THE IMPORTANCE OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN REFORMING CUSTOMS

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This is the first of a two-part article based on research which formed part of Jan Jansson's Masters thesis.

Abstract

Customs organisations operate in a complex environment of constant change. They are required to respond to the promotion of economic development and to comply with regional, national and international obligations. To accommodate changes in these areas, it is important to determine 'a certain management type' to implement change processes. As well, it is critical to identify the most significant characteristics of change management theory, which in this article are demonstrated by describing the methods used by Latvian Customs as a practical example. In defining change management, the three constituents identified by Nickols (2004) – the task of managing change, an area of practical practice, and a body of knowledge – are regarded as being the most relevant to this particular investigation. The Nickols' strategies also highlight certain characteristics of human behaviour that affect change management. The Latvian Customs State Revenue Service presents a striking example of a complex organisation where many factors are to be considered in order to effectively manage change.

Introduction

Today, customs operates in an environment of constant change. It implements national requirements relating to the promotion of economic development and compliance with regional and international obligations. Customs also plays a vital role in attracting trade and people to a country. In this respect, the effective management of goods and people entering and leaving the customs jurisdiction is a complex issue in an ever-changing trading environment.

After 25 years of supervising reorganisation and developing reforms in the public sector, I consider it is vital that customs managers properly identify a specific management method in order to effectively manage comprehensive change in a customs organisation. Experience has brought home to me that the choice of method to implement desired changes in any organisation is of the most critical importance, not least because it involves two related issues. First, any organisation is nothing more than the sum total of its employees. As a result, the selected management method must seek to influence and encourage employees to participate in the change process and thereby 'change' themselves. To this end, a change manager needs to have good knowledge of human behaviour – and ways of influencing it. Second, it is important to realise that the choice of a specific strategy will also influence the choice of other tools (methods, techniques and knowledge) used to achieve the strategic changes in question.

In order to manage the process of change, customs organisations require effective tools. There are plenty of different theories, methods and principles that provide guidance in organising a public agency. However, not all of them pay sufficient attention to the specific conditions of change. Theories like

risk management, innovation management, business process re-engineering and succession management all handle elements of change in some perspective. Nevertheless, the most distinctive attention to the process of change is provided by the theory and methods of change management.

The aim of this article is twofold. First, it highlights the importance of deciding on 'a certain management type' in order to implement large change processes. Second, it provides an overview of the most significant characteristics of change management theory and methods using Latvian Customs as a practical example.

Change management theory is based on experience gained from the results of change processes in both public and private sector companies. It takes a holistic view of what persons involved in or exposed to big changes need to know and understand about themselves and others to ensure that desired changes are sustainable. The methods are simple to understand but not that easy to implement. If managers choose to reform their working environments using this method, they must also be prepared to examine and change themselves, even if it is much easier to tell others what needs to be changed. This observation reflects the fact that the leader's role in the process of change cannot be underestimated. I believe that leaders must set an example in the interests of winning support for the change process and making its results sustainable.

The choice of change management theory should reflect awareness of the complexity of a customs administration. It is a law enforcement agency that must meet different governmental demands, for example, to ensure compliance with trade, combat and arrest smugglers, protect and prevent public security, and administer customs declarations. All these duties are very different from each other and the skills required to perform them effectively differ greatly. In fact, one could describe Customs as a 'supermarket of competencies' – the aim of customs managers being to hold this supermarket together as a single unit. For this purpose, they not only need special skills but must also realise that such diverse tasks require a variety of management techniques. For example, in order to administer customs declarations, the officer must examine the declaration and decide whether all the requirements have been fulfilled and the applicable duties paid. Such a task can be planned in advance. However, other functions (for example, customs physical controls) arise unexpectedly and must be managed accordingly.

