

PERSPECTIVE

Top talent benefits from change management

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Top talent benefits from change management

Mergers or acquisitions, the redesign of core processes and other major changes represent excellent opportunities to develop high-potential employees.

Change assignments provide plenty of opportunities to build emotional intelligence and contribute to developing a participative leadership style. Assigning top performers to lead the implementation of change not only benefits the person but the project and the organization as well.

The duties of a change agent should be seen as 30 per cent management and 70 per cent leadership. The managerial activities are anything but trivial. They include planning, budgeting and controlling, organizing resources, setting and juggling priorities and analyzing and solving operational problems.

However, it is the people dynamics that make change such a complex and laborious process. During change, many emotional and behavioural issues surface to test the leadership of a change manager.

Convincing people to adopt new habits requires more than intellectual arguments. The change agent has to uncover and understand staff perspectives, motivations and concerns. At the same time, she must be aware of her own feelings and emotions, and manage them effectively throughout the initiative.

She has to communicate relentlessly via multiple channels, adapting her message to each situation. She needs to inspire and influence, rather than command and control. She must align and energize people while fostering teamwork and collaboration.

To build effective coalitions, she needs to understand the political forces, identify the

networks of influence, and leverage these relationships throughout the organization.

Here's an actual example. Tom, a middle manager, was assigned to a major redesign of the core processes. The initiative required several functions to fundamentally rethink the way they did business.

Alexander, the executive overseeing the program, was an experienced leader who understood the people aspects of change. After meeting with the affected groups, he noticed that Tom's take-charge style, reinforced by his strong operational background, was discouraging participants from engaging themselves.

Alexander raised his concerns with Tom, helping him understand the human dynamics and offering some suggestions — including the systematic use of open questions. A few months after the project, Tom was asked how the assignment had benefited him. "You know," he said, "I've learned a great deal about our business. But for me, the revelation was the power of open questions. It's simply amazing. Now that I'm back in an operational role, I rely on them all the time. They help me uncover how people feel about an issue. They get the folks to react, share their concerns, participate and come up with terrific ideas."

Cross-functional nature of change

Another set of benefits lies in the often cross-functional nature of change. As the top performer tackles problems spanning functional

Change assignments provide plenty of opportunities to build emotional intelligence. They also contribute to developing a participative leadership style.

silos, her understanding of the business and its systems deepens. She is exposed to diverging perspectives and to the various business cultures that exist within the organization. The assignment enables her to gain a broader perspective, to develop her business acumen

and to increase her ability to think across organizational boundaries.

A demonstration of senior team support for change

Assigning star employees to the implementation of change sends a clear signal to the rest of the organization. It demonstrates the commitment of the executives and their willingness to dedicate the best resources to ensure success. It also contributes to building momentum by creating a winning attitude.

Most often, a star employee looks at a high-visibility assignment as a terrific career building opportunity. As a result, she develops a strong commitment to see the change through successful completion — a good thing considering the impact of losing a project leader mid-way through implementation.

A top performer also possesses credibility and respect — two essential ingredients. Because people tend to listen to her opinion, she is able to influence others and drive changes in attitudes and work practices. Finally, a star employee knows how to get things done.

This comment, heard from a staff member right after a project kick-off, best captures the dynamics: “Have you seen who is on the project? All the stars, including Lisa. With Lisa on board, I know the project will be well managed.”

How the organization benefits strategically

Because the pace of change keeps accelerating, the ability to adapt to changing conditions has become an important strategic capability.

Systematically assigning high-potential employees to change projects represents a good way to develop organizational change leadership. To be truly effective, the practice shouldn't be limited to the core change team.

As the implementation permeates the organization, local teams must be assembled to carry forward the plans. These sub-teams

provide opportunities to involve high-potential managers from all levels and locations.

This practice also contributes to talent retention. During a major change such as a merger, the risk of losing star employees increases dramatically. However, a top performer who is participating in defining the future and making it a reality is less likely to jump ship. In fact, the impact on retention extends well beyond the project horizon.

Change is a complex undertaking that requires enormous amounts of energy, determination and collaboration. To succeed, the change leaders have no choice but to become fully engaged. A strong bond gradually develops among the project leadership. These relationships outlast the initiative. Years later,

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the change agents will continue to view the project with pride and excitement. They will look at it as a defining moment. These emotions will cement a social commitment among the change agents, which in turn contributes to talent retention.

These informal networks of star performers can be leveraged in a number of other ways:

- to break down organizational silos;
- to facilitate the launch of initiatives across boundaries; or
- to foster an integrated approach to the business, from strategic planning to day-to-day decision-making.

Concerns of managers of high-potential employees

The manager of a star employee often balks at the prospect of losing her to a special project. Although the concerns are often valid, they can be mitigated. In any case, they should be balanced against the short- and long-term benefits described above.

A common worry is the impact on day-to-day operations. The project leadership should work with the manager, the local sponsor and the HR department to understand the concerns and devise negotiated solutions. These include parachuting a temporary replacement from another unit, allowing less aggressive performance targets during the initiative or, if the change scope is relatively small, limiting the assignment to a part-time arrangement.

The manager's aversion might also be driven by concerns regarding post-project boredom. Change is so intense that implementers often experience adrenaline withdrawal symptoms once their assignment is completed. They include unhappiness, lack of excitement and depression. These reactions are likely temporary. The experience has actually stimulated the star employee. She starts bringing forward new ideas to improve the unit's productivity and her leadership style becomes more effective. She is able to handle additional responsibilities, to the delight of her manager.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Edmond Mellina is President of ORCHANGO, the learning division of TRANSITUS Inc. – a leading provider of learning and consulting solutions to master organizational change.

Edmond is internationally recognized as an expert in the field of change and transition management. For close to 20 years, he has helped organizations on both sides of the Atlantic successfully adapt to change, first as executive and now as advisor. He is the creator of the ORCHANGO Change Management System™ and ORCHANGO Learn-and-Execute System™.

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