

# The Change Activist

by

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*Besides being enthusiastic about leadership development they both have a keen interest in the area of change management. With more than 15 years of experience in the area of change, they have crafted a methodology that looks at managing the change process in a holistic manner.*

*THE CHANGE ACTIVIST is the result of this work and this article is a summary of key highlights of the change methodology that organizations have found to be extremely useful in helping them encapsulate the many thoughts and actions that need to be taken into consideration systematically when dealing with change.*

Research and literature on change shows that projects succeed because there is a good technical solution to the issue being addressed. That shouldn't be of any surprise actually. What may be interesting is that 98% of change projects in organizations that fail also had a good technical solution! It turns out, the effectiveness of the result from a change does not depend solely on the brilliance of the solution but that another critical component exists in the change equation. It is this component that takes a great solution and makes it implementable that enhances the overall effectiveness of the result intended by the change. Understanding this critical component becomes the leveraging factor for many organizations who now realizes the impact it has on any change and are making efforts to address it. This component is about the ability to generate acceptance and muster the necessary support for the change from the people who need to implement it or are impacted by it. It is about creating alignment and mobilizing commitment towards the fulfillment of a specific intended change.

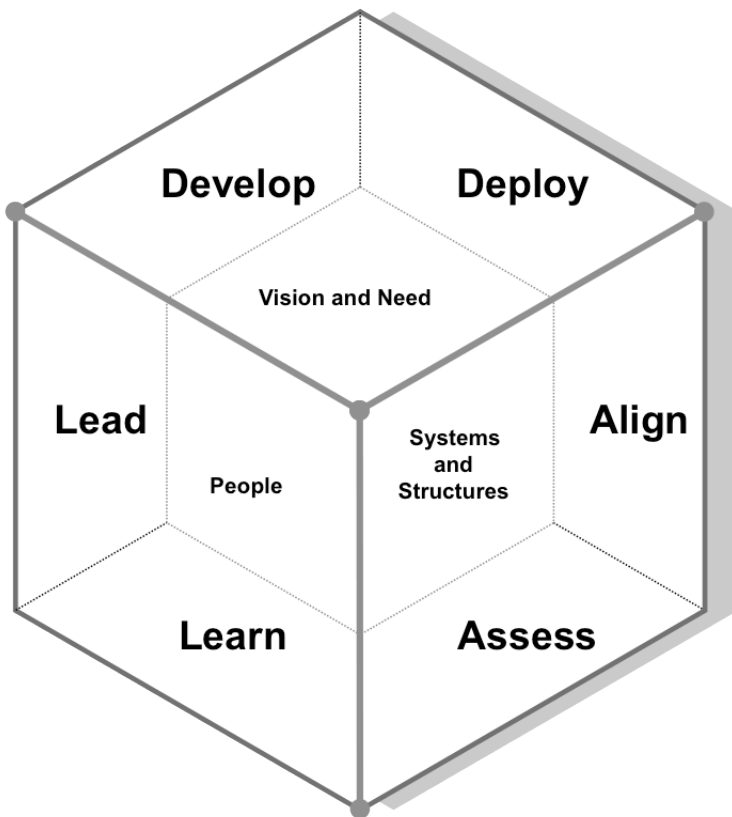
Hence, there has been an increasing emphasis by organizations on educating employees on change management. As the lines of competition becomes less defined, an organization's competitiveness in the market depends not just on the ability of people to churn out brilliant products or services but also on their ability to harness support and mobilizing commitment of their internal teams and external customers towards new initiatives.

But just what do you have to do and how do you generate and mobilize commitment towards any change.

- What are the critical factors for successful change implementation?
- What can I do as a leader to lead change?
- How do I establish a need for the change?
- How do I establish the key drivers of the change?
- How do I create a vision to excite others towards the change?
- How do I identify key stakeholders and mobilize their commitment towards the change?
- How do I deal with resistance?
- What influence strategies can I use?
- What can I leverage on to make the change have a lasting impact?