The second subject of investigation – Latvian Customs – is an interesting example of an organisation in change. Re-established on 3 July 1990, it has passed through many comprehensive changes, particularly in relation to legislation and organisation. The primary tasks for Latvian Customs have been outlined in the two business strategies adopted by the State Revenue Service (SRS) in respect of the customs service. The first document was adopted on 14 July 1999 and its main aims attained just two years later. On 5 December, 2001, the SRS adopted the second strategy document that established the following primary tasks for customs: trade facilitation, the administration of custom duties and customs control.[1]

Latvia's accession to the European Union (EU) on 1 May 2004 (and various pre-accession activities) had a tremendous impact on the organisation of Latvian Customs. Not only did it have to implement completely new customs legislation (that is, the Customs Code of the European Community) but it had the added responsibility of controlling the EU's external border. Once the main elements of the Operational Strategy of the Latvian Customs Service for 2002-2005 had been implemented, a new customs strategy for 2005-2009 (the Customs Business Strategy) was adopted in March 2005. This strategy outlines new directions for strategic development for immediate and future implementation.

This article draws on my extensive experience in Latvian Customs and my appreciation of the importance of change management methods in reforming a customs organisation. Change management theory reflects a holistic approach to examining the needs for change, preparing change goals and implementing change itself. These three aspects represent the foundations upon which Latvian Customs has based its change processes. This article also draws on the results of a questionnaire distributed among the 'change agents' (that is, customs officers responsible for implementing the various tasks described in the new

Customs Strategy) in order to ascertain whether managers in charge of implementation are operating under conditions conducive to achieving the desired results.

The scope of this investigation into the management of change processes at the Latvian National Customs Board (LNCB) is limited to certain aspects of the implementation of the new Customs Business Strategy 2005-2009. The Latvian SRS has defined the following strategic goals for customs:

1. protecting society, the economy, and environment through the prevention and detection of criminal offences and other violations of customs regulations

2. creating a better environment for international trade and accurately calculating and collecting customs debts

3. ensuring the efficient operation of the customs service by:

    3.1. applying efficient, modern methods of work, equipment, and up-to-date information technology in the work of the customs service
    3.2. ensuring that the organisational structure of the customs service is functional and efficient
    3.3. ensuring that the customs service operates within a modern working environment and promotes morale: motivated and loyal employees, supported in their individual growth.[2]

In this connection, the SRS has set 13 targets to ensure the achievement of its strategic goals. These targets are very different in character. Some relate to maximising the effectiveness of each organisational unit, while others relate to the public (for example, to protect society more effectively). Some relate to modern IT-systems and others define the need to develop better working methods. Last but not least, some targets relate to legislation.

Examining the implementation method for the new Customs Business Strategy reveals that the report only explains **how** implementation is to be carried out. The answers to the questionnaire mentioned above say much about the attitude of the respondents. It was therefore recommended that an attitude study be carried out in order to ascertain whether managers were satisfied with their allotted tasks or not. This, in turn, could reveal whether any aspects of the change process had been overlooked or whether further elements should be included in order to ensure the success of the new Customs Business Strategy.[3]

Defining change management

Management studies suggest that 'change management' is an umbrella term comprising a wide range of elements. It is important to define the term 'change management' here in order to identify these constituent elements and define its scope. Later, these elements will be analysed in greater detail. Four attempts at defining change management are now examined.

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary deals with change management in terms of process and tools. On the one hand, it defines change management as a 'structured process' that will:

> 1. … cause proposed changes to be reviewed for technical and business readiness in a consistent manner that can be relaxed or tightened to adjust to business needs and experiences.

> 3. … communicate the status and existence of changes to all affected parties.[4]

On the other hand, Webster's definition also refers to the tools that can be used (for example, database and inventory systems) to ensure an overview of the process:

> 2. [It] … [c]ould involve a database to help staff make better decisions about future changes based on historical data such as success or failure of similar changes. … [or] … yield an inventory system that indicates what and when actions were taken that affected status of key resources, as an aid in problem determination or resource management.[5]

In his definition, Oliver Recklies[6] refers to the hierarchy of activities required to implement change:

> Change management means to plan, initiate, realize, control, and finally stabilize change processes on both corporate and personal levels. Change may cover such diverse problems as, for example, strategic direction or personal development programs for staff.[7]

It is significant how Recklies chooses to characterise the nature of change processes in a contemporary world: '[C]hange is not the exception but a steady ongoing process'.[8] Thereby, he implies that messy transitional periods are far more indicative of everyday reality than those relatively short periods when everything runs smoothly. Change management comprises both revolutionary one-off projects and evolutionary transformations.

