

# Building the Capability for Change – 4 Key Skills for Change Agents

WHITEPAPER

## Introduction

We are all under pressure to improve how we do our jobs and to change what we do to better meet the needs of our organisation and its stakeholders. The pace of change is increasing, and we need to balance getting our work done whilst adopting a stream of changes and new ideas.

Organisations need employees who can deliver this balance, because without it an organisation does not have sufficient capacity to implement all the changes that it needs to be successful.

This paper addresses the need to build an internal capability for change, as relying on external organisations who provide consultancy and training is only economically viable for a small proportion of the required change. To stay competitive, an organisation needs to be capable of identifying, initiating and implementing all change ideas, large and small, by itself.

## Increase Capability Through Localisation

One of the ways we can increase this capability is to 'localise' change and make it less of a formal process. Formality applies a detailed change management method, detailed planning, reporting on progress and escalating decisions to senior managers. A localised approach simplifies the planning and reporting and enables those who have to work in a different way to decide what needs to be done differently.

The advantages of this local approach include:

### 1. Increased ownership of change

Only by leading change internally are we likely to create the necessary 'authorship' of the change that really drives ownership. Individuals who define what the change means for them, and make the necessary amendments to how they work will fully understand the change and feel responsible for its success because it is their ideas, not ideas imposed by others that they are adopting.

This authorship is driven by intrinsic motivation, the internal fire that drives people to achieve more and to take pride in what they are doing. By enabling individuals to follow their own ideas they are implementing change in a way that plays to their strengths, and the element of choice gives them autonomy which is linked to greater levels of happiness and productivity.

### 2. Relevance of the change management activities

One size doesn't fit all, so enabling those who do the work to adapt how they work to fit new circumstances increases the effectiveness of change.

An example of this comes from a supermarket chain who decided from head office which products to stock in which stores. Every branch manager had a range of products that just didn't sell, however much promotion they did because the products were not right for their location and their demographic.

When senior management introduced a policy of local decisions on what products to select from the organisations suppliers, the number of goods returned unsold fell, and revenue per branch increased.

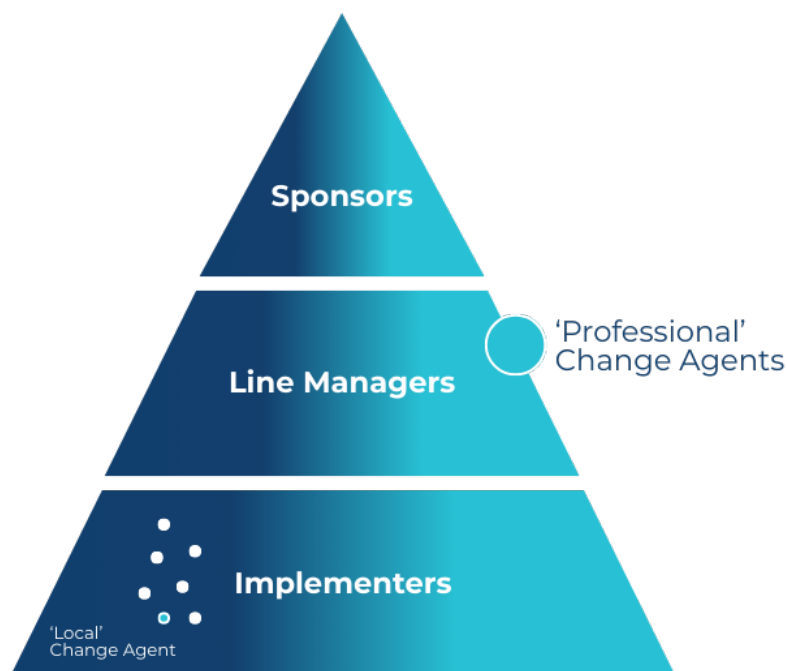
### 3. Time effective change management activities

Local ideas on what needs to change can be implemented without escalation to senior management, saving the time associated with this escalation and enabling decisions to be implemented 'just in time' as needed. This is the only way that high volumes of change can be effectively managed. The alternative is a log-jam of decisions escalated to senior management who do not have the time and local perspective to decide on the appropriate action.

