The empathetic approach to the Change Management

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Summary

There are a couple of universal rules well known by any change manager:

- The biggest obstacle to change are people
- You couldn't change anything without people working alongside you.

Therefore, considering that people are, at the same time, the reason and the solution of the challenges that a change manager has to face every single day, we should ask ourselves which are the right people to actively involve in the change project and how to deal with such an important factor.

Within this white paper, starting from some recognized theories and leveraging the experiences collected in in my 20-year long career, I will explain how to select the right audience avoiding the temptation to identify them from the widest group of individuals, difficult to manage and prone to act as a squad instead of being an active part of the transformation process. And finally, I will provide you some insights about how to transform the negative force causing a physiological low performance period into a positive example for the entire company.

The purpose of this article is to provide you with some suggestions that could help you design a change management project using empathy as your primary resource. I will demonstrate how the capacity of "listening with heart and mind" could definitely impact your journey to success.

Three theories to keep in mind

Whoever has attended a training course dedicated to Change Management has encountered the **Maslow's Pyramid**[1]. It's a very simple representation of the different levels of needs, starting from the basic ones (Food, Rest, etc) towards the satisfactions of personal expectations. Anyone could analyze its own situation and determine which level of fulfillment s/he was able to reach at a specific point of its own career.

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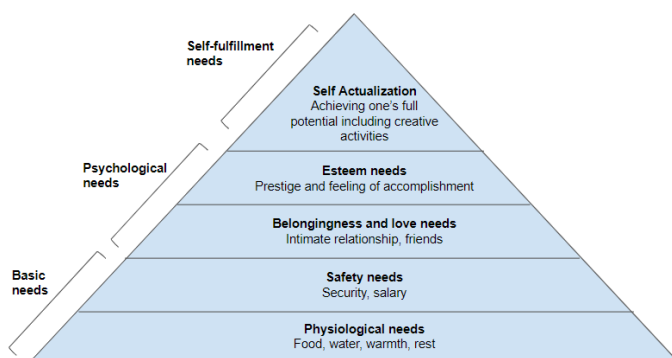
[1] Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs - Simply Psychology Org

Even if Maslow's theory is universally applicable, in this article I would drive your attention to the change management approach applied to medium-large organizations. If we looked only at that kind of companies, the largest part of their workforce could certainly affirm that all the basic needs are completely satisfied: they have a job and a correspondent salary, they live and work in a safe place, they have a general sense of security derived by the public welfare and/or a dedicated company insurance, they are constantly building their retirement plan, etc. Unfortunately, this assumption is not valid for a huge part of humanity, but looking only at the companies that have enough resources for implementing a well structured change management program, we can say that all the target population could be distributed between the third and the fifth layer of the pyramid. Generally speaking, we could assume that:

- Almost all the employees belong to a team and have created relationships that make them part of a squad, with a common vision and mission. All these people can affirm that their belongingness needs are fully satisfied;
- A small part of this first group, generally not so many people, have been also recognized as responsible for something. There are people that were entitled as the maximum expert of a specific matter or process within the organization, there are the team leaders, service and project leaders, head of department, etc. This second group of people, in particular the ones that are still professionally growing being assigned with new responsibilities and recognitions day after day, are the ones that would say that their Esteem need is partially or completely accomplished;
- Finally, there is an extremely small group of people that could say that they have done what they have dreamed since they were kids. The few people in this last category, corresponding to the top layer of the above pyramid, are the ones that have been able to transform a personal attitude into a job, becoming a reference point for the organization and the other colleagues.
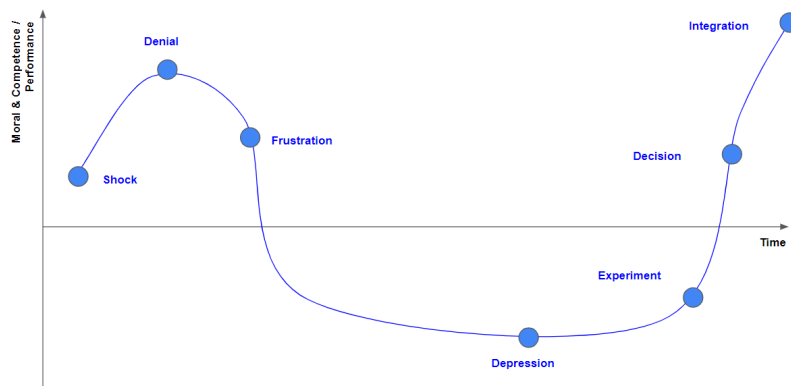
Let's keep this pyramid in mind while we move to the second theory that is represented in the below image and it is known as the **Kubler-Ross Model**[2].

