

Can project managers make great change agents?

Over the last few years we have had a growing number of project management groups come to us because they want to improve their change implementation capabilities. This usually throws up a number of issues. For example: “*What is the actual role of the project manager in user groups when it’s time to actually implement what has been built and installed?*” “*How do I get people to do what I want when I have no power over them?*” But the question we get asked the most is can project managers make great change agents? The answer is “yes” but they need to add some capabilities to be effective (always assuming they don’t have them already!)

Project management isn’t the same as change management

Project management depends on strong skills in analysis, planning and organisation, and rigorous attention to the detail and processes that ensure activities are performed on schedule. Change management, however, is fundamentally about people. It’s more like a messy ‘contact sport’ that involves learning new behaviours, influencing people to change their mindset, and encouraging people to give up entrenched ways of working. Of course, an effective project manager will often have strong people skills. And it’s true that a project management methodology like Prince 2 or PMI will emphasise the importance of addressing people issues such as commitment building and managing resistance, and will naturally include deliverables such as training and communication plans.

However, project management methodologies offer little practical guidance in *how* to motivate and mobilise people to change. Most project managers will spend the majority of their time worrying about practical issues with deliverables and timelines, not the people risks of the change process. It is these people-focused skills that will determine the success of a project and ensure effective *implementation*, not just installation. They are essential to ensure that lasting change takes place in an organisation.

What do change agents actually do?

It’s vital for an organisation to acquire these skills, either by helping project managers to develop them, or by building a dedicated change management function that works closely with the project management function. By combining project and change capabilities in key people and teams, you can create real change champions: a force for positive change in an organisation. These are people who can:

- Help senior executives and managers play an active leadership role that ensures people support the change
- Help people in the organisation to see a real personal need for change, and to understand the project vision
- Identify project stages and activities where high levels of involvement are required – and facilitate this involvement so that commitment is built
- Deal with resistance to change
- Build plans that ensure that people have the necessary skills and motivation to meet the new demands the change brings

- Work with leaders and other employees to ensure the change is “biting” where it most needs to
- Develop follow-up plans to accelerate the acceptance of change

What skills do change agents need?

- **Sharing the vision** - helping people to understand and buy into a vision for the change. It might be an inspiring vision, or something more down-to-earth, but people need to know where they're heading to fully engage with change
- **Facilitating workshops and change events** - working with groups of people to prepare them for change. This involves planning and delivering a range of communication, involvement and action learning events, and requires strong facilitation skills and an understanding of group processes
- **Collecting and assessing change data** - from individuals and groups regarding their understanding, perceptions and feelings about the change. This includes why key groups might resist change; which behaviours need to change for a project to succeed, and how; how the overall volume of change in the organisation may have an impact; and what has caused previous change projects to succeed, or otherwise
- **Planning the people side of change** - constructing people-centred plans that build on the change assessment, support technical, logistical and financial plans for the change. They are focused on gaining the commitment of the people involved. This includes planning how people will learn, get support and work through problems, and eventually embed the solution in their daily work
- **Demonstrating personal adaptability** - change champions are under considerable pressure to change themselves and to help others to change quickly. They must be personally adaptable and able to cope with the rigors of their role
- **Influencing others** - change champions should be familiar with the different forms of influence they can use, formal and informal. They must be able to maximise the positive influence they can exert in an ethical way, to gain power during the change. They must also be able to gain the support of top managers and work with sponsors – and project team members – to clarify expectations and agree responsibilities
- **Coaching top managers** – it's vital to be able to advise and coach top managers on how they can show their commitment to the change. They must recognise and prioritise the change initiative as important, over and above other projects that may be fighting for attention

These skills and processes can be learned through using People-Centred Implementation tools and workshops.

Selecting the right people to be agents

It is vitally important to choose and train the right people in these skills. The role of a business change champion is crucial because these individuals – who should be highly credible in the organisation – will be helping to manage the inevitable ambiguity and uncertainty that change brings.

The people side of change should not be left in the hands of traditional project managers. However, with additional skills – and a new understanding of change management – good project managers can become extremely effective business change champions. This benefits them, because it puts them at the epicentre of the organisation's change agenda and dramatically increases their personal value. The organisation benefits too. It can build the capability of its own people, creating a higher level of employee commitment to change, and can implement change more successfully.

This paper is one of a series on a number of change related topics all of which are available from the [Knowledge Centre](#) on the Changefirst [website](#).

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