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Making Good Change Agents: Attitude, Knowledge, Skills

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What makes a good change agent? When assessing potential candidates, three questions need to be asked: Do they have the right attitude? Do they possess the appropriate knowledge? And do they master necessary skills?

By Amy Tan and Dr. Uwe H. Kaufmann

When a business leader realizes that his organization is in need of significant change, one of the first and most critical actions is to appoint a team to spearhead a change initiative. Typically, a Six Sigma team's leadership consists of project sponsor, with overall responsibility, seconded by project managers who focus on specific aspects. These people will be the change agents - the ones on whom the success of the organization's change effort will depend.

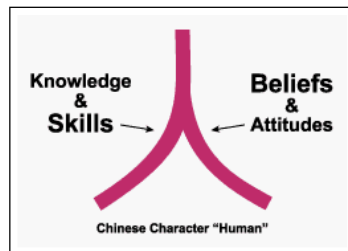
What makes good change agents?

When assessing potential candidates for roles as change agents, three questions need to be asked: Do they have the right attitude? Do they possess the appropriate knowledge? And do they have the necessary skills? Here is an exploration of each of these questions:

The Right Attitude

Change agents cannot succeed without great persistence. Change is a complex and labor-intensive process that arouses feelings and emotions. Angry people, frustrated teammates, conflicting priorities, unforeseen problems and behind-the-scene resistance are typical daily challenges. Project leaders or managers cannot lead teams through these difficulties without determination and stamina.

To avoid changes in leadership in the midst of change, change agents must be fully committed to see projects through to completion. A good way to ensure such commitment is to appoint ambitious and enthusiastic individuals who have potential for career advancement within the organization. They will look at the challenges as a career-development opportunity and will be highly motivated to succeed. These high potential employees will gain a broader understanding of the business, an extended network of relationships and stronger leadership skills.

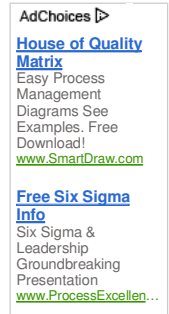


Attitude is one aspect of good change agents that is often overlooked. As depicted by the Chinese word "Ren," illustrated above, the two strokes supporting each other signify that "knowledge and skills" have to be complemented by "beliefs and attitudes."

A person with relevant knowledge and skills but inappropriate attitude will not be able to contribute as much to the organization and the community. Moreover, the higher the skills and knowledge of a person, the greater damage they can do to the organization if their attitude is flawed. Change agents must be prepared to stand up for their projects, even if it means

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tactfully challenging powerful executives - including the senior leadership. In many cases, implementation problems are due to the project sponsors or top management under-estimating the significance of their own duties. They are reluctant to commit the necessary resources; they sometimes send conflicting messages about the importance of change by failing to apply enough pressure to those who resist; or they alter priorities half-way through the change.

Change agents must act as "voices of conscience" when any mid-course corrections are contemplated. It is the responsibility of change agents to make sure such issues get a complete airing in order to avoid the project ending in failure. One effective change agent summed up the attitude needed: "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." The best change agents are tactful and diplomatic. "Political skills" are necessary, not so change agents can join in the game, but so they can better understand it. Change leaders must make their own judgments and keep their own counsel. No one can do that for them.

The Appropriate Knowledge

Project sponsors should be seasoned change agents 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 needed to succeed in their role.

Simply put, change agents better understand how a business works - in particular, the business in which they are involved. This entails understanding money - where it comes from, where it goes, how it goes and how to keep it. The job also requires knowledge of markets and marketing, products and product development, customers, sales, selling, buying, hiring, firing and just about every other aspect of the business.

In addition to the relevant expertise, change agents also should be well-connected throughout the organization. Active relationships in all areas of the organization are important in communicating effectively with stakeholders, developing coalitions and designing a successful rollout.

The Necessary Skills

The pressure on the project leadership can be tremendous. Change agents have to be able to operate during times of instability and uncertainty. They have to manage conflicting priorities, multiple constituencies and fast-approaching deadlines. They are responsible for guiding the organization through the numerous challenges of transition. Therefore, in order to survive, change agents must possess the ability to remain highly effective under intense pressure.

In addition to being well organized and disciplined, change agents need strong analytical skills. Guessing won't do. Insight is nice, even useful and is sometimes mistaken for brilliance, but insight 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 apart and reassemble operations and systems in novel ways, and then determine the financial and political impacts of what they have done. At the same time, good change agents must be flexible enough to work around roadblocks and handle evolving priorities. In short, a disciplined and yet flexible approach is needed to tackle the challenges of change.

People skills - team-building, forging strong interpersonal relationships and communicating within groups - are mandatory for good change agents. The challenge is to build the project team, putting the team members' competencies to best use. To succeed, change agents must create a strong sense of identity, purpose and joint-ownership, as well as a high-performing mindset. To manage resistance - a natural part of the change process - change agents must start by understanding and acknowledging the resistance. They need a lot of empathy, with good listening skills. Change agents must be able to put themselves in the shoes of people affected by the change. Resistance is most damaging when it remains unnoticed. It usually occurs when the feelings and concerns of employees are ignored or when they feel change is forced upon them. In order to avoid resistance or the risk of hidden resistance, change agents must learn to listen to the voice of employees and involve them in decisions whenever possible.

During the change, communication is the glue that keeps the organization together and moving toward the desired goal. Change agents need to be able to communicate effectively at all levels and across all organization boundaries.

Choosing a Good Leader for a Change...

Change is never easy and the failure rate can be high. Top management must take a hard look at the candidates for change agent positions. If none of the in-company candidates closely match requirements of the job, then a search outside the company is required. And, once an organization finds the right individual to be its change agent for a project, management has one more commitment to make - assuring the change agent has between 50 and 100 percent of their work time available to dedicate to the success of the initiative.

About the Authors

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