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was a Swiss-American psychiatrist, a pioneer in near-death studies, and author of the internationally best-selling book, On Death and Dying (1969), where she first discussed her theory of the five stages of grief.

Subsequent reviews of the original concept and its application to the business change, have brought to a new version of the curve explaining that, any person undergoing a significant change, will pass through the seven stages described by this image. There is an initial physiological shock followed by the denial that a specific phenomenon is directly involving

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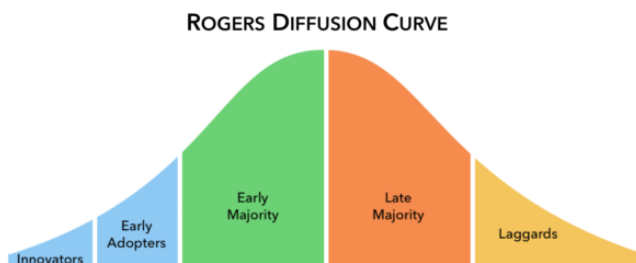[2] Kubler Ross Five stages of Grief - PsyCom.net

themselves. Then, there is a frustration moment, also known as bargaining period, followed by a depression phase that could last for days, weeks, months or even years. This is the worst part of the transformation journey, where the performances fall down in a significant way and there is a sense of internal despair without any perspective for the future. Only when the person decides to experiment the new working conditions, trying to gain the positive aspects from the new context, there will be an inversion of the curve: the performance will slightly improve and, step by step, the person will take the decision to coexist with the new situation and integrate itself with the new layout or organization.

The third and last theory to consider is known as the **Diffusion of Innovators[3]** and was published by Everett M. Rogers in 1962. The primary aspect Rogers points out was the identification of people as the key success factor for any change management initiative. Despite the kind of organizational, technological or procedural change you are dealing with, you'll never land to success if you don't identify and involve innovators and early adopters. Even if you had years of experience as a Change Manager, without their help and active participation, you would soon fail. Therefore, identifying your change actors is the primary and probably one of the most important tasks to complete whenever you are designated to lead a change management project.

As you see, all these three theories are dealing with people and their reaction to change, but none of them are referring to the specific kind of change you are bringing to the organization. There are obviously some differences if you are reforming the organizational structure or introducing a new ERP system, but from a change perspective, the key role of innovators and early adopters is absolutely the same. The key question is: who should be considered in that elite and why is empathy so important?

[3] Diffusion of Innovation - article by James W. Dearing and Jeffrey G. Cox

Identify potential change makers

Let us begin from what written above regarding the distribution of the workforce. Limiting the analysis to the well organized companies, you could probably categorize their employees according to the maximum level of need satisfaction theorized by Maslow.

We can then assume that the Physiological (food, water, rest, etc.) and the Safety needs (security,
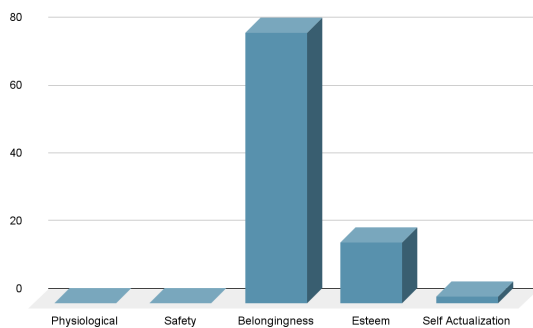
salary, etc) are generally met for each person. Sometimes, a few employees are not completely pleased with their salary, and there could be someone who is worried about the working position, but the vast majority of them could surely be located between the other three levels of the Maslow's pyramid.

Particularly, by looking at any pyramidal organizational structure, you could determine that the widest part of them are distributed over several working teams and feel themselves as a member of a squad with specific accountabilities within the organization. We can say that they are in a safe area, they are doing their daily job together with their colleagues and they have satisfied their belonging needs.

