact of driving changes and carrying other's emotions through that journey.

It's important for leaders to acknowledge that leading change is tough, so making sure you are providing yourself with the headspace you need to be your best is crucial.

At the moment, we're working on: **is our business better than usual?** We're trying to capture the changes both good and bad, and say 'well **when we do go back** to normal, we're not going to go back to normal, **we're going to be better than normal**'.

Stuart Sugarman,
Managing Director, NHS Organisation

Lesson 5.

Reduce bureaucracy

Whenever the question of "how did you make it happen so fast?" came up, the answer was "reduce bureaucracy". It's worth saying that most of the people we spoke to came from large organisations (1,500+ staff), many in the public sector with well established governance processes. What organisations found was that, with the immediacy of the crisis, there wasn't time to establish the normal levels of governance and decision-making processes. This meant people worked in a much more agile way, and many organisations reported "trial and error" cultures, and empowering staff with permission to fail.

This is a contrast to how many traditional transformation programmes are established, where people focus on project initiation documents, risk logs and reporting mechanisms. Time will tell if some of the decisions made without these processes were the right ones, but there is a real challenge here for change leaders to re-think their approach to governance in change.

People drowning in paperwork are rarely empowered to truly drive change.

"That sort of **command and control culture** is one that has potentially been felt as necessary for quite a while, but **we absolutely need to move away from that**."

Natasha Chadwick,
Business Psychologist

I hope that we can **embrace** some of this **going forward** and we **don't revert back** to how we've always done it.

Norman Goodwin,
CEO, Adoption Matters

Lesson 6.

Be human not hierarchical

This theme links with others around communication and emotional awareness. Across all our conversations the theme of leaders being human came up. People described dismantling traditional professional hierarchies. When in crisis, job titles became much less relevant. Leaders found that their teams were empowered and driven, and their job was to facilitate success, not control it.

Another interesting theme that came up repeatedly was around trust. The shared purpose, sense of crisis and pace of action combined to create cultures with 'permission to fail'. There was not a rule book, just people trying their best, and this created a sense of trust in organisations.

An interesting side effect of people working remotely has been the opening of people's homes. Several speakers commented that seeing others at home, seeing their children and pets, has enabled them to connect even more than usual. Stripping away our professional masks enables us to make better connections with those around us.

The lesson here for change leaders is not to be afraid of being human. Although we build up our professional identities, it is often when we drop these that our people respond on a human level. Change is difficult, and treating yourself and others as human beings, not resources, requires courage and vulnerability, but undoubtably builds trust in difficult situations.

"In terms of advice to change leaders, **the importance of being human has never been greater**."

Sanjay Mackintosh,

Director of
Roretti Management Consultancy

On average we spend **36 days a year writing emails**, and we receive on average 200 emails a day, so that in itself, if we can reduce the amount of emails by actually talking to human beings... **let's try and do things differently**.

Liz Hardwick,
Co-Founder, DigiEnable

Lesson 7.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

Although this isn't a new lesson, those delivering change through the start of the COVID-19 pandemic were very strong in the message that communication was crucial. Speakers referenced the different ways they were communicating, through videos, blogs, and video calls from home, all of which helped with lesson six: being more human. Some spoke of daily short meetings with partners to ensure that everyone was on the same page. What was clear was that communication was agile and not bureaucratic.

It was also clear that communication was two-way. When asked what advice they would give future change leaders a Cabinet Member for a city council simply stated "Listen." A Quality & Performance Manager from a County Council shared their findings following a staff survey of their front line customer call centre (who had moved to completely working from home). Staff were asked for feedback on the new working arrangements and, interestingly, only 2.8% wanted to continue working completely from home permanently, although 96% wanted to continue working from home some or most of the time. Examples like these, of people listening to their people, were heart-warming and are crucial to the success of any change programme.

In terms of lessons for change leaders going forward, it's worth saying, however much you are communicating, it's probably not enough.

"**It comes down to good communication to make things happen**, to get things done, so that people feel they can be heard and they can have a voice."

Penny Strutton,
Business Psychologist

The Future of Change Leadership.

So, what does this mean for the future of change leadership? This is an opportunity to rethink some of the 'norms' which frame thinking, particularly in large organisations. Some of the old ways of 'doing change' have been proven less important than we first thought, whilst some models and schools of thought have been reinforced (for example work around 'burning platforms' and shared purpose). So what might change about change?

The Past	The Future
Complex, large scale change programmes that take years to deliver.	Shorter focus on getting results – what action can be taken today, what can we achieve in a week?
Time invested on setting vague, 'catch all' priorities.	Setting clear laser-focussed objectives that people can get behind.
Complex governance and decision making processes at various levels.	Simple, quick decision making. Focus on the minimum reporting required so time can be spent delivering the change not administering it.
Hierarchical structures where leaders are in control.	Empowered groups of people driving change at all levels.
Partnerships based on contracts, paperwork, SLAs and hierarchical structures.	Partnerships based on shared aims and objectives, making a real difference.
Change leadership skills focusing on knowledge and authority.	Change leadership focussed on humanity, empowering others, and emotional intelligence.
Long-term change programmes with complex benefits that are not quite achieved.	Short, sharp, positive change with clear impact.

We've moved a lot in terms of trying to **establish connections rather than contracts** and that's been really important.

Ken Masser,
Chief Executive, Rossendale Leisure Trust

What Next?

Trueman Change will continue this work to challenge and further develop approaches to change management and delivery in organisations.

Our website www.truemanchange.co.uk has a range of free resources to help you think through and develop your change journey, as well as opportunities to get involved in the conversation around how change is changing.

If you'd like to take part in future conversations please contact hello@truemanchange.co.uk.

We'd love to speak with organisations who are embarking on change journeys. If you'd like to share your story, or access some advice and support please contact us at hello@truemanchange.co.uk

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