

# "Change Agents" – Their Roles and Influences in Organizations.

*Hasan Shirazi*

Assistant Professor  
University of Liberal Arts

## Introduction

The role and significance of "change agents" in organizations has become a subject of interest over the last decades. During the 1980s, the "change master" and "transformational leadership" literature presented leaders as charismatic heroes of radical corporate transformation that required destroying rigid and inflexible structures (Kanter 1983; Devanna and Tichy 1986; Bass 1990). Various extraordinary qualities, traits and attributes were associated with these change champions, including risk taking, and openness to new ideas. Unfortunately, this positive assertion of leadership was often conceived alongside the negative counter-image of traditional managerial roles (Caldwell 2003) played by them. This paper is going to focus on the role of the change agents and the influence they have over the people and organizations.

## Change Leader or Change Manager or Change Agent?

Caldwell (2003) in his 'Change Leader and Change Manager' tried to distinguish between the roles of a change agent as a leader and manager. He defined change leaders as executives or senior managers at the top of the organization, who envision, initiate or sponsor strategic change of transformational nature and change managers as middle-level managers and/or functional specialists who carry forward and build support for change within business units and key functions. In this regard Kirton (1980) and Kanter (1989) argued that if leadership is essential to commence

innovation it is likewise clear that managers increasingly play a vital role in implementing change. Finally, managers perform the role of facilitators encouraging commitment and empowering employees to be approachable to change and technological innovation. In this literature, they will all be termed as 'Change Agents'.

### Roles 'Change Agent' Plays in Organizations

Managing change in the organization means either depending on managers who are scattered throughout the organization having a shared awareness of how the various parts need to interact and work for the miracle to happen (desired change) or having a 'Change Agent'. It is not a new layer of bureaucracy or a permanent job for the fading executive or a steering committee but a body that convenes periodically to guide those who are actually doing the work of the organization (Duck 1998).

Duck stated that a change agent oversees the corporate change effort, making sure that all change initiatives fit together. Sometimes it is made up of highly talented leaders who commit all their time making the transition a reality and accepted by the power structure of the organization. They have the proven talent and credibility, understand the long term vision of the company, and possess a complete knowledge of the business along with the confidence and support of the CEO. They have eight primary responsibilities; however, these activities or responsibilities are not solely accountable for fulfilling the desired change in the organization. These are as follows:

*Establish Context for Change and Provide Guidance:* The change agent makes sure that everyone in the organization shares a common understanding of that vision and understands the company's competitive situation by organizing discussions throughout the organization so that individuals and teams can accurately align their activities with the new overall direction (Duck 1998).

*Stimulate Conversations:* Companies have formalized their operations in functional isolation so much that conversation across levels rarely take place and presentations are followed by inquisitions. Moreover, conversations are often considered as a luxury when resources are scarce and time pressures are severe. Most change efforts are fundamentally about moving information across boundaries and organizing early conversations is a critical task for the agent (Duck 1998).

*Provide Appropriate Resources:* The change agent has two significant powers: the power to allocate resources to make things happen and the power to kill projects that are no longer needed or those that no longer have a high priority. A lot of projects are deadlier than alive, distracting people and using resources. The

agent needs to be a tough-minded terminator of these projects (Duck 1998).

*Coordinate and Align Projects:* As organizations, shift into fast-paced change programs, task forces, teams and projects proliferate and confusions are created as these activities don't seem to fit together. The change-agent has two tasks: coordinating and aligning the projects into building blocks that fit together and communicating to the whole organization how these pieces align, so that all can see the big coherent picture (Duck 1998).

*Ensure Congruence of Messages, Activities, Policies and Behaviours:* One major complaints of the employees in organizations undergoing transformation is management doesn't "walk the talk" and do not bother to listen to them. The agent's job is to understand the inconsistencies undermining the credibility of the change effort, measure behaviours and match the reward assured by management (Duck 1998).

*Provide Opportunities for Joint Creation:* Most change programs embrace the concept of empowerment – ensuring that all employees, whether director, manager or technical worker, have the information they need to make correct decisions and take appropriate actions. Obviously, the agent cannot do all the communicating and teaching but can support the process of learning and creation (Duck 1998).