Moving from left to right, we then have some people (i.e. team leader, organizational unit representatives, etc) that were designated with specific responsibilities and, in several cases, are also recognized by their colleagues with a sort of leadership role. These people are "perceived" as responsible for something and, thus, we can say that - in most cases - they have completely satisfied their Esteem needs.
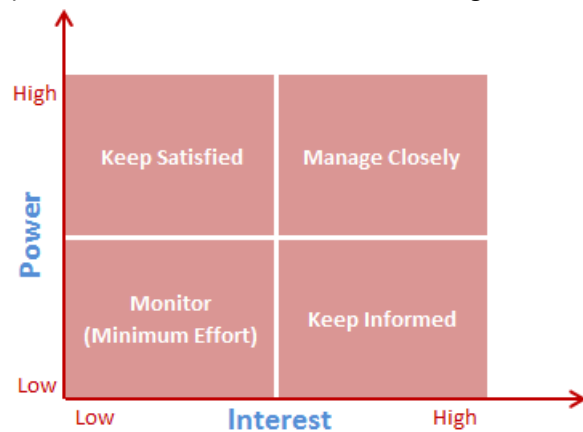
Finally, on the right side of the graph, we'll find a very limited group of people who were able to realize all their personal aspirations. In reality, it happens quite rarely, but fortunately there are some people that have found the perfect working environment in which to express all their potential .

Starting from this assumption and the corresponding distribution graph, the first idea that could come to your mind, as a change manager, would be to consider the biggest group of people as the best sourcing pool to identify innovators and early adopters. You could think that, choosing them from the vast majority, you could have a higher probability of finding the right people and it could be easier to create role models that will be copied by their colleagues.

Unfortunately, although this approach could be absolutely valuable in some specific situations, we shouldn't forget that dealing with such a large group of people could be difficult and expensive. Moreover, they are already used to working together with their team and, very unlikely, you will be able to promote some of them to an innovator role: instead, they would probably look at what will happen using the squad as a safe harbor. Unfortunately, what you are looking for are people that drive the change instead of being driven by it. Choosing people in the third layer of the Maslow's pyramid is not the best choice.

That being said, if the effective change makers don't belong to this first group, they must reside in the remaining part of the organization. The problem is: how can I discover who is sitting at the fourth and the fifth layer of the pyramid? Where to start with this analysis?

Fortunately, in this case, there is a dedicated process that you should already be familiar with: the Stakeholders Analysis. In the author's opinion, you can be absolutely sure that the people belonging to the top two layers will also have a place in the top right quadrant of the power/interest stakeholder matrix generated by your assessment process. They are, to some degree, interested in the incoming change, but most importantly they could influence the results of the initiative due to their recognized leadership. Unfortunately they are not so easily identifiable because there isn't a Maslow's Index assigned to each person, but this is exactly the point where, for the first, but not the last time, the empathetic approach comes to play: let's see how it works.

Try to ask yourself a couple of simple questions: during the setup of the stakeholders matrix, could you leverage only on the organizational hierarchy diagram received by the human capital department? Could you trust that a vertical row connecting two boxes in that graph is enough to identify the key stakeholders? Could you simply include in your group of potential innovators and early adopters the entirety of team leaders avoiding any other investigation? The answer is: obviously not.

We should instead restart from the official definition of a stakeholder that is "Individuals and organizations who are actively involved in the project, or whose interests may be positively or negatively affected as a result of project execution or successful project completion" (Project Management Institute (PMI®), 1996)

If you carefully read this definition, you could notice the word "interests": it means that the belonging to the "high interest/high power" stakeholders quadrant is heavily determined by their

perception and not only on the scope of the change initiative. Indeed, there are people that will have a positive or a negative effect on the outcome of the change project, even if located in a completely different area of the company or without being assigned a formal role by the organization. These people are absolutely convinced that, regardless of your assessments of their duties, the change will eventually affect them and are just waiting for their involvement. If you don't identify them, and most importantly, if you don't cleverly manage them in your project, they will patiently wait until the last project meeting, maybe after months of discussion, and then will submit you a list of requirements and constraints that you had never considered before. And as any project manager knows, the later a requirement is considered, the more the project failure probability increases.

The reality is that the creation of a stakeholders matrix has never been a mere "translation" of the hierarchies provided by the Human Capital department. You have to "watch the organization" and understand who is a leader even without the rank on their shoulders. Being empathetic means "to listen with heart and mind": it takes time, even weeks, but that matrix is one of the key deliverables you have to prepare in the Initiating Phase of a waterfall project or in the Foundation Phase of an Agile project.

