Effective Change Leadership - Part 1

What does effective change leadership really look like – and how do you build it in your organisation?

While there are many case studies of successful change management projects, the behaviours of the individuals leading these projects are less often the point of focus. Yet it is individuals who ultimately drive projects forward. These individuals are loosely connected in a change network, and these leaders of change need to be trained, developed and nurtured. Contrary to what some believe, change leadership is a capability that can be measured in an organisation and improved over time.

At Changefirst we define effective change leadership as:

"Effective change leadership happens when leaders of change provide direction, guidance and support to the people who are implementing the change.... as well as those having to adapt to change."1

The 3 key phases of change leadership

Harking back to Kurt Lewin’s original change model of unfreeze, change, refreeze, it’s useful to consider the implications of change leadership in the current situation, the transition and the future state.

The key aspect of this is how the role and behaviour of change leaders has to adapt over time.

As change leaders move from one side of this process to the other their role evolves. Initially they help kick-start the change through challenging the status quo and expressing their dissatisfaction with the current situation. Next they show support for the transition via both private and public demonstrations. Finally these leaders reinforce the future state and take a strong stance on activities like effectively role modelling the change.

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1 Definition taken from “Successful change: how to implement change through people” by David Miller. Scheduled for publication in May 2011.
How do you go about building effective change leadership in your organisation?

Despite a wealth of literature dedicated to considering whether effective leaders – and by implication change leaders – are born or can be nurtured, we think that the process of developing change leadership is something that any company can work on.

In any change management programme, there’s a clear process with a number of steps that organisations can work through to enhance leadership as follows.

1. **Map out a change network**

   When people talk about change leadership, they are often only thinking about the executive level, when in fact change leadership exists at multiple levels throughout the organisation. The initial drive might come from the top, but in order to sustain change you need the impact of a whole network of individuals throughout the organisation, including local managers. In fact, when change projects fail to sustain, it's often local managers who are the sticking point.

   Looking at a standard organisational chart won’t tell you what this change network looks like. Mapping the change network is a formal process of identifying key players in a change initiative, clarifying the relationships between them and assigning them roles such as sponsor, influencer and change agent.

2. **Engage sponsors at every level**

   Received wisdom has taught us that enlisting the support of an executive project sponsor at a very senior level is key to the success of a major change. But while the executive sponsor is the single point of accountability and the person who makes the big decisions, in reality a change project will also have a number of local sponsors and their role should not be underestimated.

   Sponsors fulfil a number of functions in the change process including:

   - **Accountability.** They are ultimately responsible for making a success of the project.
   - **Authority.** They lend their weight to the change, supporting people who are adapting to the change and managing any resistance.
   - **Decision making.** They make the key decisions and support change agents over smaller decisions.
   - **Support.** By lending their support, they legitimise the change initiative at every level of the organisation.
3. Develop informal influencers

In an age of social networking and viral media, we are only too aware of the influence of informal communications. In fact, the subconscious nudge, as demonstrated in Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's book[^2], can be more powerful and effective as an influencer than formal authorities telling people to change.

In an organisational context, it’s important to ensure key people are supporting a change project, particularly at an early stage when executive support may not be as fully formed as you might like it to be. It’s really a case of recognising who the informal influencers are through the change network mapping exercise, then bringing them onside before they have had a chance to form an adverse opinion. Perhaps even bringing them into the formal change network by giving them a role in the initiative.

Informal influencers fall into four main categories:

- **Advocates**, who persuade other people that change is a good idea.
- **Connectors**, who can help connect to others who you may not have a relationship with.
- **Controllers**, who control access to information or people.
- **Experts**, with technical expertise.

4. Arm change agents with the right skills for the job

Change agents are the day-to-day instigators of change and they support the sponsor’s intentions. They fulfill a number of roles, from planning and executing project plans to helping overcome resistance and building momentum towards the desired future state.

There are two sides to the instruction of change agents. Firstly, organisations need to ensure they pick the best people for the job in hand. Secondly, change agents need the right skills for the job. If there are gaps in their skills base, these should be plugged through training or coaching. Although they don’t usually have the power to force

[^2]: “Nudge: Improved decisions about health, wealth and happiness” by Richard H Thaler and Cass R Sunstein
through change on their own, change agents can make the difference between success and failure, and therefore need to have a number of tools in their box to bring their influence to bear.

These include:

- A good understanding of change principles
- Skills in collecting and using data
- Knowledge of running meetings and workshops
- Good planning and project management skills
- Communications expertise
- The ability to manage resistance and deal with uncertainty

5. Embrace change

Change programmes typically follow one of four approaches, each of which corresponds to a different leadership style. Let’s initially consider the first three approaches here:

- **Technical**: breaking the change down into a series of functional tasks and outcomes. Leaders tend to be autocratic, aggressively forcing through change while ignoring employee concerns. They build short-term gains, but their approach can lead to pitfalls and long-term resentment.

- **Emotional**: appealing to the hearts and minds of the workforce, without necessarily creating a proper structure to the initiative. Visionary leaders will pre-announce an initiative without consulting local managers who will be affected by the change and without necessarily thinking through the consequences. On the other side, sympathetic leaders pay too much attention to how people feel about the change, rather than leading them through it.

- **Bolt-on**: where change agents are expected to see through a change on top of their regular job. A recent survey by the Society for Human Resource Management found that while organisations experience on average 2.1 changes per year, 77% of HR departments did not have the resources to manage change. In this approach leaders may put financial incentives in place to reward adoption of the change, but they don’t have enough time to think through the real consequences and fail to role model and get involved in change because they are too busy doing their regular jobs.

The first three approaches can be problematic, each in their own way. We would always recommend the fourth option which is **Embracing Change**. This is all about effectively communicating the case for change – the “what”, the “why” and the “what is in it for me?” It’s about change managers role modeling the change and involving all staff in the process. And it’s about change leaders using rewards to effectively incentivise the right type of behaviours.

Embracing Change contains many of the elements of the three earlier approaches above but is more comprehensive approach than the first three taken together. It is easy

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3 SHRM survey, 2007
to adopt but a little more challenging to implement – but if you are able to, the rewards are clearly there.

In next month’s newsletter (due out in May 2011) we will be looking at Effective Change Leadership Part 2. We will focus more closely on one of the crucial aspects of change leadership – how effectively change leaders role model change. If you have not already signed up to our newsletter you can do so here.