

Managing Change: The Role of the Change Agent

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ABSTRACT

Every organizational change, whether large or small, requires one or more change agents. A change agent is anyone who has the skill and power to stimulate, facilitate, and coordinate the change effort. Change agents may be either external or internal. The success of any change effort depends heavily on the quality and workability of the relationship between the change agent and the key decision makers within the organization. In this article, I discuss change agent types, change agent roles, and characteristics of successful change agency.

The individual or group that undertakes the task of initiating and managing change in an organization is known as a *change agent*. Change agents can be internal, such as managers or employees who are appointed to oversee the change process. In many innovative-driven companies, managers and employees alike are being trained to develop the needed skills to oversee change (Tschirky, 2011). Change agents also can be external, such as consultants from outside the firm.

For major organization-wide changes, companies frequently will hire external change agents. Because these consultants are from the outside, they are not bound by the firm's culture, politics, or traditions. Therefore, they are able to bring a different perspective to the situation and challenge the status quo. This can be a disadvantage, however, because external change agents lack an understanding of the company's history, operating procedures, and personnel.

To offset their limited familiarity with the organization, external change agents usually are paired with an internal coordinator from the human resources department. These two then work together with line management. In very large firms, the organization sometimes has its own in-house change specialist. This person replaces the external consultant and works directly with the organization's management team to facilitate change efforts. Following, I will discuss change agent types, change agent roles, and characteristics of successful change agency.

Change Agent Types

Although little research has explored what type of change agent is most effective in a given situation, some research has identified different types of change agents according to their characteristics and methods of implementing change (Burke, 2011; Eikenberry, 2011; Mansfield, 2011; Thota, 2012). These include the following types.

Outside Pressure Type

These change agents work to change systems from outside the organization. They are not members of the company they are trying to change and use various pressure tactics such as mass demonstrations, civil disobedience, and violence to accomplish their objectives. Typically, they offer options that are more radical than the community might accept. This usually results in the possibility of examining many different change alternatives.

People-Change-Technology Type

The focus of activity for this type of change agent is the individual. The change agent may be concerned with employee morale and motivation, including absenteeism, turnover, and the quality of work performed. The methods used include job enrichment, goal setting, and behavior modification. The major assumption underlying this orientation is that if individuals change their behavior, the organization will also change, providing enough people within the organization change. A manager can certainly assume the role of people-change-technology type and often do.

Analysis-for-the-Top Type

The focus of this change agent is on changing the organizational structure so as to improve output and efficiency. The change agent uses operations research, systems analysis, policy studies, and other forms of analytical approaches to change the organization's structure or technology. For example, the change might include introducing computerized information-processing systems. Many managers assume this role when implementing change.

Organization-Development Type

These change agents focus their attention on internal processes such as intergroup relations, communication, and decision making. Their intervention strategy is often called a cultural change approach, because they thoroughly analyze the culture of the targeted organization. This approach grew out of such areas as sensitivity training, team building, and survey feedback. Many managers assume the role of organization-development type when implementing change.

Change Agent Roles

There are at least three distinct roles that change agents play: consulting, training, and research (Carnall, 2008; Dawson, 2010; Stephen, 2010; Tidd, 2010). A manager can and often does perform each of these functions. An outside change agent can perform these activities as well.

Consulting

As a *consultant*, the manager places employees in touch with data from outside the organization or helping organization members to generate data from within the organization. The overall purpose is to help employees find solutions to problems through analysis of valid data.

Training

In addition to performing the role of consultant, the manager may function as a *trainer*. Here the manager helps organization members learn how to use data to effect change. The manager, or outside change agent if one is used, has a dual purpose as trainer: (1) to help organization members derive implications for action from the present data and (2) to provide organization members with a new set of skills—the ability to retrieve, translate, and use new data to solve future problems. Several companies have hired outside consultants to instruct organization members on how to improve the overall operation of their firms.

Research

Finally, and closely associated with the previous role, the manager may assume the role of *researcher*. As researcher, the manager may train organization members in the skills needed for valid evaluation of the effectiveness of action plans that have been implemented. Furthermore, as part of the overall intervention strategy, the manager will design an evaluation component that can be used in solving not only the current problem but also future problems.

Characteristics of Successful Change Agency

After an extensive review of the literature, several researchers have identified a set of ten factors characteristic of effective change agency (Anderson, 2011; deBruijn, 2011; Jain, 2011; Lindegaard, 2011; McCabe, 2011). These factors briefly defined in the following list, refer to the way in which change agents manage change rather than to any personal characteristics they may possess. In many cases, the plant manager performs the role of change agent. However, the change agent can be an internal change specialist, corporate office administrator (often called a “trouble shooter”), or outside consultant whose expertise is in implementing change.

Hemophily

The more alike the change agent and employees are, the more likely it is that the change agent will be successful. Similarity between the change agent and organization members results in acceptance of the change agent by the employees and understanding of the employees by the change agent.

Empathy

This is the skill of understanding the feelings of another person. Empathy leads to improved communication and understanding between the change agent and organization members.

Linkage

This refers to the extent to which the change agent and organization members are tied together in collaborative activities. The greater the collaborative involvement (the tighter the linkage), the more likely the change agent will be successful.

Proximity

This refers to the physical and psychological closeness of the change agent and organization members. The greater the proximity between the change agent and the organization members, the more likely the change agent will be successful. Increasing proximity makes it easier to develop collaborative linkages. Proximity also facilitates the development of empathy between change agent and organization members. Proximity has relevance to open door policy and the visibility of the change agent during working hours.

Structuring

This factor refers to the ability of the change agent and organization members to clearly plan and organize their activities concerning the change effort. A clearly designed change effort is more likely to be understood and implemented by the employees.

Capacity

This factor is a characteristic of the organization. It refers to the company's capability of providing the resources needed for a successful change effort. A successful change effort requires an adequate amount of resources.

Openness

This characteristic refers to the degree to which the change agent and organization members are willing to hear, respond to, and be influenced by one another. The preceding

six factors can all facilitate the development of such openness or, when absent, they can hinder the development of openness between the change agent and organization members.

Reward

This refers to the nature and variety of potential positive outcomes of the change effort that might accrue to the change agent and organization members. Change efforts should be designed so that the employees are rewarded for changing.

Energy

This refers to the amount of physical and psychological effort the change agent and organization members are able and willing to expend on the change effort. When day-to-day problems are so pressing that they sap all of the employee's energy, it diminishes the energy they can devote to the change effort.

Synergy

This characteristic refers to the positively reinforcing effects that each of the preceding nine factors has on one another. More specifically, synergy involves the variety of people, resources, energies, and activities involved in interacting in the change effort that mutually support success.

Conclusion

Every organizational change, whether large or small, requires one or more change agents. A change agent is anyone who has the skill and power to guide and facilitate the change effort. Change agents may be either external or internal. The success of any change effort depends heavily on the quality and workability of the relationship between the change agent and the key decision makers within the organization.

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