This article offers a few fundamental perspectives of what is necessary to ensure the success of any change. It discusses the various different actions that any organization that is serious about creating successful change will have to invest time and effort in.

The content of this article can be easily converted into an action development platform where teams bring an actual project and work through the methodology during a 3-day workshop. This usually brings about more clarity to the change team and they become more convinced and excited about the change that they are responsible for implementing.



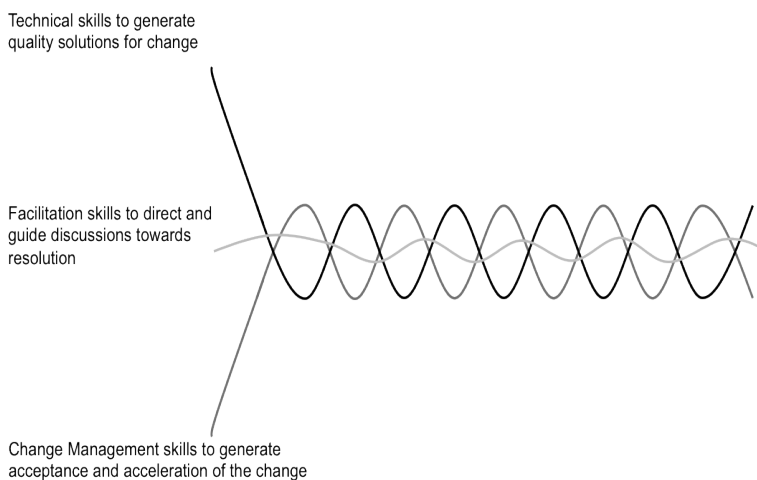
The Change Activist framework is best summarized in the diagram on the left.

- Develop** a compelling need for change and a clear vision of the future state;
- Lead** and inspire others towards embracing the change;
- Learn** the needs of stakeholders and design ways to address them;
- Assess** the impact of existing Systems and Structures on the change;
- Align** with necessary adjustments to support the change;
- Deploy** an effective communication strategy and effectively execute action plans.

The framework takes into account various components and entities that change efforts will entail. Change teams probably know bits and pieces of this but they do not always consider change holistically or address it in a systematic way. Often, once the vision and need is developed, change teams charge towards implementation immediately, often ending up with frustrating results because they had not taken into account the resistance from the people impacted by the change and the inherent systems and structures that may block their path towards effective change.

Change teams are likely to rework the solution over and over again neglecting the acceptance work.

It is the integration of the focus and efforts on the solution as well as the considerations in generating acceptance and mobilizing commitment that will result in a successful and effective change result.



## Develop: Establish The Need For Change

One of the first questions the change team needs to answer is “why change?”. The rationale for the change must be based on **current, relevant business condition** or in support of the organization’s strategic direction.

- *Do we know the driving forces behind this change? (Social, Technical, Economic, Environmental, Political)*
- *How is this change connected to our business strategy or policy?*
- *Do we know what will happen if we do not make this change? How valid are these threats?*
- *Do we know what will we gain if we make the change? How tangible are the gains?*
- *What proof have we found that will validate the need for the change?*
- *Have we created a sense of urgency amongst our key stakeholders around the change?*
- *Have we considered the needs of the different stakeholders and found proof that “speaks” to each of them?*
- *Are we convinced ourselves of the need for this change?*

Having a clear case of the change ensures that we keep the rationale for the change front and center. While some people are motivated by a compelling vision of a shared future state, others are likely to support the change only when they see the urgency or business case for the change. This could present itself in the form of a **valid threat or an attractive opportunity**. While the vision provides the “pull” factor, the need comprises the “push” factor. These factors in combination form the elements of the “change story” that aims to move the change forward through it’s very first step.

Furthermore, the case for change must be **backed up with valid evidence, indicators or proof**.

This not only serves to ensure that the case for change is a compelling one to our stakeholders, but also ensures that the change team has taken the lead in thinking through, and be convinced themselves of the case for the change.