The stakeholders matrix, especially the top-right quadrant, will then represent the right sourcing pool for the identification of innovators and early adopters. Underestimating the time needed for the analysis puts your change project at high risk of failure. Therefore, take that assessment as your personal responsibility and do not delegate the task to a junior member of your team. Indeed, empathy is a soft skill that only the right attitude and years of experience can teach you.

Why are they so important

First of all, I would like to introduce you to the concept of *involvement,* where this term is a

combination of Commitment, Recognition, Sense of, Willingness to stay.
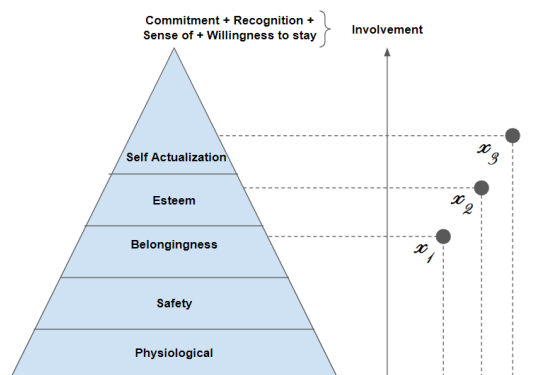
In the writer's point of view, there is a direct dependency between the quantity of satisfied needs and the level of *involvement* demonstrated by a person.

In other words, if we assign the letter x_1 to the measurement of the *satisfaction* of an employee who has "only" its belonging need accomplished

and the letter x_2 to a person in a leading position, we could also say that x_1 is definitely lower than x_2.

Let's now have a look at this image where, starting from the Kubler-Ross curve, I assigned a letter y to the duration of the low performance period.

Duration of the Low Performance Period

y_1

y_2

y_3
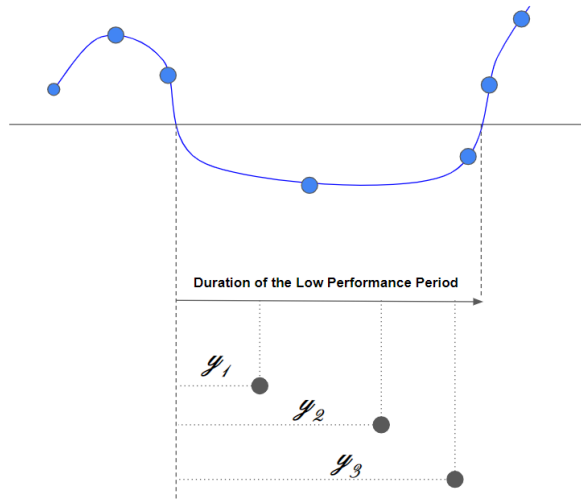
As you probably remember, the low performance period is the phase following the frustration step, where a person realizes that the incoming change will definitely have an impact on their professional life. Once recognized that the change, typically an organizational change, couldn't be avoided, there is a period of time where a person loses its certainty, becomes sad and unmotivated, doesn't see a way out and, sometimes, starts looking at a new job outside of the company.

In the author's opinion, there is a direct relationship between the duration of the low performance period and the level of involvement described in the previous paragraph.

Based on this assumption, **the more the people have a high level of involvement, and thus are in a good standing with the satisfaction of their Esteem needs, the more they will suffer any organizational change affecting their work situation**. In other words, we could also say: the more you have to lose, the more you won't change.

$$y = f(x)$$

The duration of the Low Performance Period (y) is directly dependant by the level of involvement (x)

As a direct consequence of this assumption, the identification and the right management of people belonging to the group of people with a level of *involvement* equal to x_2 or x_3 becomes a priority for any change manager because losing their factive cooperation also means causing a long period of low performance for people that were given with a strategic role by the organization.

Prioritize potential innovators and early adopters

Sometimes, even selecting only people with a satisfaction index equal to x_2 or x_3 , the sizing of this group remains extremely elevated and quite difficult to manage. It typically happens in wide companies with several levels of control. As change manager, you need a sort of prioritization

rule aiming to select people that are real key success factors for that initiative. In this chapter, we will see how to use the intensity of the involvement as an indexing factor.