Two other change management experts, researchers Jeff Hiatt and Tim Creasey,[9] characterise change management as a mixture of ideas derived from the fields of engineering, business and psychology.

In his definition, Recklies refers to the 'corporate and personal level'; Creasey and Hiatt develop this concept further by concisely describing it as a convergence of two 'predominant fields of thought: an engineer's approach to improving business performance and a psychologist's approach to managing the human-side of change'.[10] This idea is visualised in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Convergence of ideas in change management
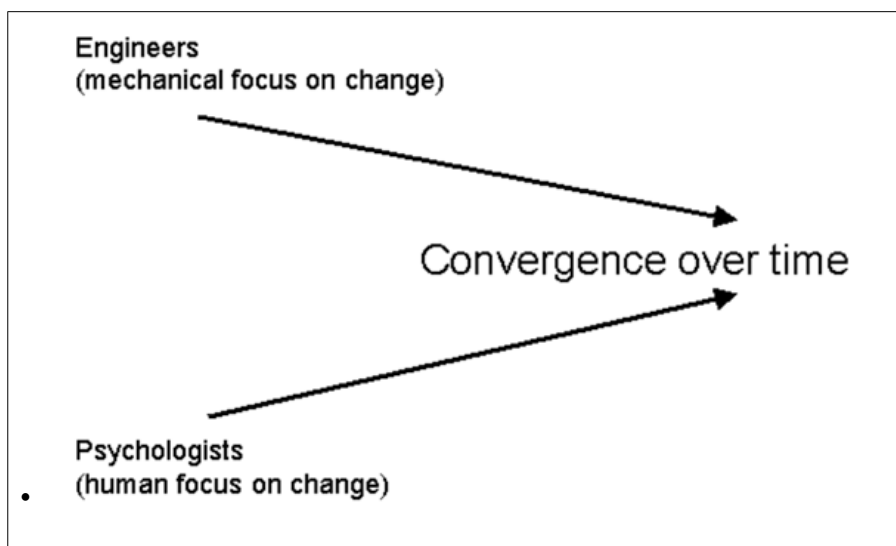
The diagram demonstrates that only a convergence of both aspects will provide the key to sustainable change in business. This viewpoint is also reflected in the definition of change management formulated by Creasey and Hiatt:

> While many techniques can be employed to design the solution to a business problem or opportunity (i.e., the business change), change management is the process, tools and techniques to manage the people-side of that business change to achieve the most successful business outcome, and to realize that change effectively within the social infrastructure of the workplace.[11]

This definition emphasises the psychological aspect of change far more than Recklies does. I tend to support this viewpoint because experience has taught me that the human factor plays an important role in reform efforts.

Fred Nickols, an acknowledged authority in the field of change management,[12] identifies four basic constituents of change management, three of which will be addressed in this article:

• the task of managing change

- an area of professional practice
- a body of knowledge.[13]

Concerning the task of managing change, Nickols highlights two aspects. First, he emphasises '… the making of changes in a planned and managed or systematic fashion'.[14] In other words, the aim of change activities should be the successful, effective implementation of new methods and systems in an ongoing organisation, with those changes initiated by the organisation itself and controlled internally.[15] Three examples illustrate this:

1. A customs organisation can recruit persons more highly educated than its current employees and who have a background that can inspire new working methods. The new skills brought into the organisation can be harnessed to achieve the desired changes. In the Latvian customs administration, for example, the number of employees with an academic qualification has increased annually and today the majority of the customs officers have a bachelor's degree or higher education certificate.

2. In-house training, consisting of practical and theoretical education, can be used as a tool to evaluate the existing organisation and recommend changes.

3. A customs organisation is often exposed to the financial demands of its ministry (that is, to achieve certain aims within a smaller budget) that can result in rationalisation and other internal changes.

