

What Makes a Good Leader of Change?

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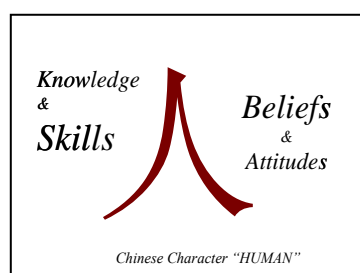
In response to evolving conditions, you came to realise that your organisation must change. You are now ready to move into action. As the leader of the organisation, one of your first and critical decisions is to appoint the team that will lead the project. Typically, the leadership consists of project sponsor, with overall responsibility, seconded by project managers focusing on specific aspects. These people will be your change agents – the ones upon which success of your initiative will rely. What makes a good change leader then?

When assessing potential candidates, you need to ask yourself three questions: Do they have the right attitude? Do they possess the appropriate knowledge? And have they mastered necessary skills? Let's look at each of these view points.

The Right Attitude

A change agent cannot succeed without great persistence. Change is a complex and labour intensive process that arouses feelings and emotions. Angry people, frustrated team mates, conflicting priorities, unforeseen problems, or behind-the-scene resistance are typical daily challenges. A project leader or Manager cannot lead her team through these without determination and stamina.

To avoid changes in leadership in the midst of change, the person must be fully committed to see the project through to completion. A good way to ensure that, is to appoint an ambitious and enthusiastic individual who presents potential for career advancement within the organisation. She will look at the challenges as a terrific career-development opportunity and will be highly motivated to succeed. This high potential employee will gain a broader understanding of the business, an extended network of relationships and stronger leadership skills.



In terms of attitude, this is one aspect that is often overlooked. As depicted by the Chinese word “Ren”, illustrated above, where the two strokes supporting each other signify that “knowledge and skills” have to be complemented by “beliefs and attitudes”. A person with relevant knowledge and skills but an inappropriate attitude will not be able to contribute as much to her company and the community. Moreover, the higher the skills and knowledge of a person, the greater damage she can do to the organisation if her attitude is flawed. The change agent must be prepared to stand up for the project, even if it

means tactfully challenging powerful executives – including you! In many cases which we have seen, the implementation problems are often due to the sponsors or top management underestimating the significance of their duties. The sponsors or top management are reluctant to commit the necessary resources; sometimes sending conflicting messages about the importance of change by failing to apply enough pressure to those who resist; or by changing priority half-way through the change.

The change agent must act as a **Voice of Conscience**. When any mid-course changes occur it is the responsibility of the Change agent to raise the issue with the sponsors; otherwise

the project will end up failing. An effective change agent we worked with has this attitude: “My primary goal is to ensure this project succeeds, no matter what. My secondary objective is to preserve my personal relationship with all senior management.” This might sound extreme, but the best change agents really are tactful and diplomatic.

Sometimes, a change agent must have the **Political Skills**, not suggesting the one to join in the game, but better understand it. A change leader must make her own judgements and keep her own counsel; no one can do it for her.

The Appropriate Knowledge

The project sponsor should be a seasoned change agent with a general understanding of the business. However, project managers should be subject-matter experts in their respective area of responsibility. Having someone with excellent project management skills is simply not enough. They will crash due to lack of detailed understanding of the subject area. Expertise also brings the credibility and respect much needed to succeed in their role.

Simply put, you’d better understand how a business works. In particular, change agents need to understand how the business works. This entails understanding of money – where it comes from, where it goes, how it goes, and how to keep it. It also calls into play knowledge of markets and marketing, products and product development, customers, sales, selling, buying, hiring, firing, and just about anything you might think of.

In addition to the relevant expertise, a change agent should also be well connected throughout the organisation. These active relationships are important in communicating effectively with stakeholders, developing coalitions, and designing a successful rollout.

The Necessary Skills

Change is not as easy as ABC, the pressure on the project leadership is always tremendous. A change agent has to be able to operate under a huge amount of instability and uncertainty. She has to manage conflicting priorities, multiple constituencies and fast-approaching deadlines. She is responsible for guiding the organisation through the numerous challenges of transition. Therefore, in order to survive, she must possess the proven ability to remain highly effective under intense pressure.

The change agent also needs outstanding **Analytical Skills** in addition to being very organised and disciplined, both in her thinking and actions. Guessing won’t do, insight is nice, even useful, and sometimes shines with brilliance, but it is often difficult to sell and almost impossible to defend. A rational, well-argued analysis can be ignored, but not successfully contested. Change agents must learn to take part and reassemble operations and systems in novel ways, and then determine financial and political impacts of what they have done. At the same time, a good change agent must be flexible enough to work around hurdles and handle evolving priorities. In other words, a disciplined and yet flexible approach is needed to tackle challenges.

People Skills such as team building, interpersonal understanding and communication skills is a mandatory set of competencies of a good change agent. The change agent has to build the project team and leverage on the team members’ competencies. To succeed, she must create a strong sense of identity, purpose and joint-ownership, as well as have a high performing mindset. In other words, engage the people, use natural leadership style and influencing skills to get results.

To manage resistance – a natural part of the change process – the change agent must start by understanding and acknowledging it. She needs a lot of empathy, with good listening skills. She must be able to put herself in the shoes of people affected by the change. Resistance is most damaging when it remains unnoticed. It usually occurs when the feelings & concerns of employees are ignored or when change is forced upon them. In order to avoid resistance or the risk of hidden resistance, the change agent must learn to listen to the voice of her customers' feelings. Whenever possible – influence the people by involving them in decisions.

During the change communication is the glue that keeps the organisation moving towards the desired state. The change agent needs to be able to communicate effectively at all levels and across the functions.

One More Time about what makes a good leader for change...

Keep in mind that change is never easy and that the failure rate is high. To maximise your chances of success, we strongly recommend you take a hard look at your candidates. If none of them closely matched your requirements, then consider alternative people. You will avoid yourself a lot of trouble down the road.

Last but not least: once you find the right individuals, make sure they can dedicate 50% to 100% of their time to the initiative.

About the Authors

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