Never change a winning team is a philosophy that many of us support. We rarely question its truth because it makes so much sense at an intuitive level. In the world of sports, countless top coaches swear by it. For instance, this has been Morten Olsen’s mantra for his entire career as chief coach of the Danish national soccer team, with concepts such as typerende (typicality) and automatismer (automatisms) creeping into our vocabulary.

At Implement, we have always had issues with repetition. It was, therefore, an exhilarating experience when Freek Vermeulen recently visited, and we had the opportunity to hear his lecture “Change for Change’s Sake”. Vermeulen, along with Donald Sull and several others, is part of a group of brilliant up-and-coming professors from London Business School who have challenged and inspired us in a wide range of areas within strategic transformation. The message of his lecture, which can be found in an article of the same name in Harvard Business Review, June 2010, is that it is actually extremely dangerous for an organisation only to make changes in times of crisis.

Rather, Vermeulen argues that every company should implement organisational changes periodically, even when there is no apparent reason to do so. This is because the process is, among other things, a good way to create new networks and boost employees’ understanding and knowledge of customers, products and services. Another interesting phenomenon is that old connections and relations survive across new formal chains of command, thereby functioning as an efficient substitute for the matrix organisations that look so good on paper, but rarely work in practice. As they disappear
over time, reorganisation becomes necessary again. And it is based on this line of thinking that he introduces the fantastic management concept of the “serial changer”, which obviously should be seen as a positive thing in this context.

The bad news in all of this is that uncertainty and turbulence are here to stay, along with much higher demands for adaptability from all of us. The good news is that greater uncertainty has a direct correlation to greater opportunities if we are capable of seizing them. And the really good news is that we can improve our skills in this area if we constantly exercise our change muscles. Doing this will help us avoid managerial complacency, dependency on specific individuals and failures in communication when it really matters.

We are not experts in soccer, but when it comes to getting people and organisations to produce results, we definitely have an opinion. Which is why we are really looking forward to the first top coach who has the guts to shuffle the starting lineup and change the playing style, not when the team is suffering, but also – and especially – when things are going well. Blind faith in “typical” mechanisms and “automatisms” will not win games in the major leagues. Your opponents are simply too competent for that...

Change

When you plan for and lead change initiatives, their strategic rationale and your own personal motives for carrying them through will be questioned – *do it anyway!*