*Anticipate, Identify and Address People Problems:* People issues are at the heart of change. Communications and human resources (HR) are critical to success, but there should not be shortage of talents and there must be diversity of perspective, resources, and think-tanks for anticipating the problems in the organizations. Agent along with the cross-functional teams in communication and HR represents an opportunity to gather and disseminate information horizontally and vertically (Duck 1998).

*Prepare the Critical Mass:* It is important to design the change layout, resources and strategy from the very beginning for replication and transfer of learning. Most teams need guidance on how to do this and to ascertain whether these are aligned with the other activities. The agent manages the content process and the congruence of operation and emotion thus providing a powerful leverage for change (Duck 1998).

The real contribution of leadership in a time of change lies in managing the dynamics, not the pieces. The fundamental job of leadership is to deal with the dynamics of change and the convergence and congruence of the forces that change unleashes, so that the company is better prepared to compete (Duck 1998).

Buchanan and Boddy (1992) came up with a model for the core competencies of change-agents in different areas to influence the organization and people that is placed in Table 1.1.

**Table #1.1**

**Change Agents' Competencies (adopted from Buchanan and Boddy 1992)**

<i>Change Agent Competencies</i>	
<b>Goals</b>	
	Sensitivity to changes in key personnel, top-management perceptions and market conditions and to the way in which these impact on the goals of a project.
	Clarity in specifying goals and defining the achievable.
	Flexibility in responding to changes outside the control of the project manager, perhaps requiring major shifts in project goals and management style and risk taking.
<b>Roles</b>	
	Team-building activities, to bring together key stakeholders and establish effective working groups and clearly define and delegate respective responsibilities.
	Networking skills in establishing and maintaining appropriate contacts within and outside the organization.
	Tolerance of ambiguity, to be able to function comfortably, patiently and effectively in an uncertain environment.
<b>Communication</b>	
	Communication skills to transmit effectively to colleagues and subordinates the need for changes in project goals and in individual tasks and responsibilities
	Interpersonal skills, across the range, including selection, listening, collecting appropriate information, identifying the concerns of others and managing meetings.
	Personal enthusiasm, in expressing plans and ideas Stimulating motivation and commitment in others involved.
<b>Negotiation</b>	
	Selling plans and ideas to others, by creating a desirable and challenging vision of the future. Negotiating with key players for resources or for changes in procedures and to resolve conflict.
<b>Managing up</b>	
	Political awareness in identifying potential coalitions and in balancing conflicting goals and perceptions
	Influencing skills, to gain commitment to project plans and ideas from potential skeptics and resisters.
	Helicopter perspective to stand back from the immediate project and take a broader view of priorities.

Additionally, Keep (2001) in his 'The Change Practitioner' came up with some core competencies for 'agents' in different areas of business as in Table 1.2.

**Table #1.2**  
Change Agents' Competencies in different areas  
of Business (adopted from Keep 2001).

Cluster	Skill/Competence
Project management	Planning, resource allocation, etc.
Contracting (with 'clients')	Defining the task, establishing relationships
Team building	Such as defining roles, maintaining good working relationships
Analysis and diagnosis	Data collection and problem solving
Data utilization	Qualitative and quantitative data, paper-based review, or survey techniques
Interpersonal skills	Communication, time management
Communication skills	Listening, written presentations
Political awareness	Sensitivity, influencing
Intervention implementation	Participation, involvement
Monitoring and evaluation	Criteria setting and reviewing, measuring effectiveness
Technical skills	Financial interpretation, psychometrics
Process skills	Facilitation, systems thinking
Self-awareness and insight	Reflection, critical thinking, intuition

### Influence of 'Change Agent' on Organizations

Leaders need vision, energy, authority and strategic direction but to be inspirational they need other qualities and these qualities can be honed by anyone willing to dig deeply into their true selves (Goffee and Jones 2000). For all levels of change the change-agent is a helper who "intervenes as a facilitator" (Schein 1987: 9) and inspires the transformation process. There are certain characteristics of these agents that influence the thoughts and actions of others. Different academics had come up with different models and theories to bring this to light and this section will cover some of their ideas.

