

Dealing with resistance to culture change: how to work on a failure

Antonio Ottaiano and Pietro Scalisi (Istat, Italy)

ottaiano@istat.it, scalisi@istat.it

Abstract

Promoting a cultural change in statistical organizations is a delicate issue of strategic importance. It is important because it may help to create a favorable and positive work environment, in which the staff feels welcomed, integrated and supported in the development of their professional profile. It is delicate as well because it has to be proposed and shared with adequate communication.

In fact, change management opens several challenges: the engagement of personnel, bringing everyone on the same boat, is probably the most important one. This means that in order to promote change within organizations and to encourage innovation of processes and products, priority has to be given to communicate the advantages of cultural change and to gain the consent and support of the personnel.

The Italian Institute of Statistics has recently gone through a significant and formative experience from this point of view. To support the modernization process, the Human Resources Department has implemented a skill register, aiming at classifying each employee's competences (in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes) and measuring their level of mastery. The goal was to set up a competences system, on which all activities related to the human resources management cycle (policies on recruiting, mobility, training planning, career development, etc.) have to be based.

However, the process of implementing the cultural and organizational change in Istat was 'top-down' driven and not enough attention was paid to share the theoretical model with the personnel. This has generated so far a resistance to change in many colleagues, who have accepted with suspicion some proposals. In particular, the invitation to each employee to fill in the competences database was accepted by only twenty-five percent of the staff.

The presentation will describe the failure achieved by this activity and how we decided to learn from this lesson and change the way of introducing and communicating such a significant cultural change in personnel policies.

Keywords

HRMT; Culture change; Skills register; Failure

Dealing with resistance to culture change: how to work on a failure

Antonio Ottaiano, Pietro Scalisi - Italian National Institute of Statistics

Introduction

Promoting a cultural change in statistical organizations is both an important and delicate issue.

In 2017, the introduction of the technical competences register in our Institute represented an important cultural change, the expression of a different approach to the human resources management. At the same time, it involved a delicate transition, which wasn't easily accepted by the staff, since perplexity and resistance to change are very common instinctive reactions at the workplace, which must be accepted and managed carefully, if you do not want to compromise the expected result.

This presentation analyzes an experience of failure, matured in our Institute in these circumstances, to reflect on resistance to change and how to overcome it. In particular, we will share how, due to this experience, the communication strategy changed and what good practices were introduced to recover and implement cultural change.

The cultural change underlying the technical competences register

The technical competences register aims at classifying each employee's competences (in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes) and measuring their level of mastery. Its introduction represents the intention to change the role played by the Human Resources Department. Thanks to such a tool, in fact, the Human Resources Department can collect information about its staff in order to define its personnel policies and accelerate the transition from an impersonal and bureaucratic procedures management, based on fulfillments to be accomplished, to a personalized one, based on the skills of individuals, taking the staff throughout its career and supporting it in its professional development.

The ambition to place the right person in the right place, thus facilitating the motivation and involvement of each one, should be the polar star of the work of Human Resources Management. In other words, it is a matter of transforming the ratio that leads the actions of the Human Resources Department from a generalist and welfare perspective to an employee-service-oriented one.

This approach is implemented by including all personnel policies within a single organic framework, centered on the knowledge of the competences people have within the organization. Focusing on the relationship between the skills possessed and acted by the staff and those desired by the organization allows to better manage the existing professional skills and to build development paths based on the abilities and attitudes of individuals. Information collected by the system are indispensable elements to address the human resources management cycle, that is policies on recruiting, mobility, training planning, career development, etc.

Resistance to change

Now, what exactly is the technical competences register? It is a classification system of specialist skills, made of 6 thematic areas, 29 subareas and 314 skills, aiming at classifying each employee's capability and at measuring their level of mastery. Employees can access to the classification and define their profile, highlighting the technical skills possessed, even those not practiced in the usual work activities. Of course, collecting the staff specialist skills is not enough to outline the human capital available in the Institute, but it's a first step. This commitment needs to be followed by others, aimed at collecting also the complementary competences practiced in the work activity by the employees.

This first step, finalized to build a System of competences, was not adequately communicated by our Institute and many colleagues experienced the introduction of the skills register as a useless action. Worse: they feared that the information provided would be used by the Human Resources Department to move them from one line to another on a compulsory basis.

Our communication strategy, in other words, was top-down driven and not enough attention was paid to share the theoretical model with the personnel, so making possible distorted interpretations of the objectives underlying the initiative. The result was that only 25% of staff profiled themselves. Some employees reported the uselessness, and the consequent loss of time, of an operation based exclusively on the self-assessment of their own competences. Others complained about the lack of coherence with the mobility and recruitment policies carried out in the last years by the Institute; some others stigmatized the fact that the use of information was for the exclusive benefit of the administration and not of the staff. The unions reinforced these comments, accusing the Human Resources Department of a supposed instrumental use of information gathered, a perspective diametrically opposed to the one we had.

What has this flop taught us?

The reduced staff adhesion to the appeal to profile themselves in the technical competences register has reiterated the importance of setting up a clear, effective and transparent communication about new issues in relationship with personnel. This kind of communication has to show the benefits of the changes and to be consistent with the actions implemented so far. People are resistant to change their status quo; if they don't understand the advantages that can derive from it or if they detect inconsistencies with the usual practices, the resistances increase.

How did we react? First of all, transforming a heterodirect process into an inclusive process, trying to activate the trust and the sense of responsibility of the employees. To overcome mistrust and motivate colleagues, we started from the bottom, explaining the meaning of the operation and the use of its data. The procedure for inserting new recruits, for example, which has been recently tested and which is based on structured interviews that use the technical competences register to identify the profile of the candidates and address their assignment to the lines, has been presented as a concrete and effective utilization model of the information collected with this tool.

The usefulness of this procedure has been much appreciated by the staff, above all for the predisposition to create a dialogue with the new colleagues and to establish significant and personalized relationships, which do not end with the starting training. Similarly, other procedures have started that use the profiles of competencies released by the Register, such as the selection of teachers for training courses, the choice of experts for international cooperation missions or the assignments of colleagues in mobility applications, which have demonstrated the positive effects of this tool both for those directly involved and for the Institute.

The competences register, in this way, has not been presented abstractly, but presented in concrete work procedures, which allowed to dispel the shadows on its use and the prejudices that had conditioned it.

Conclusions

Adequately communicating such an important change of perspective in human resource management is necessary. If we want to promote change within our organizations and to encourage innovation of processes and products, we have to give priority to communicate the advantages of cultural change and to gain the consent and support of the personnel. This is certainly an expensive operation in terms of time and energy consumed, but it helps to take each employee by the hand and *take him on board*, showing him benefits he can obtain. The lesson we have learned confirms the importance of the main aspiration of each Human Resources Department: to build a stable and trusting relationship with all employees – and each of them - in order to make them feel welcome, integrated and valued. A cultural change always opens up numerous challenges: to deserve the trust of employees and make them allies are certainly the most important ones to win.