



Change Doesn't Have to be Painful

By Scott Hopkins, CPPS

Winston Churchill once said, “To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.” I could not agree more, as I believe changing ensures people stay current with the ever-shifting times and prevents us from falling into comfortable ruts. The trouble with the Churchill statement is that change can be difficult and painful, and people generally like to keep things simple and painless by sticking with what they know. But change doesn't always have to be painful if it's planned for, and by

sticking with only what you know you could be damaging your organization. This article will discuss ways to plan for change, focusing specifically on what *you – the property professional* – can do to make change less painful.

The Setup

Before we discuss how to plan for change, see if the following scenario sounds familiar: Your organization has been using spreadsheets or home-grown databases to track its property for

20 years. Your property management policies were drafted during the Nixon presidency. When new property custodians join your team and ask why things are done a certain way, the answer is consistently, “Because we've always done it that way.” No one seems to be able to provide a good explanation as to why things are the way they are – no matter how little sense it makes to keep them that way.

On top of this, the current way of managing property just doesn't seem



to work. You are constantly modifying your procedures in *reaction* to a negative event or finding rather than *anticipating* changes that may come down the pike. This way of doing business has led to several audit failures. New property isn't added to spreadsheets in a timely fashion; no one documents asset transfers so it is difficult for you to maintain true accountability; and your people dread the physical inventory process because they know they'll spend more time reconciling their results than they will looking for their assets. Additionally, there is no audit trail from your organization's purchasing system into the property system - nor is there a way to show that items have been placed in excess status - so it is difficult to tell where things came from or how and when they were disposed of. To make things worse, you are constantly losing assets, so not only is your property management *tool* not up to the job, but your internal *controls and processes* aren't getting it done either.

The Plan for Change

So what do you do about all this? You should plan for change across all facets of your property management shop by:

- ▶ Analyzing and documenting your current processes from top-to-bottom
- ▶ Determining where your gaps are and what you need to do to plug those gaps
- ▶ Evaluating and purchasing new property management software, ensuring that the software will help you close those gaps
- ▶ Getting a project sponsor who will drive the implementation of the new software and policies/procedures/processes, and who will inspire others in getting the job done
- ▶ Working with the software vendor to drive the configuration of the property management software so that it meets your organization's specific needs
- ▶ Allowing the user community to be involved in configuring and

testing the software, ensuring the people on the ground have a say in the way things should be

- ▶ Analyzing and documenting future processes, and using this information to inform the user community how things will be changing
- ▶ Touting the benefits and being honest about the new way of doing business, and explaining the impacts of the changes
- ▶ Communicating with your user community constantly about all facets of the program so they can fully prepare themselves for the change
- ▶ Training your people on what their jobs will be, and doing so shortly before deploying the new software so they don't forget how to do things
- ▶ Providing support to the user community after go-live to ensure they're on the right track
- ▶ Helping to ensure your effort isn't totally wasted by ramming a new system/new set of processes down people's throats

This sounds like a lot, and maybe it is for smaller organizations that have limited resources and funding. But when you look at this list holistically, think about how much easier following these steps would make any major changes and help you accomplish four major objectives:

1. Evaluate your processes/policies/procedures honestly, determine where you could do better, and get a software tool that will help you do better.
2. Allow those most affected by the changes to be involved, thus giving them ownership and a reason to be invested.
3. Give your user community the time and the opportunity to prepare for the coming changes so that they're not caught off guard when the changes occur.
4. Help ensure a successful implementation by providing appropriate training and adequate time for feedback

The Details

I've given you high-level ideas about what needs to be done to implement a change management program. I've discussed these in more detail in a previous *Property Professional* article¹ about effecting change from a *change management team* point-of-view; now I'd like to identify what you as a property professional can do when you find yourself on the *receiving* end of change.

Look Deep within Yourself – and be Harsh

One main reason people decide they need to change is because the current way of doing things simply isn't working. Before your organization decides to make the shift to new property management

software, you as the expert should examine every process involved in the asset lifecycle – from acquisition through disposal. Be honest with yourself, carefully documenting where you're falling short and where you need to make improvements. This will not only help you determine where you have gaps, but will begin the process of gathering requirements for your new property management software.

Vet the Product

Once you have an idea of where your gaps are and what you need the new software to do for you, get your wish list of requirements down on paper and shop them around to vendors. As vendors start demonstrating their products, provide them with a few real-world scenarios to ensure they can demonstrate the ability to handle those scenarios. Focus not only on those key requirements like, "I want to see you add an asset to the system," but focus especially on how that software can help you fill your gaps. Grill the vendor about how things work so you can get a better idea of how the software can improve your way of doing business. Remember that software is an investment, and that you're purchasing it under the assumption that it's going to help fix your property management problems.