Yet some research shows that at least half of unsuccessful change efforts fail because they never went beyond this this very critical first step – to establish a sense of urgency for the change. In the words of Harvard Professor John Kotter, too often leaders launch their change initiatives by “*writing a memo instead of lighting a fire*” – expecting that people would rally behind the cause this way.

Establishing a compelling need for change requires an **honest examination of current realities** and recognition that the environment we operate in will no longer be the same. This could be due to the emergence of a strong competitor, a new set of capabilities that are essential for the industry that we have not yet acquired, or changing customer expectations that render our current practices obsolete or irrelevant.

## Develop: Create A Shared Vision

Peter Senge explained “*at its simplest level, a shared vision is the answer to the question ‘What do we want to create?’ Just as personal visions are pictures or images people carry in their heads and hearts, so too are shared visions pictures that people throughout an organization carry. They create a sense of commonality that permeates the organization and gives coherence to diverse activities*”.

Without a pull towards some goal that people truly want to achieve, the forces in support of the status quo can be overwhelming. Change can be difficult and even painful. With a meaningful vision, we are more prepared to challenge our old ways of thinking and behaving because we can see that the adjustments or sacrifices are in service of something larger and more important.

The first step is to craft a **clear and compelling picture** of the future state, so that stakeholders can see what life would look like when the change is successfully operationalized. The intent is to **generate energy, enthusiasm and inspire people to commit**.

However for it to be a truly shared vision, the team has to **go beyond writing a vision statement** or a project definition – a vision statement can be a

helpful initial step to help the team clarify the focus of the change project, but it rarely makes the vision “come alive”. The intent is to create a sense of connection so that stakeholders can see themselves in it, and more importantly, want to be a part of it. The change team needs to think of ways to creatively engage the stakeholders even during the envisioning state so that they will truly have a stake in the future of the change.

One of the best ways to enroll people into the change vision is to give them an opportunity to contribute towards it – people commit to what they help to create.

Some guiding questions are:

- *Have we crafted a clear picture of the future state?*
- *Does the picture create energy and enthusiasm for the change?*
- *Is the vision for the change meaningful to the change team and stakeholders?*
- *Does it articulate what success looks like?*
- *Can people see themselves in the change story?*
- *What might be some of the ways to give stakeholders a true stake in the vision?*
- *How do we creatively involve them in the process?*

## Lead: Inspire Through Leadership

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world”. This underscores the important role leadership plays in any change.

**Leadership provides the visibility, impetus and resources** for making change happen. They are the rallying force for the change and keep people interested in the change by being role models, chief evangelists, and negotiators. Above all, people count on them to remove obstacles and hold people accountable for actions to make change happen.

While organizations are great at installing new technical solutions and effecting complex

structural changes, they often overlook the preparation that their leaders require in order to deal effectively with the psychological or people acceptance part of change.

It is therefore important to **make explicit the actions that we need from leaders** in times of change so that the change team is able to better assess if there is sufficient leadership to back up the change.

It also just as important for the **change team to appraise themselves** – after all why should anyone pay attention if the change team itself is not modeling the way?

- *Have we identified the list of organizational leaders, champions, sponsors and key leaders who are in relevant, strategic positions for making the change happen?*
- *Do we have leadership involved at the right time, right place, to the right “degree”?*
- *Have we proactively prepared our leaders so that they are well informed of the purpose, rationale, costs and benefits of the change?*
- *Have we given leaders timely, specific feedback on what they need to “do more of, or less of”, so that they are able to make adjustments to better support the change?*
- *Are we aware of the constraints and priorities that the leaders face, so that we do not over-impose our agenda and remain open in engaging them on ways that they can support and help?*
- *Who else might we include if we broaden our list of leaders beyond the traditional sense of leaders with formal titles and positions, to other well-respected informal leaders and “activists”?*

## Learn: Engage Stakeholders

Organizational change is a planned effort to improve an organization’s capacity to get work done and thus improve its effectiveness. It is tempting to believe that major changes can be done by redefining job titles, modifying organizational charts, improving some processes or installing a new technology – but structural changes, while necessary, isn’t enough.

