



# A CASE FOR CHANGE

JOHN PEPPER ARGUES THAT DESPITE THEIR STATED REASONS, NATIONAL GEOSPATIAL DATA PROVIDERS AREN'T OPENING UP AS QUICKLY AS THEY SHOULD BECAUSE THEIR CORPORATE CULTURES ARE MAKING THEM RESISTANT TO CHANGE

Why is geospatial data not being liberalised as quickly as it should, despite increasing transparency, wider markets for data, technological changes and an increasing expectation that it must? Barriers remain in place when customers try to gain access to geospatial data. These include the provider not having the necessary simple processes in place; complex charging and re-use regimes used to protect IP and copyright; access processes so laborious that the customer often gives up the will to pursue the data; restrictions on the grounds of national security or national interest; and simply "No, you cannot have it," with no reason! There are countless others that could be mentioned but in all these instances, the question "Why?" needs to be considered. Should data providers adapt to the challenge of change individually as people or as an organisation or both?

It is important to understand the culture that predominates in organisations providing geospatial data around the world. All too often, it is the collective culture that prevents or slows change from happening. Most authoritative geospatial data worldwide is provided by public sector organisations (for example, NOAA, Ordnance Survey, UKHO) that have a culture epitomised by inflexibility. These organisations are bureaucratic, with hierarchical terms such as rank, post and grade often

perceived as more important in describing the role than the skills of the person who fills it.

As a result, 'power' comes from the position held in the organisation. Very often, rules and procedures hamper effective participation in and communication of change. This type of corporate culture supports steady state working, predictability and stable values but copes badly with change. By adopting this mentality, corporate risk aversion increases, resulting in no or very slow decision-making.

## Why do people resist change?

It is a myth that people resist change! Humans are adaptable and a measure of change often brings an air of excitement to people. Few people work in organisations where no change happens yet we are all aware of situations where change has been made harder to deliver because of resistance. This is always down to the individual's aversion to risk. Some types of change cause no resistance at all as the advantages are apparent whilst some types of people (for example, salespeople) rarely object if they are given a new product to sell.

The psychological contracts between employees and their organisations embrace conditions of employment, rewards, salaries and



holidays, but they are also about the unwritten, subconscious elements of the relationship that very often motivate the individual, such as the opportunity to use new skills, empowerment, team working and relations with customers. All this provides a sense of comfort and belonging, which if changed permanently in whole or in part can affect the individual's ability to handle the change.

So what behaviours are manifested in the way people react to change? People often don't believe the change will work and that the old way of doing things is better as it works for them. They may be afraid that they might fail or fear the 'agent for change'.

There are two types of symptoms of resistance. Active resistance involves being critical and finding fault, perhaps ridiculing the whole idea of the need to change and might include psychodynamics of guilt, blame and shame. It also can manifest itself through forms of manipulation, including sabotaging an idea, distorting facts or being deliberately threatening or ambiguous. Active resistance may be actively working to ensure that the change initiative will fail.

Passive resistance includes giving verbal agreement to an initiative but failing to deliver anything by refusing to make a decision or withholding information or the resources needed for the change to happen. Cultural change at both the organisational and personal level remains stubbornly elusive in many organisations responsible for collecting, managing and publishing geospatial data.

### Management styles

Directive autocratic management styles are evident in the geospatial data provider community today, with managers taking decisions without input from other stakeholders whilst supervising subordinates closely. Permissive autocrats give employees some degree of freedom in how they work towards a goal but persuasive managers, whilst drawing heavily from the autocratic style, make efforts to convince employees of the benefits of the decisions they've made. Consultative managers try to make decisions that take into account employee needs, but the flow of information is almost exclusively top-down, with employees not allowed to offer feedback. Innovative and progressive thinking is easily stifled as individuals are ignored. Democratic managers are very rare in hierarchical organisational cultures. They allow staff some form of input into the decision-making process that is considered when making decisions.

Whatever happened to 'management by walking around' with managers going 'on the floor' for as much time as possible to communicate with employees and gather information and viewpoints that can then be fed back into the decision-making process. Sadly, it is rarely done, thanks to the common excuse that "I'm too busy."

### What is the answer?

There is increasing interest from governments, commerce and the citizen (taxpayers) in using geospatial data. Public sector data pro-



Managers and staff need to be educated about the value of change and openness, as in these workshops run by the author in places including Korea, Singapore and Sri Lanka (© John Pepper)

viders are often mandated to respond to national or international initiatives to make data more accessible for re-use and to share in an open and transparent manner at marginal cost or free of charge in machine-readable formats. But many providers steadfastly refusing to free up access to data collected as part of a public task.

Geospatial data providers must evolve from the outmoded hierarchical cultural model that prevents them from embracing change to a more open business model. Managers and employees are often too willing to hide behind excuses and not embrace change with ripostes such as "We do not have the resources..." In many countries, geospatial data providers reside in government departments where resources do not always exist to do things effectively and efficiently and where employees are not always encouraged to ask "Why not?" Whilst the market for geospatial data has changed, the culture of organisations has not kept pace with barriers hampering data access, sharing and re-use.

Engaging staff in decision-making will give them the confidence and belief through empowerment to drive change. Leadership of such organisations has to adapt with a more open and collegiate approach to the opportunities the geospatial industry offers. Without this, societal and economic benefits derived from greater geospatial data access, sharing and re-use will not be achieved.

## WHATEVER HAPPENED TO 'MANAGEMENT BY WALKING AROUND' WITH MANAGERS GOING ON THE FLOOR?

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