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## What Makes a Good Change Agent?

Publications

By Dagmar Recklies

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. The scope reaches from smaller change projects in particular sub business units up to corporation-wide transformation processes.

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Unfortunately, not every change process leads to the expected results. There are multiple reasons for potential failure: Typical barriers to change are unexpected changes in the external conditions, a lack of commitment in implementation, resistance of people involved, or a lack of resources. The implications of failed change projects go beyond missed objectives. More important is the negative symbolism and the de-motivation of people involved. People within the change team may become dissatisfied with their own performance or with the lack of support they received. In the result, some of them will probably never again be willing to commit themselves to change initiatives. Similarly, people affected by the (failed) change effort will develop growing skepticism. They might perceive future change projects as "another fancy idea from management", which brings a lot of work and few benefits.

In the light of the many problems and risks associated with change projects, the change agent<sup>1</sup> has a very important function. The change agent's or change leader's capabilities have a major impact on success or failure of the project, and on the extent of potential unwanted side-effects.

The following article describes required capabilities of good change agents. Readers should keep in mind, however, that there is no 'ideal' change agent. Particular requirements normally relate to the actual situation in the organization (e.g. corporate culture, strategic relevance of the project, acceptance of the project among management and staff, timeframe, resources etc). Depending on these factors, change agents either may need good [project management](#) capabilities in order to guarantee timely progress, or they should be good leaders with the ability to motivate people. Jim Canterucci defines change leaders on five levels. Although he mainly focuses on leadership capabilities and qualifications, his system can easily be transferred to change projects with varying importance. The leader of an organization-wide restructuring project will need different capabilities than the one who is responsible for clearly defined project on departmental level.

Levels of Change Leadership Skills, derived from Jim Canterucci:<sup>2</sup>

- Level I Accepts the need for change, communicates and defends the need for change throughout the organization, creates an open and receptive environment
  - small change initiatives with clear direction
- Level II Defines and initiates change, identifies leverage points for change in processes and work habits
  - change projects at local level
- Level III Leads change, translate the vision of the organization into the context of a specific change initiative and bring this message to the entire organization, redirects approaches in the face of new opportunities
  - transformation of a central vision into change initiatives and organization-wide communication
- Level IV Manages complex change, understands the cultural dynamics of the current state of an organization, creates a strategic practical course, balancing the current reality with the need for rapid adoption of the desired future reality
  - generates change with a high degree of transformation
- Level V Champions change, challenges the status quo by comparing it to an ideal or a vision of change, causes crisis in order to support dramatic [actions](#) and change efforts, transforms the organization
  - Ability to revolutionize organizations

Change agents always need the ability to get all people affected by the project involved, to ensure their support and commitment. This requires a high competency as the basis for acceptance as well as soft skills, which are often summarized as emotional intelligence. This includes the ability to communicate, to understand and to take into [account](#) opinions and doubts of others. Change projects involve a great variety of factors and forces. These factors do not only comprise the reasons and objectives for change, but also the existing state of the organization, values, beliefs and routines of the people there. Many change projects challenge the existing cultural framework of an organization. Efforts to change such lasting values, however, lead to resistance and denial. More than in [technology](#)-related projects (e.g. implementation of new software), it takes the acceptance and the support of all people affected by such projects to make them succeed. It is the change agent's task to generate this acceptance in order to implement change with the people, not against them.

Buchanan und Boddy<sup>2</sup> have carried out a study on the perceived effectiveness of change agents. On that basis, they compiled the fifteen most important competencies of change agents. These, too, are

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evidence for the importance of the soft factors:

### 15 Key Competencies of Change Agents

#### Objectives

1. Sensitivity to changes in key personnel, top management perceptions and market conditions, and to the way in which these impact the goals of the project.
2. Setting of clearly defined, realistic goals.
3. Flexibility in responding to changes without the control of the project [manager](#), perhaps requiring major shifts in project goals and management style.

#### Roles

4. Team-building abilities, to bring together key stakeholders and establish effective working groups, and to define and delegate respective responsibilities clearly.
5. Networking skills in establishing and maintaining appropriate contacts within and outside the organization.
6. Tolerance of ambiguity, to be able to function comfortably, patiently and effectively in an uncertain environment.

#### Communication

7. Communication skills to transmit effectively to colleagues and subordinates the need for changes in the project goals and in individual tasks and responsibilities.
8. Interpersonal skills, across the range, including selection, listening, collecting appropriate information, identifying the concerns of others, and managing meetings.
9. Personal enthusiasm in expressing plans and ideas.
10. Stimulating motivation and commitment in others involved.

#### Negotiation

11. Selling plans and ideas to others by creating a desirable and challenging vision of the future.
12. Negotiating with key players for resources, for changes in procedures, and to resolve conflict.

#### Managing up

13. Political awareness in identifying potential coalitions, and in balancing conflicting goals and perceptions.
14. Influencing skills, to gain commitment to project plans and ideas from potential skeptics and resisters.
15. Helicopter perspectives, to stand back from the immediate project and take a broader view of priorities.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter also mentions many emotional components among the most important characteristics of change agents.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the factors described above, she stresses the need to question the knowledge of the organization. According to Moss Kanter, existing patterns of thinking and existing assumptions about the organization, its markets, customers and relationships have to be challenged. Thus, change agents should realize that there is more than one right solution. The change agent has to be able to evaluate facts from different points of view, e.g. from the customer's or competitor's perspective. Furthermore, Moss Kanter stresses the importance of coalition building, which she describes as an often-ignored step in change processes. Change agents should identify and involve opinion leaders, decision makers on resources, functional experts and other important persons as early as possible in the project-planning phase. The importance of the factor motivation is well described with the phrases

transferring ownership to a working team and making everyone a hero. In my opinion, Moss Kanter gives the most important preconditions for successful change management – the involvement of the people – with these two phrases. Members of the change team and other employees affected by the change initiative must not feel like as if they are just the tools for change or the subject of change. In my experience, it is not enough to have a convincing vision. Real commitment can only be gained by giving people the chance to become actively involved, to contribute their own experiences. Every employee needs to know that his contribution to the project is important and is valued. Thus, people will develop a sense of ownership for the project, which, in turn may serve as a major source of motivation when it comes to the inevitable problems and barriers.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter provides a great summary of the characteristics of a good change agents when she writes that the most important things a leader can bring to a changing organization are passion, conviction, and confidence in others.

© Dagmar Recklies, October 2001

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<sup>1</sup> Following, the term change agent is used for all those persons or groups of persons, which are responsible for implementing change. Thus, it covers the function of the change agent in itself, as well as change managers, change leaders or project managers for change projects.

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2 Jim Canterucci: Are You a Change Leader?, available at [http://www.corpchange.com/archives/article\\_archives/a19\\_are\\_you\\_a\\_change\\_leader/a19\\_are\\_you\\_a\\_change\\_leader.htm](http://www.corpchange.com/archives/article_archives/a19_are_you_a_change_leader/a19_are_you_a_change_leader.htm)

3 D. Buchanan & D. Boddy: The Expertise of the Change Agent: Public performance and backstage activity. Prentice Hall. 1992

4 Rosabeth Moss Kanter: The Enduring Skills of Change Leaders. In Leader to Leader; Nr. 13 Summer 1999. available at <http://www.pfd.org/leaderbooks/l2l/summer99/kanter.html>

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