

# The risk of change

**There are a lot of similarities when bringing babies and change initiatives into life: the heartaches, the joys, the sleepless nights, and finally, that wonderful moment when they become somebody else's problem. Here are some thoughts from parenthood that might help when reflecting on managing the risk of change in business...**

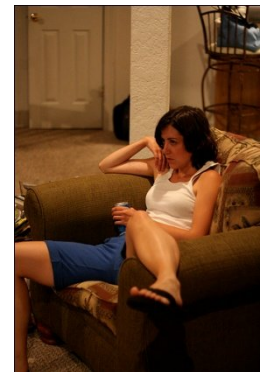


To start, here are some ideas about parenting that are personally appealing:

1. If children were born as obnoxious grunting teenagers rather than cute wee babies, most parents probably wouldn't bother;
2. Success is hard to measure; and
3. When things go wrong with change, the muck gets everywhere and the smell lingers on.

## **Newborn Joy to Princess Bitchface in a blink of an eye**

Project concept and conception are enjoyable moments. It's the time when a twinkle in the eye becomes reality. All those hopes and aspirations wrapped into little bundles. Newly in the world, they are fresh, cute and appealing. Yet even for those who know what to expect, the teenage years often come as an unpleasant surprise - complaints from neighbours, the tantrums, the angst, the "pass but could do better" reports... Rewarding times – looking back. It's hard to miss the teenagers wandering around in oversize caps with their pants on the ground, so why don't potential parents notice them rather than the cute wee babies? Likewise, it's hard to miss the organisational change projects failing to live up to expectations and causing grief, so why don't managers notice them before commissioning yet another project?



## **Success is hard to measure**



When parents decide to have a child (or have one thrust upon them), success is usually hoped for but rarely planned. Progress is measured by proxy such as academic achievement or place in sports teams; but important attributes such as instilling integrity are judged rather than measured, and the benefits of having children are just assumed. In many ways this reflects the way that organisations go about projects. To many in the organisational family a lot is taken on faith; these things are ordained by God (or at least by one of the Archangels) and it's just expected that someone further down the food chain will nurture and clean up after the baby/ cuckoo left in the nest.

## **The risks of change**

Like children, change initiatives are prone to accidents. Where babies are especially prone to getting hurt by falling off things and choking, organisations have problems with turf battles and getting change to stick.



Changing nappies is an example of one of those daily parenting duties that need to be done with an eye to the risks involved; having an awareness of the context within which you're trying to achieve success, anticipating problems, acting quickly and efficiently. Placing the baby on the dining room table and turning away, even for a moment, is inviting disaster. Sponsors putting projects high on display then leaving the project manager unattended is similarly unwise, running the risk of falling, suffocation or other accidents. A safe changing table should have railings, and should be slip resistant. A safe change project should have good governance and provide high quality management information.

## Summary

Change initiatives can be fun and bring a lot of meaning into an organisation. Handled with care and good judgement they will usually grow into useful business-as-usual maturity. But where they are unplanned, left to their own devices, and required to be seen not heard, they can go off the rails and cause a lot of angst. Three things help grow gorgeous babies into good adults, and the same things helps with change initiatives:

1. Be aware of what's likely to come, go into it with eyes wide open;
2. Know what you're trying to achieve and measure progress towards it; and
3. Be aware of, and manage, the risks of change.

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### About the author



*Adrian Sparrow has worked in senior management positions in a variety of industries. He was a consultant for Alexander Proudfoot, KPMG, and Deloitte. He has Masters degrees from Cranfield and Massey Universities. Adrian tries to bring insight and practical thinking to problems facing organisations.*