Second, Nickols asserts that the changes can be triggered by various processes and events outside the organisation and this leads to the second aspect of the definition, that is, that managing change is 'the response to changes over which the organization exercises little or no control.'[16] Examples of legislative, social and political factors that affect processes inside Customs are readily available: the EU and other regional free trade agreements can compel a customs organisation to adopt changes in customs legislation and sometimes impose new obligations that require new sets of skills. Global express cargo companies and their clients depend on efficient customs clearance and demand that customs organisations introduce simplified procedures in order to facilitate faster border crossings. According to an Airports Council International *World report* published in December 2006, '[t]otal freight carried worldwide currently equals 75 million tonnes, increasing to 214 million by 2025'.[17] Such figures give a better idea of the speed at which air cargo is developing and the huge volume of freight that customs must cope with. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that customs administrations are under pressure to make changes, for example, simplified procedures with a pre-clearance system often require a computer system that can examine and process customs declarations.

International agreements of relevance to Customs, such as the Revised Kyoto Convention,[18] the Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)[19] and the Arusha Declaration of the Customs Co-operation Council concerning Integrity in Customs[20] are all examples of external influences on the customs organisation. Security requirements are also examples of influences from the international community, as illustrated by the following recommendation to the United Nations Security Council:

> Customs services are central in implementation and they may benefit from international cooperation … Lessons can be drawn from efforts to combat drug trade and trafficking. The WCO and Eurocustoms should be consulted when target trade sanctions are used for lessons from past experience.[21]

This and other recommendations were elaborated during the so-called 'Stockholm Process' that aimed to develop Guidelines for the Implementation of UN Policy Options in which I participated in joint working group meetings as chairman of Eurocustoms.

Turning now to the second Nickols' constituent where change management is referred to as 'an area of professional practice', there are many consultancies (both large and small) that offer the planning and managing of change processes for their clients as a professional service. There are even practitioners who call themselves 'professional change agents' or 'change management experts.'

The third constituent asserts that change management is a body of knowledge. It reflects the content or subject matter of change management as a professional practice and comprises 'models, methods and techniques, tools, skills and other forms of knowledge'[22] that constitute the basis of any practice. This definition acknowledges that the content comprises elements from many disciplines such as 'psychology, sociology, business administration, economics, industrial engineering, systems engineering and the study of human and organizational behavior,'[23] all united under the umbrella of change management. Nickols also notes that this large body of knowledge is somewhat 'eclectic' in nature and that its application varies considerably.[24]

It is necessary to consider these three definitions when leading processes that are motivated by the need or willingness to start a change process.

A large number of institutes, universities and consultancy firms around the world are researching and studying change management. A closer study of a range of definitions and descriptions of the subject leads me to conclude that they are all broadly similar. Most researchers focus on private companies and, consequently, their concepts and methods of implementation are not directly transferable to a customs authority; others adopt a more general approach.

After considering the various definitions and their application in practice, I regard Nickols' definition as being the most relevant to this particular investigation. My opinion is based on the fact that it describes the whole process of change management most precisely and illuminates a systematic mode of procedure. As far as I am concerned, this definition can be effectively applied in practice and outlines the overall picture of comprehensive change efforts in an understandable manner. It also attributes equal importance to changes in tasks and the influence on people's behaviour and attitudes. Consequently, those who follow this theory in practice must be aware of both the professional matters in the respective branch and how people are influenced by the process of change. I take the view that an understanding of both elements is absolutely necessary.

Pre-conditions for change

Change management is being applied to a whole range of organisations and companies that differ in every conceivable way (for example, organisational schemes, ownership, business, traditions, culture, etc.). Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find two organisations that are exactly alike. As a consequence, a new question arises: what factors influence the way that change is implemented? Taking into account the differences mentioned, it is logical to assume that the modes of procedure adopted will depend on the business activity pursued by the organisation. When planning and implementing changes, a detailed needs analysis must be carried out before the most appropriate measures can be selected. For example, the number of customs declarations, rejections and reasons for them must be measured using a different method than that used, for example, to evaluate the results of physical controls. The implementation plan must include a strategy of how to measure the different elements of the change process.

In spite of the differences that have been pointed out, the process of change in these various organisations can also be viewed in more general terms. For example, are there any common characteristics or fundamental similarities between the various change processes? Upon deeper reflection it appears that, in general terms, the change problem has both a content and process dimension,[25] irrespective of the desired end-result. Change management literature describes a wide range of change models that mostly focus on the private sector. However, these models cannot always be applied to the public sector because their pre-conditions are so different. For example, if a customs administration were to adopt a process-orientated organisational structure, problems would immediately arise owing to the considerable differences in carrying out customs controls and processing customs declarations. The declaration system follows a certain procedure that resembles a process whereas controls are determined by rapidly changing conditions.