Let's start assigning the variable g to the growth force of a single person and treat it as a physical vector that, as any physicist could explain, is characterized by a magnitude, a direction, a tail and a head. The growing force is measuring the strength with which a person is satisfying their Esteem need, but differently from an official entitlement assigned by the company, the growing factor is more intimate and involves aspects that are related to the personal feeling and expectations. For example, a person just nominated as team leader, maybe having waited for that promotion for years, will have a stronger growth factor than a person that is leading the same organizational unit for a significant period. Another example is the responsibility for a specific process that has not changed for a long time: the company recognised their key role because the process is absolutely crucial, but the intensity of the growth force will decrease year after year.
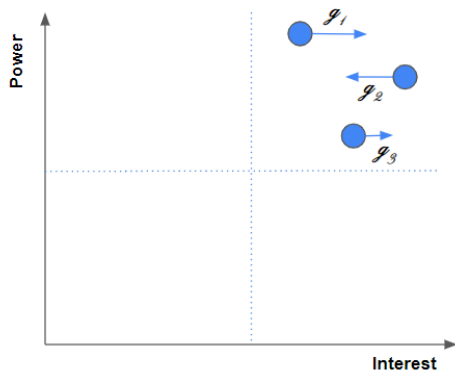
As a consequence, exclusively looking at the organizational structure is absolutely insufficient when you have to determine the growth force (also known as the motivation) of people belonging to the group of employees with the Esteem needs satisfied. Instead, what we could do is restart from the stakeholders matrix and add the growth force as a simple arrow in the diagram.

The question is: how can I determine the intensity of the growth force, considering that it is not reported in any database and it is continuously changing? The answer is, again, the adoption of an empathetic approach.

As a change manager, the only way to understand the growth force of the potential innovators and early adopters is to listen, listen and then listen again. Based on the feedback received directly by the involved person, and indirectly by their colleagues, you could create a sort of ranking for each of the people belonging to the previously selected group. But why is it so important to estimate the strength of that growing force?

Let us define that the letter d in this image will represent the depth of the low performance period curve, and therefore the consequent damage that the lack of this person's contribution will cause to the company.

Moral & Competence / Performance

Time

d
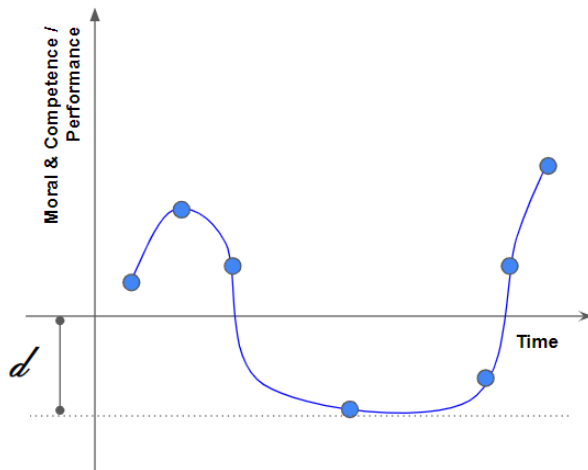
As explained in the previous chapter, the duration of the low performance period is directly dependent on the level of involvement and, therefore, on the level of satisfaction of their needs.

In my opinion, we could also assume that there is another relationship between the Maslow Pyramid and the Kubler-Ross curve. In this case, it is the direct dependency between the magnitude of the growth force and the depth of the depression curve.

In other words, **the more a person is steadily growing, the more the damage caused by an organizational change, whether not correctly managed, could cause a significant impact on their performance.**
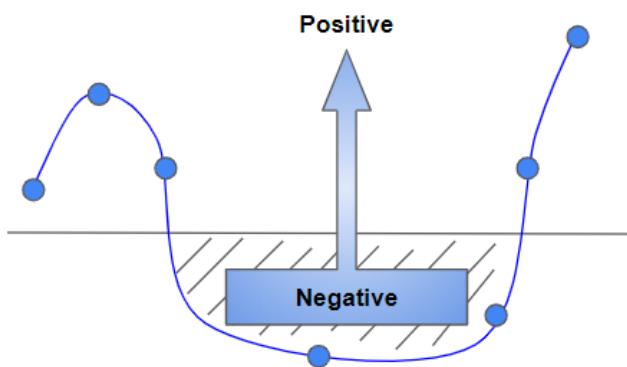
Manage them (still with empathy)

Well done !