As change leaders, we need to recognize the fact that **organizations change only when people in them change** – when employees, presented with a new idea, shift their attitudes and beliefs towards a new idea progresses from disconnected to committed.

Employees' attitudes toward a change are affected by the **perceived value of the change** (would the change make their work easier or more effective; would the change result in bringing significant contributions to the customers) and by the perceived level of management support for the change. They would look at the **"net benefit" or "burden"** that the change presents, and decide whether or not they would advocate the change and "jump onto the band wagon", or "sit on the fence" and remain apathetic or resist the change by switching to the opposing side.

Anticipating and **engaging stakeholders early on** in the change process ensures that we are plugged in to their perspectives, issues and concerns, as well as their likely stance towards the change, and not to make any assumptions about their support or resistance as even this could change during the life cycle of a change process.

Early supporters could suddenly realize that the change is bringing about more inconvenience than they have anticipated and decide that they should not be as supportive after all, and vice versa.

It also helps us to adopt a **learning attitude** so that we are always one step ahead in thinking about how to best facilitate acceptance, gain people support and ultimately, their commitment.

Stephen Covey in his book "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" mentioned Habit #5 as "Seek first to understand, then to be understood". Referencing this as a key lesson to managing change, it is clear that we need to involve ourselves in engaging people, especially those impacted by the change, so that we can listen and know the issues that they are concerned about. They need to know and feel that their input are taken and considered, only then are they more likely to lend their support toward the change. Engagement is a process of mutual learning where people who might be impacted by the change are

invited into a conversation about assumptions, concerns and insights. Often we hear complaints from recipients of new policies or staff who are informed of new changes that it is not so much that they do not agree with the rationale or need for the change itself, as much as their feeling disregarded for not being consulted with or listened to before the change is deployed. In other words, people are as much interested in the fairness of the process as much as the fairness of the outcome.

Here's some questions to remind ourselves to engage and learn from those impacted by the change:

- *Have we identified the key stakeholders for this change?*
- *Have we analyzed and understood the stakeholders' issues and concerns?*
- *Do we have a critical mass of advocates to move this change forward?*
- *Have we identified the types and sources of resistance for this change (structural, human resource, political, symbolic)?*
- *Have we designed appropriate strategies to address the needs of different groups of stakeholders?*
- *In what ways could we engage stakeholders so that we generate the necessary acceptance and actions for moving the change forward?*
- *Are we listening to and learning from stakeholders and taking their feedback into consideration where possible?*

## **Assess: Analyze Systems and Structures for Fit**

Change does not happen in a vacuum. Existing systems and current contextual and cultural factors may have significant bearings on the path towards the new state. If the first fatal mistake that change agents make is to ignore the people side of things, the second one is the failure to **ensure that sustaining systems and structures are in place** to make change last.

This part of the change work is to perform the **necessary analysis of existing systems and structures**, to assess whether they are **in support of the new behaviours and mindsets** that the change requires. When we refer to systems and structures, we are referring to both the tangible and intangible aspects of the organization's design, **policies, platforms, and processes** that have a significant bearing in producing the patterns of behaviours we see from people in the organization. Similarly, the **values and culture** of an organization also have significant bearing on the behaviours and actions of people in an organization.

For example, we would expect that an organization that wants more collaborative behaviours as a result of a change is more likely to be successful if it formally rewards on the basis of team performance. Similarly, if a change is required for the organization to engage more in experimentation and innovation, you are likely to see that taking place if it is supported by a culture that prides and supports risk-taking.

Ignoring existing systems and structures and cultural factors may likely lead to the change being derailed or prematurely ended. We often hear the lamentation from people in the organization that changes are often “kicked-off” on a grand start but seldom seen through to completion or fulfillment. Changes are “grafted on” rather than **integrated into the “DNA” of the organization**.