Goffee and Jones (2000) stated that inspirational leaders share four unexpected qualities other than the customary ones. Leaders selectively show

their weakness. By revealing some vulnerability, they divulge their approachability and humanity. Exposing weakness establishes trust and thus helps others to follow their command thinking as human beings. If they communicate that they are perfect at everything, there will be no need for anyone to help them with anything. Beyond creating trust and a collaborative atmosphere, communicating a weakness builds solidarity between followers and leaders. But the golden rule is never to expose a weakness that will be seen as a fatal flaw and jeopardize the central aspect of the professional role.

Leaders are good "Situational Sensors". They can collect and interpret soft data and sniff out the signals in the environment and sense what is going on without anything spelled out for them. They easily gauge unexpressed feelings and can judge whether a relationship is working or not. They develop this ability based on many years of working, interacting with different personalities and judging environments. But there are risk associated with sensing and making fine judgements about how far they can go. Leaders sometimes put themselves in the risk of losing their followers. In addition, sensing a situation involves projection – of the state of one's mind, attributes, ideas to other people and this may interfere with the truth (Goffee and Jones 2000).

Real leaders manage through a unique approach that has been called "Tough Empathy". Tough empathy means giving people what they need and not what they want. They empathize fiercely with the people they lead. Tough empathy also has the benefit of inspiring leaders to take risks (Goffee and Jones 2000). Furnham (2003) argued that one of the key qualities of successful leaders is "Courage to Fail" – enabling leaders to try something new, to experiment, to buck the trend and innovate process or even man-management.

Finally, another quality of inspirational leaders is that they capitalize on what is **unique** about them. Often, leaders will show their differences by having a distinctly different dress style or physical appearance, but typically they distinguish themselves through qualities like imagination, loyalty, expertise or even a handshake. "Anything can be different, but it is important to communicate it" (Goffee and Jones 2000).

The late David McClelland, a noted Harvard University psychologist, found that leaders with strength in six or more emotional intelligence, were far more effective than peers who lacked such strengths. Goleman (2000) in this regard argued that leadership with the best results do not rely on only one leadership style but on most of them seamlessly and in different

measures, depending on the business situation. These six leadership styles are as follows.

"The Coercive Style" should be used only with extreme caution and in few situations when it is absolutely imperative, such as during a turnaround or when a hostile takeover is looming. The coercive style can break failed business habits and shock people into new ways of working. But it has a damaging effect on the reward system as high-performing workers are motivated by a satisfaction of work well done, rather than money. The coercive style erodes such pride and undermines motivation. Change-agent uses this style at the beginning of the process (Goleman 2000).

"The Authoritative Style" works well in almost any business situation but is particularly effective when the business is adrift. An authoritative leader charts a new course and sets these new courses on the basis of a fresh long term vision. An authoritative leader is visionary and motivates people for the bigger picture. This style would fail when a leader is working with a team of experts or peers who are more experienced than he/she is (Goleman 2000). Change-agent uses this style the most after the "Coercive Style".

The Affiliative Style revolves around the people and its proponents value individual and their emotions more than task goals. An affiliative leader strives to keep employees happy and to create harmony among them by building strong emotional bonds and reaping the main benefit of such an approach – fierce loyalty. It also increases flexibility in the workplace. Despite these benefits, the affiliative style should not be used alone as it allows the poor performer to go uncorrected (Goleman 2000).

The Democratic Style is ideal when the leader is uncertain about the best direction to take and needs ideas and guidance from able employees. And even if the leader has a strong vision, this style works well to generate fresh ideas for executing the vision. As leaders spend time getting people's thoughts and ideas, a leader builds trust, respect and commitment. The democratic leader drives up flexibility and responsibility but this style makes less sense when employees are not competent or informed enough to offer sound advice and also during crisis (Goleman 2000). Change-agents prefer this role when the transformation process takes off.

The Pacesetting Style is like the coercive style and should be used sparingly. In this style the leader sets extremely high performance standards and

exemplifies them himself/herself and is obsessed about doing things better and faster. The guidelines for working may be clear in the leader's head but he/she does not state them clearly and expects people to know what to do. As for reward, the pacesetters either give no feedback or jumps in to take over when he/she thinks the followers are lagging (Goleman 2000). This role is useful for the change agent either at the beginning or when there is a threat of deviation from the original set path.