In order to recognise the conditions for a change process, it is necessary to have a clear view of the conditions under which the organisation operates and how they can influence the change process. In general, conditions can be divided into two groups: external and internal. The external international environment (for example, World Trade Organization [WTO], WCO, EU and international treaties/conventions) of a customs organisation influences customs law, procedures and regulations on a daily basis. The flow of trade and national regulations (for example, the *Public Service Act*) also influence conditions such as staff numbers, the salary system and bureaucracy. Internal conditions for a change process include staff education levels, the working environment, human resource management and routines relating to the delegation of power or reorganisation.

In the following, I list the most important internal conditions in a customs organisation that can influence whether the change process is successful and sustainable:

- political will and support as a long term commitment
- funding for the change program over and above normal operational costs
- political and organisational stability: the DG should be contracted for the duration of the change process in the interests of continuity
- skills in strategic planning and management that reflect the aims, conditions and leadership requirements of the change process
- an appropriate 'business' culture with the applicable law, procedures and administrative routines in good order and the capability to achieve a high level of compliance
- an effective change management strategy that is communicated to key stakeholders
- a human resource management strategy as a part of the wider strategy of change
- an appropriate organisational structure to communicate business objectives at operational levels
- effective routines for change process, if necessary
- effective planning and performance measurement for the change process in all sectors that reflect a quality approach
- analysis of technical innovation: the automation and migration of 'old' systems and procedures as well as the development of new ones, if necessary
- a transparent management information system in order to collect and spread the information relating to the change process
- identification of strategic partnerships (particularly with stakeholders) and preparedness to reach agreements that adopt a customer-based approach
- voluntary, informed compliance with traders and other stakeholders
- transparency and integrity as foundations for the change process
- effective dispute resolution mechanisms.

Those most directly involved in the design and implementation of change management strategies must be aware of these internal conditions and take account of their inherent limitations and opportunities. Capacity building in Customs, for example, depends on these conditions.[26]

Change management strategies

The preparation for change must begin with a familiarisation with the conditions referred to above. Consequently, the top management in any organisation must carry out a preparatory analysis. Nickols provides a brief summary of four basic change management strategies that highlight certain characteristics of human behaviour and these are outlined in the following table.[27]

Table 1: Basic change management strategies

Strategy	Description
Empirical–Rational	People are rational and will follow their self-interest — once it is revealed to them. Change is based on the communication of information and the proffering of incentives.
Normative–Reeducative	People are social beings and will adhere to cultural norms and values. Change is based on redefining and reinterpreting existing norms and values, and developing commitments to new ones.
Power–Coercive	People are basically compliant and will generally do what they are told or can be made to do. Change is based on the exercise of authority and the imposition of sanctions.
Environmental–Adaptive	People oppose loss and disruption but they adapt readily to new circumstances. Change is based on building a new organization and gradually transferring people from the old one to the new one.

Nickols also points out that over 30 years of experience in working with organisational development has taught him that successful change efforts inevitably involve a combination of these change strategies. This leads to the next important question, that is, what are the factors that determine the choice of change strategy?

An analysis of the existing situation demands consideration of a number of aspects relating to staff (for example, their competence, willingness or resistance to change) and conditions for the change process. In particular, the following factors must be considered.

Degree of resistance

If staff demonstrate strong resistance to change, it is recommended that a combination of power-coercive and environmental-adaptive strategies be adopted. By the same token, weak resistance or support suggests combining the empirical-rational and normative-reeducative strategies.

Concerning Latvian SRS/Customs, the degree of resistance is due in part to historical experience of the administrative culture of the communist system. At that time, the bureaucratic control system meant that it was impossible to develop the organisation without first obtaining the permission of the politburo. It was very difficult to initiate changes and still survive in that system and, as a result, it bred passivity, stagnation and bureaucracy. Today, the Public Service Act and other national regulations (such as the decision-making procedures of the SRS) can also generate resistance to change because it is sometimes necessary to amend legislation before a change process can be initiated.

