

CHANGE MASTER SERIES

What makes a good manager of change?

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What makes a good manager of change?

In response to evolving conditions, you came to realize your organization must change. You are now ready to move into action. As the organization's chief, one of your first and most critical decisions is to appoint the team that will lead the project. Typically, the leadership consists of a project director with overall responsibility, seconded by project managers focusing on specific aspects. These people will be your change agents - the ones upon which the success of your initiative will rely. What makes a good change manager 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 do they master the necessary skills? Let's look at each of these viewpoints.

The right attitude

A change agent cannot succeed without great persistence. Change is a complex and laborious process that arouses strong feelings and emotions. Angry people, frustrated teammates, conflicting priorities, unforeseen problems or behind-the-scene resistance pose daily challenges. A project manager cannot lead her team through these minefields without determination and stamina.

To avoid mid-course changes in leadership, the person must be fully committed to see the project through completion. A good way to ensure that is to appoint an ambitious individual who presents substantial potential for career advancement within the organization. She will look at the challenge as a terrific career-building opportunity and will be highly motivated to succeed. The benefits will actually extend well beyond the project's time horizon. Indeed, the initiative will provide this high-potential employee with a broader understanding of the business, an extended network of relationships and stronger leadership skills.

In term of attitude, there is one aspect that is often overlooked. The change manager must be prepared to stand up for the project, even if it means tactfully challenging powerful executives – including you. In a previous article (“From the abyss to the lighthouse – Six fundamental principles of effective change execution”), we stressed how critical the sponsorship role is in any change projects. We said that implementation problems are often due to the sponsoring executives underestimating the significance of their duties.

Here are typical issues:

- The sponsors might not be doing enough to sanction the change and build the case;
- They might be reluctant to commit the necessary resources;
- They might send conflicting messages about the importance of the change by failing to apply enough pressure to those who resist, or considering mid-way through the process a new ‘top-priority’ initiative.

When any of this occurs, the project is in serious trouble. 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 captured this attitude as follows: “My primary goal is to ensure this project succeeds no matter what. My secondary objective is to preserve my personal relationships with all senior executives. If I must choose, I will have no hesitation: the former objective takes precedence”. This might sound extreme, but the best change agents really are “diplomats with a strong spine”.

The appropriate knowledge

The project director 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.

For example, if you have decided a major overhaul of your brand, you might consider appointing the following experts and breaking down the project accordingly: a marketing specialist to handle external and internal communications, a training expert to ensure employees can deliver the brand's promise, an organizational development professional to align the management systems (e.g. performance assessment, rewards and recognition), and an operations specialist to adjust or redesign the pertinent processes.

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

The necessary skills

Change is not for the faint of heart. With so much at stake, the pressure on the project leadership is always tremendous. A change agent has 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 organization through the numerous challenges of the transition. Therefore, in order to survive, a project leader must possess the proven ability to remain highly effective under intense fire. We have seen otherwise outstanding project managers collapse under the escalating pressure. Most often, the breakdown occurs when that person is overseeing a critical phase, so the whole project can be delayed. And beyond the individual drama, a burnout has a negative impact on the morale and cohesion of the project team.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD MANAGER OF CHANGE?

Use the following check-list next time you have to assemble a change leadership team:

The right attitude

- Persistence, fuelled by high stamina
- Committed to see the project through completion
- Prepared to stand-up for the project, even if it means tactfully challenging powerful executives

The appropriate knowledge

- Respected subject-matter expert in area of project responsibilities
- Well connected throughout the organization

The necessary skills

- Proven ability to remain highly effective under fire
- Excellent analytical skills
- Very organized and disciplined, yet flexible
- Project management, attention to details
- Outstanding team building, interpersonal understanding and communication skills
- Participative leadership style, switching to a directive style when necessary

As with any other projects, the days of a change agent are filled with problems to solve. Consequently, the project leader needs outstanding analytical skills in addition to be very organized and disciplined, both in her thinking and her actions. At the same time, a good change agent must be flexible enough to work around roadblocks and handle evolving priorities. In other words, a disciplined yet flexible approach to tackling challenges. Lastly, because the devil is in them, attention to details cannot be overlooked.

Note: the change leadership team should adopt a common project management framework in order to ensure effective communication, coordination and monitoring throughout the initiative. Ideally, each leader will have been formally trained in project management and they will have mastered the methods. Otherwise, the project director should organize a crash course. In any case, the director must

facilitate a session with all change agents to discuss the chosen framework, clarify the roles and responsibilities, and define the core processes (project reviews, scope and risk management, conflict resolution, stakeholder communications, etc.). This critical meeting should be organized within days of the project kick-off.

Team building, interpersonal understanding and communication represent another mandatory set of competencies. To understand why, let's look at the people dynamic.

The change agent has to build a core project team and leverage numerous coworkers across the entire organization. To succeed, she must create a strong sense of identity, purpose and joint-ownership among them, as well as a high-performance mindset. In order to engage these people, her natural leadership style should be participative. However, she must have the ability to be directive when arbitrage or swift decisions are required.

To manage resistance - a natural part of the change process - you must start by understanding it. The project leader hence needs a great dose of empathy. She must be able to put herself in the shoes of the 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 change is forced upon them. In order to mitigate the risk of hidden resistance, the change agent must engage the target groups in open discussions about their feelings. Whenever possible, she must also involve these groups in implementation decisions - another reason why a participative style is crucial.

During any change initiative, communication is the glue that keeps the organization moving towards the desired state. For that reason, a good project manager must be able to communicate effectively at all levels and across functions.

Conclusion

After reviewing the above requirements with change sponsors, we often get a reaction along

the line: "This is a hell of a long list!" Yes, it is. However, keep in mind that change is never easy and the failure rate is high. To maximize your chance of success, take a hard look at your candidates. Make sure the project director matches the above requirements as closely as possible, and that her core team is well balanced across all dimensions. 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 the bulk of their time to the initiative. If the project is large, the change leaders must be full-time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Edmond Mellina is president of ORCHANGO – a provider of innovative and proven learning programs especially developed for organizations in transition. With its flagship Change Master Program, ORCHANGO is known for world-class change management training.

Edmond is internationally recognized as an expert in the field of change and transition management. He is the creator of the ORCHANGO Change Management System™ and the ORCHANGO Learn-and-Execute System™.

Edmond's articles have appeared in leading business publications around the globe; the media regularly interview him as an expert source.

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