Growth, Change and Organisational Pressure

A fictional case study for People & Organisations

How to use this case

Apex contains more issues and evidence than you are expected to cover in a 1,500-word report. Your task is to decide what is significant, investigate it using appropriate academic and professional evidence, and develop a justified argument. There is no expectation that every student will identify or prioritise the same issues.

If you are studying another organisation, you may also use Apex as a diagnostic prompt: does anything happening here make you curious about whether something similar exists in your own organisation?

1. The organisation

Apex Performance Group is a UK-based automotive and motorsport business employing approximately 180 people. It began 25 years ago as a small family-owned engineering company producing specialist automotive components. Its reputation for engineering quality allowed the company to grow steadily, although many of its management practices developed informally and remained relatively traditional.

Today, Apex operates through three closely connected areas. Apex Engineering designs and manufactures specialist automotive components and employs around two-thirds of the workforce. Apex Motorsport develops and operates cars in a national racing championship and is also used as a testing environment for selected engineering innovations. Apex Commercial brings together finance, HR, marketing, sponsorship, procurement and wider business development.

For much of its history, Apex had a clear hierarchy. Senior managers made significant decisions, departmental managers allocated work and employees were expected to follow established procedures. A number of employees and supervisors have worked for the company for more than ten years. The founding family retains a minority shareholding and two family members remain in senior roles, although external investors now have representation on the board.

2. A new direction

Eighteen months ago, Apex secured substantial external investment to support expansion. The investment funded automated manufacturing equipment, new digital production and reporting systems, recruitment into commercial roles and expansion of the motorsport operation.

Senior management announced an ambition to make Apex a more innovative, collaborative and data-informed organisation. Employees were told that departments would work more closely together, managers would give teams greater responsibility, and technology would remove repetitive work while improving quality and productivity.

At approximately the same time, Apex Motorsport secured its largest sponsorship agreement to date. The agreement brought valuable income and visibility, but also increased expectations around race results, media activity, partner events and the speed at which technical developments could be demonstrated.

Investors expect evidence that the wider transformation is delivering results. Department heads have consequently been asked to improve productivity, control operating costs and provide clearer measures of performance. No redundancies were announced as part of the investment programme.

3. Eighteen months later

The organisation has changed considerably, but the results are mixed. Production capacity has increased and some quality measures have improved. However, productivity gains have been inconsistent and managers disagree about whether Apex is changing quickly enough.

On the shop floor

New automated equipment now performs several tasks previously completed manually. Some employees have become enthusiastic users of the technology and have suggested further improvements. Others continue to rely on familiar processes wherever possible.

Initial training consisted of short supplier-led workshops followed by online guidance. Employees who missed the original sessions were generally expected to learn from colleagues. Several experienced operators have become informal 'go-to' people for technical questions, although this is not formally recognised within their roles.

One production manager described the new systems as 'fairly intuitive once people stop fighting them'. An employee with 17 years' service commented in a staff forum that 'nobody has actually explained what my job is supposed to look like in two years' time'.

Production targets have increased since the new machinery was installed. Managers argue that the targets reflect the additional capacity created by the investment. Some employees argue that stoppages, maintenance requirements and time spent learning new systems are not adequately reflected in those expectations.

Leadership and decision-making

Senior management has repeatedly encouraged managers to give employees greater autonomy and to involve teams in operational decisions. In practice, approaches differ substantially between departments.

Some managers now hold short team meetings, invite ideas and allow employees to resolve routine issues without approval. Elsewhere, employees report that relatively minor decisions still move through several levels of management.

A recently promoted supervisor said that managers are being told to 'empower people' while still being held personally accountable when targets are missed. Another manager has questioned whether all employees currently have the confidence or experience required to take greater responsibility.

Several employees have also expressed uncertainty about who has authority when cross-departmental projects are underway. Project teams may include engineering, motorsport and commercial staff, while formal line-management responsibilities remain unchanged.

Performance and data

Apex has introduced digital dashboards containing team and individual performance information. The dashboards include measures such as output, quality, downtime, project milestones and selected attendance data. Managers were told that the information should support better decisions and identify where additional support is required.

Some employees find the information useful and say it makes expectations clearer. Others have informally started referring to the dashboards as 'the league table'. There is no single approach to how managers discuss dashboard results with their teams.

One department uses its dashboard during weekly improvement meetings and asks employees to suggest reasons for unusual results. In another, screenshots showing individual performance have occasionally been circulated by email when targets were missed.

Senior managers have discussed linking a greater proportion of future reward to team performance, although no final decision has been made.

Communication and employee voice

Information about the transformation is communicated through staff emails, quarterly briefings, line managers and the company intranet. An internal pulse survey conducted three months ago found that 31% of respondents agreed that they clearly understood the reasons behind all of the organisational changes.

Managers have questioned the usefulness of this result, noting that not all employees completed the survey. Employees working different shift patterns have also reported receiving information at different times.

A staff consultative group meets every two months. Attendance by senior managers varies depending on operational pressures. Minutes are circulated afterwards, although employees interviewed by HR gave mixed responses when asked whether they knew what happened as a result of issues raised through the group.