You have leveraged all your empathetic capabilities and you were finally able to identify stakeholders placing them in a dedicated matrix. Instead of just "copying and pasting" the organizational structure, you spent time listening (with heart and mind) to them and to their colleagues, you were able to identify people coming from unexpected areas of the company, but with a strong level of involvement. Therefore you have now identified who could have a longer depression phase causing damages to itself, but also to the company. Finally, you were able to classify them according to the growing force representing how much they are involved and, consequently, how deep could be their depression phase. As a result of all these processes, that represents your primary responsibility as a change manager leading the initiative, you will have your elite: a group of people entitled as innovators and early adopters that could help you in the next phases.

Be careful: the usage of the conditional is not by chance and the role of an emphatic approach is still indispensable in order to reach out to the success of the change initiative. You have only identified the group of people to involve, but their commitment is something that you still need to obtain. Do never forget that these people are your strongest oppositors. They were constantly growing in the satisfaction of their Esteem Needs and, obviously, an organizational change interrupting that rising is all but welcomed. Even if it wasn't your decision, you are now their worst

enemy. The question therefore becomes: how could you transform their negative reaction into a positive push in the direction of the change initiative?

The first suggestion is: have a private conversation and try to understand their original expectations. Try to put the conversation this way: "If there hadn't been any change in the organization, what would your plan have been for the next two to three years? Where would you have imagined yourself and with which accountabilities? Would you have had a career path in your mind and how would it have been structured?".

Unfortunately, considering what you represent for them, there is a relevant possibility that they will provide you only some generic answers or, in some cases, they will lie to you. Therefore my suggestion is to create a positive and effective environment for the above conversation. Why not sincerely affirm that the reason that the person was involved as a change actor is the importance given by the company to his or her performance? You should clarify that the organization is absolutely convinced of the importance of their contribution to the general mission and, at the same time, is conscious of the effects that the incoming change could cause on their performances, but instead of "leaving them alone with his frustrations", they prefer to actively involve them in the change process.

Once you created the right context for the dialogue and collected the previous expectations from your elite, let's move to the next phase: assigning them a role. I have already explained that these people have been selected because of their belonging to the top layers of the Maslow's pyramid. This means that they were assigned by the company or by their colleagues to a leadership role (even without rank on their shoulders). Moving to a new context doesn't have to represent a reason why that entitlement should be revoked. Instead of putting their leadership at risk, try to reinforce it by assigning them a specific area of accountability in your change management initiative. Ask them to be part of the group of people promoting the change: they have only to leverage on the potentialities already proven and recognised. Ask them to act as a model for their colleagues demonstrating, once more, their leadership skills.

Finally, it is extremely important to let them decide some of the practical aspects of the organizational change: sometimes they know the company much better than you. Once explained the middle and the long-term vision, as well as the reason and the urgency for that incoming transformation, let them suggest the best strategy to achieve that result. After that, let

them express their concerns using your empathetic approach aiming to address all of them in a positive direction.

Even when you are speaking with the rest of the population, do include them in the message. As a simple example, an email shouldn't be sent to the team with their manager in CC. Instead, the email should be sent directly by their referent person with you in CC. Generally speaking, you need their sincere commitment and there is nothing but an empathetic approach that could help the creation of it.

Conclusions

In this white paper, you have seen the importance of the empathetic approach to change management. By listening with heart and mind, you should be able to:

- overcome the limited reliability of a hierarchical structure provided by the Human Capital department when you have to create the first version of the stakeholders matrix;

- understand the level of need satisfaction accordingly to the Maslow's pyramid;

- assign the growing force factor giving a priority index that could help reducing the potential innovators and early adopters;

- establish a collaborative environment where the physiological negative reactions could be transformed in a positive way and become a key success factor for the change initiative.

The more you will be able to identify, prioritize and involve these people, the more you will put your project in a good position. But if you don't dedicate this analysis enough time, if you don't leverage on all your empathetic capabilities, if you don't create a collaborative environment, you will sooner fight against an unbeatable force made by people who are not willing to lose the satisfaction of their needs. At that point you would probably be forced to adopt some different strategies, including the leadership involvement, but you shouldn't ignore the damages created to the company because of the low performance of such strategic people.