

How do I know if I am a good Change Agent?

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Change Agent Skills	4
Motivation	4
Trust	4
Empathy	5
Influence	5
Conclusion	6
About the author	6

Executive Summary

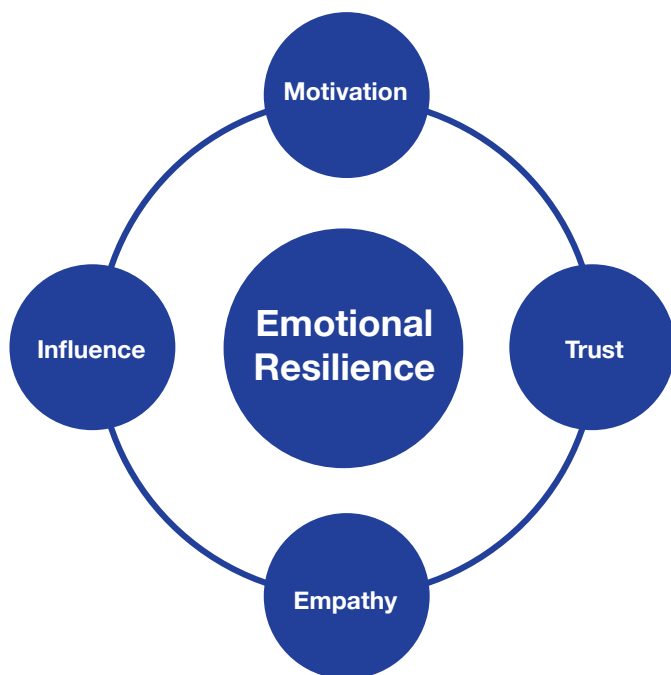
The role of a Change Agent is to help people move from their current ways of working to new ways of working. Change Agents perform a consultancy role, helping their organisation to move towards its desired operating model, fix problems and create new opportunities.

Core to the role is a desire to help people cope with the changes. This means seeking out and building trusted relationships with those impacted by change. You can use this network to help people share their experiences and support each other. Change Agents help colleagues find the information that they need about the change, share ideas and examples about how to make it work and solve problems when the reality of working in the new way differed from what was expected.

This paper is not for 'professional' Change Managers i.e. those of us with responsibility for leading and managing a specific change initiative. Instead this paper is for those impacted by change, who have had the change thrust upon them and now need to understand it and start applying it to their work. These people are 'local' Change Agents, local to the change, making sense of it for themselves and their colleagues and helping their area of the business to work differently.

Change Agent Skills

Change Agents don't have any hierarchical authority to make people work in new ways. 'Local' Change Agents are local to the work that is going to change and are just as affected by the change as their colleagues. They don't have the authority to impose changes or compel their colleagues to change what they are doing. Instructing people to work differently will not achieve your objectives because even if colleagues comply with your demands they will not have bought into the approach and will look to return to the old ways of working at the first opportunity.



Change Agents rely on their ability to positively influence how their colleagues feel about the change and use persuasion to encourage their colleagues to participate in making the change happen. This influencing can only be effective if it is rooted in empathy for how others are experiencing the change, and empathy relies on understanding of others views and agendas which are shared only when there is sufficient trust between people.

Being a 'Local' Change Agent requires understanding and managing your own emotions and the emotions of colleagues. This demands the motivation to put the necessary effort in to this empathetic approach and the emotional resilience to keep it going.

Motivation

Supporting others through change is a big commitment of energy, enthusiasm and effort over an extended timeframe. So there has to be a push, something that triggers willingness to make this effort and sustain it over time.

To be an effective Change Agent, you have to be very honest with yourself and this starts with being clear about your own motivation for wanting the change to happen. You will need others to trust you if they are to follow your lead in changing how they work. Trust cannot exist if there is dishonesty. Dishonest people say one thing but think another. There is no authenticity to them, they are not believable. So be very clear why you support the change so that when challenged about why you think it is a good idea you can be honest.

One of the common problems in change is that people claim greater benefits for the change than they believe in. so don't trot out 'corporate speak' about the strategic importance of the change for your organisation if that isn't what motivates you.

Perhaps your motivation is more pragmatic. For example, "how we work today is error prone, with lots of time taken up apologising to customers and fixing things". Or maybe you cannot see any immediate benefit "I'm happy with how things are but I know they need to change because how we work doesn't fit with a lot of other changes that are being made."

Trust

Trust has a direct impact on the speed by which change can take place. If there is trust then the person asked to change will accept what is being requested of them. If they do not have trust, they are likely to ignore the change for as long as possible. When they do decide to change their reluctance may lead them to identify, research and assess all of the possible options available to them, which will take time and delay the process of change.

Bearing this in mind, it is counter-productive to rush into implementing a change without taking the time to create trust and build productive relationships. Without trust, those you need to implement the change will stand on the side-lines for longer, waiting to be convinced about the need for the change, the suitability of the changes and the reasons why they are beneficial. You will have to prove each point that you make about the change because people will be unwilling to accept what you say without evidence.

Trust is a complex mix of circumstances and emotions, but there are some common factors that help it to develop:

1. Reliability – do what you say you are going to do, when you said you would do it
2. Clarity – be clear about your values and your positions on different issues so that others can understand your reactions to events
3. Openness – be willing to share information and be clear about where your information comes
4. Consistency – make sure there is consistency between how you ask others to behave and how you behave yourself
5. Curiosity – show a genuine interest in other people and what they are thinking and feeling.