As I stated earlier, the needs for change are increasingly triggered by external factors, for example, international standards and requirements. As a result, it becomes even more important to communicate these requirements at all bureaucratic levels in order to raise awareness of reform process since bureaucracy represents one pillar of resistance. Organisations that struggle with a formidable internal bureaucracy must first of all ascertain the extent to which their own bureaucracy impedes progress.

To summarise, change agents should not ignore existing circumstances and pre-conditions but deliver a clear message of what can and cannot be changed. The question of the best way to deal with resistance that is nearly always present in all organisations, can only be answered once the pre-conditions for the changes in question have been understood. As a rule, resistance can be addressed and reduced by a combination of the right approach and comprehensive information.

Target population

In the case of a large target group, it is advisable to combine all four strategies. This approach ensures that the change strategy will take account of all interests at stake in some way.

The approach to change must be designed with the respective target group in mind. A number of aspects, for example, people's competence, human factors, legal power, cultural background and traditions, may influence people's perception of the strategy. Accordingly, it must also be presented in an understandable, adaptive manner, for example, taking into consideration people's educational background. It is also worth noting a person's position within the organisation: customs officers who perform specific or narrowly-defined tasks in the lower echelons of the hierarchy will need more time and information to perceive and understand the needs for change than those employed at a more central level.

Stakes at issue

When the stakes are high, every effort must be made to implement the changes in question. Therefore, a combination of all four strategies is recommended.

As mentioned above in the pre-conditions for change, change can be initiated by external factors, for example, new legislation, procedures, IT systems and new requirements affecting customs control. A typical example of high stakes was Latvia's accession to the EU. The implementation of EU legislation was an obligatory requirement and not simply optional or motivational. Similarly, Customs is powerless to regulate the flow of trade: the organisation can only adjust its resources depending on where the trade goes. Moreover, the failure of a customs administration to adapt to changing circumstances may inflict a heavy cost in terms of trade efficiency.

Timeframe

Change that must be implemented within a short timeframe should adopt a power-coercive strategy. If the timeframes are longer, a combination of empirical-rational, normative-reeducative, and environmental-adaptive strategies is recommended.

Change efforts must comply with the timeframes required to implement various parts of the change process. It takes years to develop a new IT system for customs declarations whereas it is possible to change control methods within a couple of months.

Expertise

Depending on whether the organisation has sufficient expertise in change processes, it is advisable to combine these strategies. However, if the organisation lacks the necessary expertise it should select the power-coercive strategy and rely on the strategy designed by its managers.

The choice of strategy also depends on what must be changed and who is to manage the change process. The available skills within the organisation should be assessed in order to establish whether change managers will require the services of external experts in some areas of change.

Dependency

Dependency refers to the mutual relationship between an organisation and its staff. If the organisation is dependent on its people, management will have limited ability to command or demand. Conversely, if people are dependent upon the organisation, their ability to oppose or resist will be limited (mutual dependency almost always signals a requirement for some level of negotiation).

Dependency also influences motivation for change and begs the question: what will be the respective benefits for the employee and employer? A change process offers the opportunity to balance or match the needs of both parties by means of negotiation before a decision is taken to appoint a change leader. Usually, it will not be difficult to incorporate the employer's desired changes into the change strategy. On the other hand, the implementation of changes and their effect on the persons involved is a more complicated issue. Issues such as the need for new skills in relation to leadership, change management methods, knowledge of new tasks, and partnership with clients, should all be taken into consideration when appointing change leaders and other key persons. The cost-benefit analysis proves that the value resulting from such investments is often very high.

Conclusions

The more complex the organisation, the greater the number of factors to be considered when starting a change process. The SRS presents a striking example of a complex organisation where many factors are to be considered in order to adjust the changes to the existing conditions. All six factors are worthy of consideration before commencing a large-scale change project. Success will depend on choosing the right change strategies.

This concludes the first part of this contribution on change management. The second instalment will examine the practical application of change management and provide a number of recommendations for an effective change process.

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Endnotes

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2 State Revenue Service, DG's order No. 570 of 24 March 2005.

3 During the course of this investigation, an attitude study was carried out and its findings and recommendations delivered to the management of the LNCB for consideration.

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6 Oliver Recklies is Managing Director of Recklies Management Project GmbH and Editor of the Internet-Portal Themanager. org.

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