Informal communication remains influential at Apex. Rumours concerning future automation and possible restructuring have circulated despite management stating that no redundancy programme has been agreed.

4. Pressure across the business

Engineering and motorsport

Relations between Apex Engineering and Apex Motorsport have become more strained. Engineering managers argue that motorsport can disrupt planned production by requesting specialist components at short notice. Motorsport staff respond that rapid development is inherent to racing and that the programme generates publicity, technical learning and commercial opportunities for the wider group.

A recent component required for an important race weekend was prioritised ahead of a customer production order. The race car finished on the podium, generating significant social-media attention for Apex and its sponsor. The customer order was delivered two days late.

Both departments regarded the weekend as evidence supporting their own position.

The sponsorship team is meanwhile asking drivers, engineers and other employees to contribute more frequently to partner events and digital content. Some enjoy this visibility; others see it as an additional responsibility that sits outside the work they were employed to do.

Workload, retention and morale

Three experienced engineering supervisors have left Apex during the past four months. Exit discussions identified different reasons, including a better salary elsewhere, frustration with organisational change and one individual's wish to reduce commuting time.

Overall employee absence is approximately 14% higher than it was before the transformation began, although the pattern is not uniform across departments. HR has not yet completed a detailed analysis of the increase.

Recruitment has brought younger employees and several new specialists into Apex. Some long-serving employees welcome the additional expertise, while others believe external recruits are progressing more quickly than people who have 'grown up with the company'.

A recently recruited data analyst has questioned why several reports are still manually re-entered into spreadsheets when the information already exists within Apex's new systems. A long-serving manager responded that the spreadsheets are 'how we know the numbers are right'.

Costs, priorities and competing expectations

Although Apex is growing, senior managers remain under pressure to demonstrate a return on the recent investment. Departmental budgets are being scrutinised more closely and managers have been asked to justify recruitment and training expenditure.

HR proposed a wider programme of management development and technology training. The proposal was supported in principle, but implementation was delayed while the executive team reviewed costs and operational priorities.

Finance has warned that continued growth in revenue will not automatically translate into improved profitability if overtime, rework and unplanned expenditure continue to rise. Commercial colleagues argue that investment in people, brand and customer relationships is necessary if Apex is to move beyond its traditional engineering markets.

Managers broadly agree that Apex needs to change. There is less agreement about what should change first.

5. Snapshot of organisational evidence

Indicator / observation	Current position
Employees	Approximately 180 across Engineering, Motorsport and Commercial
Employee understanding	31% of pulse-survey respondents agreed they clearly understood the reasons behind all current changes
Absence	Approximately 14% higher than before the transformation programme; variation exists between departments
Recent supervisory turnover	Three experienced Engineering supervisors left in four months, for differing stated reasons
Technology	New automation and digital reporting systems implemented; adoption varies
Training	Initial short workshops and online guidance; substantial informal peer support
Performance management	Digital team and individual dashboards introduced; management use varies
Business pressure	Higher production expectations, tighter cost scrutiny and increased sponsor/commercial demands

6. Where Apex stands now

The executive team believes that the overall direction of travel is correct. It points to increased production capacity, new commercial opportunities, stronger data and greater potential for innovation.

Within the organisation, however, there is no single view of the transformation. Some employees believe Apex is finally modernising. Others believe change has been introduced faster than the organisation's people, structures and working practices can accommodate. Some managers believe greater accountability is necessary; others worry that pressure for immediate results is undermining the collaboration the company says it wants.

The board is due to review the transformation programme at the end of the financial year. It wants to understand what is helping or hindering organisational performance and what management should prioritise next.

Using the Apex case

If Apex is your chosen organisation, you should not attempt to discuss every issue in this document. Select and prioritise the evidence that you believe is most significant to the assignment question. Use academic literature, theory and appropriate professional evidence to investigate what may be happening, consider different explanations, and develop justified recommendations.

If you are studying another organisation, Apex can still be useful. Treat the case as a set of prompts rather than a template. For example, it may encourage you to investigate how change is communicated, how performance is measured, where decisions are made, how technology affects roles, whether departments compete for resources, how employees experience leadership, or whether stated organisational values match everyday practice.

Questions to take into your investigation

- What evidence tells you that an issue actually exists, rather than simply suggesting that it might?
- Could the same piece of evidence reasonably support more than one explanation?
- Whose perspective is represented - and whose might be missing?
- Which issues appear to be causes, which appear to be consequences, and which might be both?
- Where do formal policies or management intentions appear different from everyday practice?
- Which issues matter most for employees, teams, stakeholders and organisational performance?
- What would you investigate further if Apex were a real client?
- What does academic theory help explain - and where might theory oversimplify the situation?
- If management cannot address everything at once, what should it prioritise and why?
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Remember

A strong report is not the one that spots the greatest number of possible issues. It is the one that selects relevant evidence, analyses it carefully, engages with appropriate sources, considers competing interpretations and arrives at well-justified conclusions and recommendations.