Empathy

Empathy means recognising and sharing the emotions of another person. It is different to sympathy which is a feeling of care for the other person but which doesn't involve sharing their perspective. If we are empathetic we use our understanding of how someone else is feeling to guide our actions.

As a Change Agent, we need to work out how someone else is feeling about the change so we can tailor our response. For example, if they are fearful of the change, we need to simplify it, demystify and make it something that feels achievable. If someone is angry that how they currently work is now seen as 'wrong' we need to reassure them that their work was valued before they can become involved in the change.

Consider these perspectives when you are trying to understand how others might be feeling about the change:

- Anger that the new ways of working are reducing that persons feeling of status or respect in the organisation
- Anger that the new ways of working are reducing that persons feeling of autonomy over how they work
- Sense of pointlessness because all of the effort that this person is putting in to learning new ways of working only recently is now wasted and they need to start again
- Feelings of loss because that person will no longer be working with their current colleagues and people that they know and trust
- Fear of learning something new, and the possibility of making mistakes or failing in front of others

Influence

To be an effective influencer, you need to know who needs to be influenced, coupled with an accurate assessment of your sphere of influence, and who you are capable of influencing.

To help identify who needs to be influenced, consider the work that needs to change as being part of an end to end stream of value that runs from the initial request for the work to the

completion and handover of the work to the person who requested it. This will give you the first part of the community affected by change i.e. the suppliers and the customers.

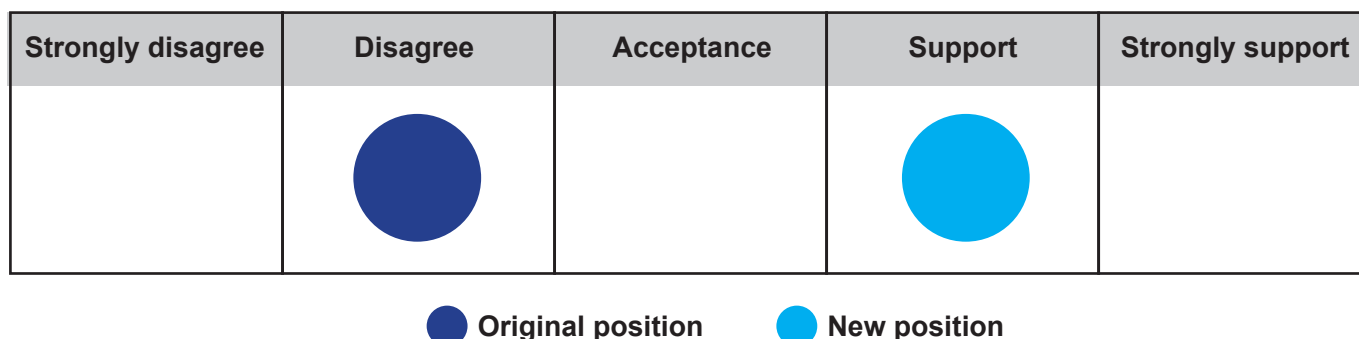
Now consider all of the people in the middle, all those who contribute to getting the work done. These are probably the core group that you need to influence because if they don't work differently, the change will not happen.

Next consider if there are others who take decisions about the work or who set rules for how the work is completed. This just widens out the community to those with managerial responsibility for the work.

Now that you know the key players it is time to consider who you can influence. Influence is the ability to have an effect on the perspective of someone else. This ability is the result of many factors, but these are the most common ones. Evaluate yourself against these influencing factors:

- Technical knowledge of the process and systems to be changed – do you have influence because you are seen as an expert?
- Track record – do you have influence because you have been involved in this type of change before?
- Leadership – do you have influence because you are recognised as someone who has led themselves and others through difficult situations before?
- Wide-ranging experience of the area of work being changed – do you have influence because you are seen as someone wise and knowledgeable about the relevant business area?
- Relationship expert – do you have influence because you are acknowledged as someone with good relationships with all those impacted by change?

Influencing involves putting across a point of view about the change that isn't currently shared with those you are trying to influence. A really useful piece of advice I was given years ago about influencing was not to aim too high. Recognise the position of the person you are trying to influence and don't expect them to make too much of a jump forward.



This is the visual I have in mind when I try to influence others, as it means I don't try to go too far, and push people too much in the direction I want to go.

Conclusion

The role of 'Local' Change Agent is a leadership role, and is increasingly part of every role, irrespective of how senior or experienced you are. The future of work belongs to those who can help their organisations develop new products and services, build new customer and supplier relationships and find new ways to market themselves.

My advice is that if you have any opportunity to get involved in a change initiative, grab it with both hands. Leading change in whatever capacity is a core skill and needs lots of practice. You will build useful networks of colleagues and stakeholders and develop relevant experience that translates into every aspect of your role.

About the author

I have been responsible for the successful delivery of effective change and for creating environments that support transformational change for over twenty years. I have an impressive track record of successful consulting assignments and I am an acknowledged thought leader in Change Management.

I am the Co-Chair of the Change Management Institute UK and a respected author of text books and articles on change, project and programme management. I am a talented communicator with a reputation for delivering complex information with humour and passion. I draw on my wealth of practical experience to illustrate concepts and to engage my audience in lively debates on advantages and disadvantages of each approach that I outline.

To access more resources about change management connect with Melanie on LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/melaniefranklin1/>

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