- *What are the existing systems and structures that have a bearing on the change?*
- *Have we assessed the likely impact of these systemic structures on our change?*
- *On the whole, is the net result one that is favourable to the change, or unfavourable?*
- *In what ways is the change in line with the culture or norms of the organization, and in what ways might the change raise concerns about the inconsistency with existing culture and values?*

## Align: Consider Making Relevant Adjustments To Support The Change

Having completed the analysis through ‘Assess for Fit’, the change team’s work is not complete until it has taken the next step to ensure that there is **alignment throughout the system**. Systems thinking is required if we are to identify how the elements of the change are interrelated and how changes made in one part of the organization are bound to affect other parts. We will need to consider the following:

- *What systems and structures do we need to create, modify or eliminate?*
- *Who has influence over the change of these systemic structures?*
- *What do they need in order to support us?*
- *What might be some unintended consequences if we make these changes?*
- *Have we prepared a foundation for change and assured people by establishing what will remain unchanged (such as core values and purpose)?*

If the existing **systems and structures** are consistent with and support the change, then we want to reinforce or emphasize their importance; if they are not, we will need to **modify them**; if they are posing a major hindrance, we may need to **eliminate them**; and similarly, if they are non-existent, we may need to **create them**.

However, the change team would most likely discover that the changes that are required would not entirely be within their sphere of influence. New stakeholders who are critical to the change may become apparent. In order to ensure that change last, these newly identified stakeholders also need to be brought on board.

Policy owners of organizations are custodians of formal rules and regulations that were there to provide stability and consistency in the first place. They would naturally be concerned about disruptions to the status quo and the perceived fairness, integrity and inherent consistencies.



Advocating for their support would require a combination of sound rationale and strong leadership support of the highest levels. Finally, depending on the scale and scope of the change, we need to recognize that the changes to systemic structures would take time.

## **Deploy: ACT On It** **plan the Action;** **design Communication;** **manage the Transition.**

Every step and analysis the team performs in the change process must culminate in a set of action plans, or else the entire effort would merely be an academic exercise.

While the time frame and milestones for each change project could vary, knowing what actions to take at each milestone will be critical for all projects to ensure that we know **what we need to do in order to move the change forward**. In concert, these actions form the transition plan for the change.

**Involving stakeholders early on and consistently** throughout the change process is critical for success. The old adage rings true that we do not wait until the winter comes before we gather firewood – alliances and coalitions need to be forged along the way so as to minimize resistance and enable **smooth transition** into the new state.

Lee Iacocca once said *“You can have brilliant ideas but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere!”*

A good communications plan ensures that the change team is clear about who we are going to speak to (which stakeholder or stakeholder group), by when, by what means (communication channels) and for what purpose. In times of change, **clear and consistent messaging** is critical - in the absence of information, people will resort to their own reasoning or “theory” for the change – on top of having to communicate the intent for the change, the change team might inadvertently find themselves having to spend even more time

clarifying the rumours and doubts that emerge because of poor communication management.

To sum up, the real work of the change agent happens outside the planning rooms, involving real stakeholders, real challenges, and real deadlines.

- *Do we have a transition plan to bring us from the current state to the future state?*
- *Does our transition plan include a realistic time frame, critical milestones and targets?*
- *Are we clear about what actions are required to move the change forward at each phase?*
- *Do we have a plan for engaging stakeholders throughout the life cycle of the change?*
- *Do we know what forms of communication are most appropriate for the message we wish to convey?*
- *Have we also considered the forms of communication that will appeal and are relevant to the various stakeholders?*
- *Have we taken the effort to customize the message for each stakeholder so that the information provided is both timely and relevant?*

So as you put the whole process together, you will see how successful change management is based on a systematic approach that includes a holistic consideration of a few key factors, taking into account:

- i. the intent of the change represented by the vision and need for the change making them clear and compelling;
- ii. the concerns of the people that we must learn through engagement and address as change leaders; and
- iii. the systems and structures that govern our everyday behavior which we will have to assess and align in order to bring about effectiveness of change which has high impact and is long lasting.

## Acknowledgements

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We have also been inspired by the work of the following resources and authors:

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