Finally, **The Coaching Style** is not used by most leaders but is very effective in terms of personal development of the employees and long term objectives but not for immediate work-related tasks. It is perhaps most effective when people on the receiving end are "up for it". The major role played by the change-agent is coaching, mentoring, guiding and focusing on the big picture.

Buckingham (2005) discussed what average managers, great managers and great leaders do to make things successful. He declares "Average managers play checkers, while great managers play chess". As in checkers all the pieces are the same but in chess each has distinct characteristics and methods to move and play. The ability to keep tweaking roles to capitalize on the uniqueness of each person is the essence of great management. The change agents need to tweak into the key role player in the organization to influence and make the change a successful one.

Change agents need the skill to deal with particular psychological challenges that arise during different stages of the transformation process. Initially they face anxiety, shock and defensiveness and then ambiguity, hopelessness and at some later stage they have contend with conflicts or deal with forces pushing individual and groups in different directions Finally, their encouragement enable participants to adopt a new approach (Chapman 2002).

## **Conclusion**

"Change processes and change projects have become major milestones in many organizations' history. Due to the dynamics in the external environment, many organizations find themselves in nearly continuous change" (Recklies 2001). Unfortunately, not all the change initiatives lead to the expected results for the organization and for the change agents. Change agents have to keep this in their minds to be ready about the changes in the external environment, a lack of his/her commitment in the implementation stages, resistance of people in the organization, or lack of resources and should try to overcome these barriers. When the change initiative fails, people involved in the change process may

become dissatisfied with their own performance or with the lack of support they received. In addition to that, people affected by the (failed) change effort will develop growing skepticism and might perceive future change projects as "another fancy idea from management". In this regard Buckingham (2005) concluded that leaders must bring insight into their actions and interactions. Great managing is about release, not transformation and it is about tweaking the environment so that the unique contribution, the unique needs, and the unique style of each employee can be given free rein. Success as a manager will depend on the ability to do this effectively.

### Reference

- Bass, B. M. (1990) 'From Transactional to Transformational Leadership: Learning to Share the Vision', *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 19-31.
- Buckingham, M. (2005) 'What Great Managers Do', *Harvard Business Review*, March, pp. 70 – 79.
- Buchanan, D. and Boddy, D. (1992) *The Expertise of the Change Agent*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.
- Caldwell, R. (2003) 'Change Leaders and Change Managers: Different or Complementary?', *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 5, pp. 285-293.
- Chapman, J. A. (2002) 'A framework for Transformational Change in Organisations', *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 16 – 25.
- Devanna, M. A. and Tichy, N. M. (1986) 'The Transformational Leader', *Training and Development Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 7, pp. 27-32.
- Duck, J. D. (1998) 'Managing Change: The Art of Balancing' in *Harvard Business Review on Change*, Harvard: Harvard Business School Press, pp. 55 – 81.
- Furnham, A. (2002) 'Managers as Change Agents', *Journal of Change Management*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 21 – 29.
- Goffee, R. and Jones, G. (2000) 'Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?', *Harvard Business Review*, September - October, pp. 63 – 70.
- Goleman, D. (2000) 'Leadership that Gets Results', *Harvard Business Review*, March - April, pp. 78 – 90.
- Kanter, R. B. (1983) *The Change Masters*, London: Allen & Unwin.

- Kanter, R. B. (1989) *When Giants Learn to Dance*, London: Simon & Schuster.
- Keep, J. (2001) 'The Change Practitioner: Perspectives on Role, Effectiveness, Dilemmas and Challenges', in Hamlin, B., Keep, J. and Ash, K. (eds) *Organizational Change and Development – A Reflective Guide for Managers, Trainers and Developers*. Harlow: Financial Times/ Prentice Hall, pp. 83-100.
- Kirton, M. (1980) 'Adaptors and Innovators', *Human Relations*, Vol. 3, pp. 213-24.
- Recklies, D. (2001) "What Makes a Good Change Agent?" available on: [http://www.themanager.org/Strategy/change\\_agent.htm](http://www.themanager.org/Strategy/change_agent.htm), viewed on: December 14, 2006.