Take Me to Your Leader

Change management initiatives such as software implementations can go a lot more smoothly if you have a project sponsor, or "champion" that can drive the change and inspire others. Find someone in a leadership position who has a stake in property management and get him or her fired up about the prospect

of implementing new software by providing a comprehensive overview of potential costs and anticipated benefits. The ability to prove *quantifiable* results is key to gaining any type of support within your organization, especially when it comes to upper level management. Without someone out there banging the drum and talking about how things will improve, implementations could be delayed and people could lose interest. If people understand why the new way of doing things will be better – and if you have a leader who drives things forward and constantly reminds people of the benefits – they may just begin to believe it.

Use the Vendor Wisely

Once you purchase software, work closely with the software vendor to drive the configuration of the system and any new processes. Keep in mind that experienced vendors have worked with clients who have had similar challenges as you, so use their knowledge to help drive you where you want to go. Additionally, many vendor representatives hold NPMA certifications, so use their knowledge of the property management world as well. Above all, don't be afraid to *change your processes and let the software work for you*. Remember, just because "you've always done it that way" doesn't mean "that way" makes sense, so let the software's built-in efficiencies work for you.

The Users Usually Know Best

Too often people who will not actually use the property management software determine the way the software ought to work. Why not let the *end users* drive the functionality instead? As you begin to implement and configure the

software, involve your end-user community in the implementation and testing. Find experienced people who will provide useful feedback. This will allow those on the ground to get their hands dirty with the new product, and in turn these users can inform the project leaders about how the software could be better. Best of all, over time those future users of the software will get invested in its implementation - and maybe even start buying into the change. And in the end, this involvement helps avoid the inevitable narrative that the change was forced upon the organization.

What's New? What's Happening Now?

One of the best ways a change management (CM) team can prepare a user community for change is to communicate the changes. Once the CM team has analyzed and documented the future processes, they should be using this information to inform the user community how things will be changing. They should be talking about things such as how the software will simplify things, (or how the software may radically change the way they are doing it now); any tasks that now may require additional (or fewer) resources; and what the user community can do to prepare for the new software (data cleanup, standardization, etc.) Anyone being affected by the change should attend these information sessions in order to get a better understanding of how to prepare for the changes and impacts. If you have a large organization spread across the country, attend as many sessions as you can and pass the information along to the system users. Work closely with the project team to ensure you're on the right

track before deployment. The more the users understand the changes, the better prepared they'll be when the change comes, thus avoiding any surprises once you go live.

Get Yourself Some Training

When it comes to new software, chances are people will need training. But how do you ensure the training will be useful? One thing that will help is if you train people on only what they need to know. Don't train someone in the excess warehouse on how to manage the depreciation of capital assets, for instance. And you probably don't need to train a finance person on how to conduct the day-to-day asset management tasks (adding assets, transferring assets, and conducting physical inventories, for example). Another key to successful training is making sure it's timely. Don't train someone three months before go-live; they'll likely forget how to use the software (or the software might undergo changes in three months time). Train them as close to deployment as you can so the information remains fresh and relevant.

Support Groups

I'm a trainer at heart so naturally I fully believe in the importance of training, but I also realize that training alone does not lead to full proficiency. This is why post-deployment support is key to a successful implementation. Ideally your change management team or the users involved in testing and implementation can go into the user community to provide support. If you have a small staff, you could provide support just by having someone staffing a phone center. Whichever method you choose, any post-deployment support will ensure people use the software correctly, and

will help you draft communications and job aids to gently correct those who aren't.

To summarize, as a property professional, you can positively effect change in a number of ways. If you honestly look at your processes and determine where you could do better, you help drive the shift to the new process. If your leadership and your people are involved and have a stake in the outcome, they will begin to take ownership of their new roles and duties. If your community knows the changes that are coming and has time to prepare for them, they can't say they had no idea what was coming. By implementing a solid change management plan and being involved in the change, you will give people the opportunity over time to come to grips with something totally new, and you can work closely with them to help them plan for the impacts the change will bring. In essence, you will be their guide through a process that generally no one likes to undertake, and you will increase your chances of making a *successful* change. ■

REFERENCES

Change Management: The Under-Appreciated Factor. Hopkins, Scott; Sirios, Sheila. *Property Professional*, April, 2008.

BIOGRAPHY

Scott Hopkins, CPPS is a senior business analyst for Sunflower Systems and is a member of NPMA's Federal Center Chapter. Mr. Hopkins has worked on software implementations with Sunflower for over five years, and he has 10 years' experience in change management and training design and delivery with both federal and private-sector clients. Scott lives in Alexandria, VA with his wife and two hilarious sons.