## Two Types of Change Management Resources

To achieve internal capability for change through this localisation, we need to create a balance of change management resources:

1. At team of highly trained, experienced change practitioners, which is why in the diagram I am referring to them as 'Pro' Change Agents. They are responsible for oversight of specific change initiatives, ensuring that Sponsors, Line Managers and 'Local' Change Agents are aligned, sharing information and working together. At a more strategic level they define the change management framework, tools and techniques to be applied by all those responsible for change activities.
2. 'Local' Change Agents, each supporting a small team of their colleagues. These individuals are not experts in change management theories and models, but they understand what needs to be done, and they have a passionate belief in the need for change and the benefits it will bring to their area of the business. Unlike 'Pro' Change Agents, change management is not their full-time responsibility. These resources balance the need to improve how things are done with achievement of 'business as usual'. Their mandate comes from their Line Managers, who must support them in this role to pare back their day to day responsibilities to create enough time to lead the change.



This balance of change management resources can only be achieved if change is a strategic priority, continuously emphasised by executive management. Without this mandate, there is no motivation for Line Managers to appoint some of their staff to these 'local' change agent roles. Importantly, Line Managers need significant motivation, because those staff that are selected for change management responsibilities need to be the 'star players' who are the ones most able to deliver excellence in business as usual.

In a recent study by McKinsey, the importance of getting the right Change Agents is highlighted:



*“Change agents appear to have a notable impact on success. Less than half of respondents say their organisations select these employees, who dedicate a significant part of their time to work as facilitators or agents of the transformation. But those who do report overall success more often than other respondents—and are twice as likely to report success at transforming their organisational cultures.”*

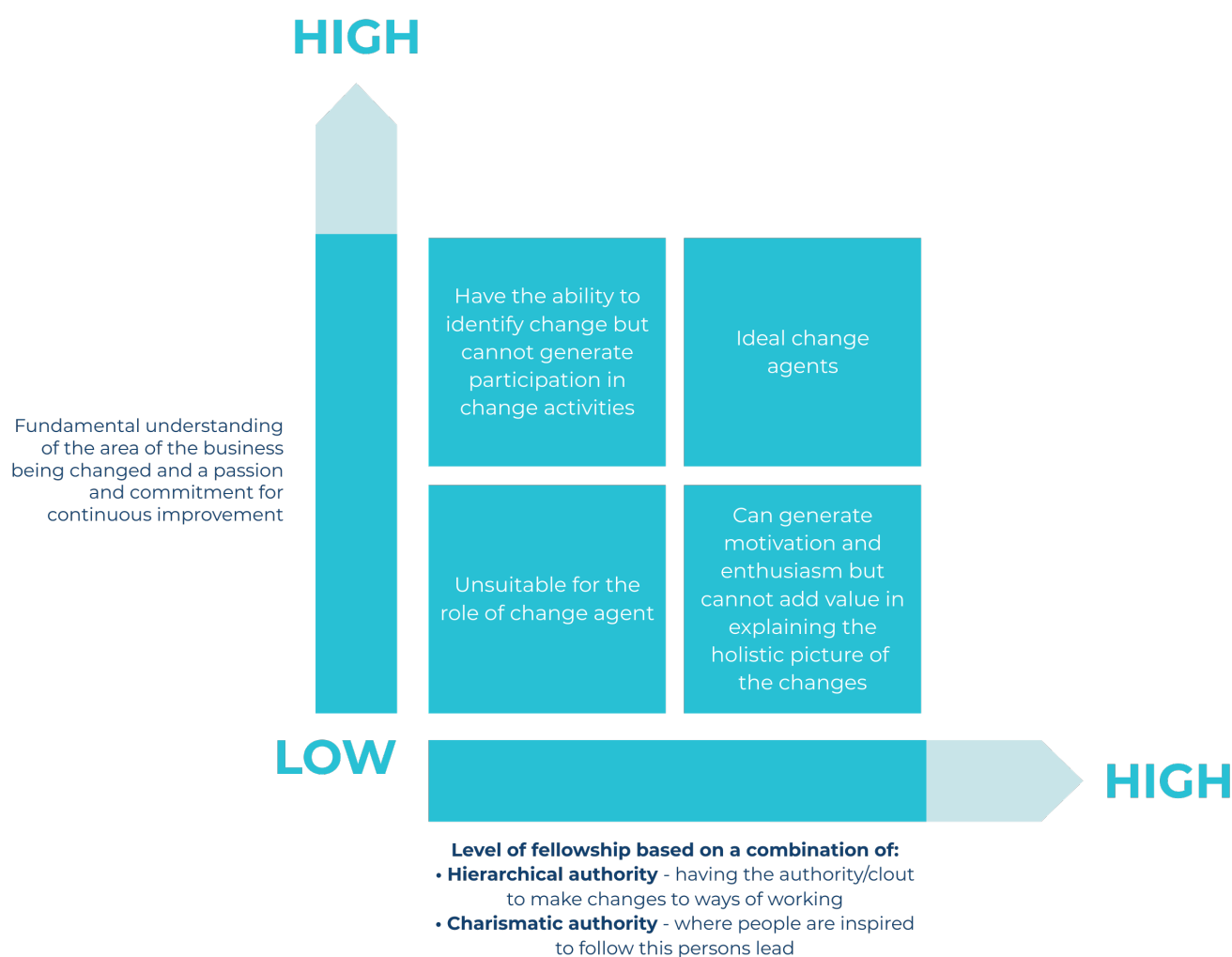
In addition, Line Managers, backed up by their Sponsors have to be willing to remove blockages that make it difficult for the local change agents to be effective. The McKinsey survey also highlights the importance of ensuring that all those involved in change are motivated to do so, and if not, that action should be taken:

