



‘Bitten off more than you can chew’

It’s easy to bite off more than you can chew when delivering change. We get distracted from our main aim and start to try to tackle everything at once.



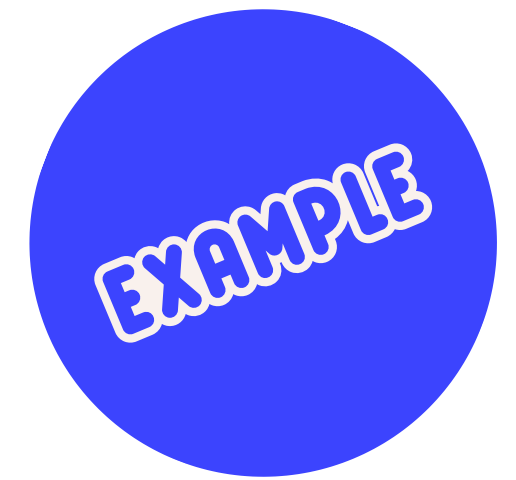
Change
Challenger # 5

We're all guilty of being too ambitious, right



It's easy to bite off more than you can chew when delivering change. We add just a bit more scope to get a new feature. We launch more quickly than the people impacted can accommodate. We add too much complexity to the organisation. We get distracted from our main aim and start to try to tackle everything all at once.

Biting off more than you can chew occurs when an organisation launches into transformative changes without fully grasping the depth and breadth of the adjustments required.



Mark had just landed his first C-suite role. After years of preparation, patience, and perseverance, he became the global enterprises Chief

Marketing Officer for the Europe division. And he was determined to make a splash. Mark had been with the company for a short time, and this role was a big step up. The company had dozens of brands operating differently across dozens of markets.

When **Mark** took over, one of the changes underway was launching a new Digital Asset Management tool. This tool aimed to drive new levels of sharing and standardisation across the region. Theoretically, the organisation could reduce spending with creative agencies by sharing materials more efficiently and consistently.

Mark thought the initiative needed to be more ambitious. In addition, he wanted to conduct a full review of agency spending, centralise media purchasing across the region, restructure his marketing function, and introduce new capabilities. **No one disagreed that these things needed to be done. But did it all need to be done right now?**

What can 'biting off more than you can chew' lead to



Lack of readiness for the unknown occurs when the system is already running at max capacity, your ability to respond to unexpected challenges reduces (and there are often unexpected challenges!)

Resource overextension occurs when the project team and those impacted by the project are maxed out. The initial resource allocation proves inadequate in the face of expanding project needs, leading to budget overruns, strained capacities, and often frayed relationships.

Strategic drift occurs when the project's goals begin to shift as the full extent of required changes becomes more apparent—potentially leading to strategic drift.

Increased stakeholder dissatisfaction occurs when stakeholders express frustration and dissatisfaction as timelines extend and costs rise.

How does it affect change



You make life more difficult for yourself.

You make life more difficult for people in your organisation.

Repeated recalibrations, replans, and failure to meet deadlines cause inefficiencies and make things needlessly complex.

Delayed implementation is a commonly noted problem; people want to keep adding scope without increasing the budget or impacting timelines.

Increased risk of failure!

The likelihood of the project failing (or failing to deliver the initially intended benefits) increases as the volume or complexity increases beyond the capability to manage it effectively.

Decreased moral

Being blind to overambition or continually adding more to change can contribute to the perception of a never-ending project and reduce motivation, morale, and engagement.



Tips to mitigate the risk of 'biting off more than you can chew'.

Be realistic from the start!

A thorough impact assessment can highlight where we might add undue strain to the system. The earlier you can get insight into the impact, the more leverage you will have to keep things achievable.

Balance flexibility and rigidity.

Biting off more than you can chew can happen in one go or creep in over time. Maintain a healthy balance of flexibility and rigidity in your project delivery. Strong governance can help ensure the impact is planned for and accounted for when the initiative changes.

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Incremental implementation.

Just because you bite off more than you can chew doesn't mean you need to swallow everything at once. Consider how you can break up the implementation into smaller, more manageable chunks. This might mean that implementation happens over a longer time horizon.

Strong communication

Communicate, communicate, communicate. And when you think you've communicated, do it one more time. Maintaining open lines of communication can help manage expectations.

Notes to remember.



Sunk cost fallacy

It's tempting to believe that because you've started down one path, you must commit to it. In fact, **the best change leaders** know that priorities can change, and therefore, that might mean that what you're working on is no longer going to deliver the intended positive outcomes—so the best thing to do is simply stop. Don't continue investing time, energy, and resources in something that won't deliver improvement.

Have honest conversations (Even when they're difficult)

It's hard to be the one to have the awkward conversation. However, **the best organisations** can often accommodate difficult conversations with limited negative blowback. If your organisation has bitten off more than it can chew, it might be time to talk to others about it (and learn how to mitigate it).

Remember Mark?

The ambitious CMO who wanted to build Rome in a day?



What happened?

EXAMPLE



He took over the sponsorship of the Digital Asset Management change programme and started making more changes. First, he began to discuss changing the organisational design of his marketing function; then he started to centralise decision-making around media purchasing. At this stage, he had one of those difficult conversations.

One of Mark's senior colleagues, Anita, dropped by his office one day. She explained that whilst he was moving the organisation in the right direction, she was worried that he was trying to move too quickly. Mark's bold ambitions outpaced the speed of change the organisation could accommodate, and there was a lack of alignment.

Mark was initially a bit confused. He wasn't seeing it. But as Anita explained the perception of the changes in the organisation, it started to dawn on him. He was risking making any impact by trying to impact too much!

Over the coming weeks, Mark and Anita's partnership grew. They engaged in regular intellectual sparring matches, with Mark usually bringing too much ambition and Anita usually bringing a dose of reality. The organisation continued to mature at a more realistic rate. Mark won some battles and got the organisation there more quickly, and Anita won some battles and kept ensuring that the changes weren't too disruptive. At the heart of it all was the ability to have a challenging conversation and build a partnership.



Change is inevitable, but it doesn't have to be disruptive.

We work with established blue chips, SMEs, ambitious scale-ups, and inspiring charities around the globe to help them find a better way to change.

Need help figuring out where to start?

Or do you already have a clear vision and need a reliable partner to help you get there?

Get in touch. We'd love to speak to with you.

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Or, come and say
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