*“Just one-quarter of respondents strongly agree that their senior leaders replace people on their teams who aren’t personally committed to the changes being made. But when they do, the organisation’s transformation is much likelier to succeed. In organisations where senior leaders replace uncommitted people, 29 percent of transformations succeed, compared with 6 percent where leaders keep those people in place.”*

## Characteristics of Effective Change Agents

It is very hard to draw up an exhaustive list of all the qualities needed for effective change agents. In a recent Change Management Institute event where this subject was debated, the most often cited quality was emotional intelligence. This included the ability to build trusting relationships with stakeholders, demonstrate empathy and have an ability to influence others.

'Local' Change Agents are responsible for implementing change within their direct sphere of influence. Therefore, they must have the confidence and respect of their colleagues, which is described in the diagram as 'fellowship'. These individuals are regarded by their colleagues as leaders, who they look to for guidance and whose behaviour they will adopt. However, 'fellowship' is not sufficient. It must be coupled with an excellent understanding of the business area that the 'local' change agent represents. This person has to be able to make sense of the change from a process, regulatory, data, systems and stakeholders perspective. They must also be committed to making change happen, because they have a belief that change is beneficial and will create improvements.



In the Change Management Institute event, this belief in the importance of change was described as a 'curiosity' about what and how to improve. We also debated the importance of a willingness to

challenge the validity of the change, often challenging more senior managers, even if the 'local' change agent is relatively junior.

We also identified the need for resilience, which one group described as 'gritty determination' and the ability to keep going with the change, even when there are no immediate benefits.

## Core Skills for 'Local' Change Agents

'Local' Change Agents need both the personality characteristics described above and some core change management skills to be able to make change happen, without having to develop a professional level of ability to manage change at a more strategic level.

I have selected four core skill areas but they should not be regarded as independent, they all inter-related as strength in one skill makes it easier to achieve the other skills:

1. Understanding the reasons for resistance to change and by understanding the origins and drivers for change, understanding how to address resistance.
2. How to undertake a localised impact assessment using a checklist of pre-defined questions.
3. Identifying and planning of all the activities to create and adopt the new ways of working.
4. Undertaking a Readiness Assessment to understand if their local area is ready to change its ways of working.

## Resistance to Change

This skill area provides the change agent with a fundamental appreciation of how people react to change. It explains why as human beings we prefer to maintain the status quo, even when the current situation is not ideal. This gives 'local' change agents a sense of the challenges they face and provides insight into ways that they can address what appears to be resistance to change. Key knowledge areas for resistance to change include:

- Need to understand that sometimes resistance is merely an immediate reaction to something new, and is not genuine opposition, but a temporary expression of shock.
- Need to understand that some people are more motivated to change than others so they need to be allowed to get on with it, whilst others need more encouragement.
- Need to understand that people feel comfortable with their knowledge of how to get things done, and that losing that and having to start all over again:
  - Slows their progress and everything takes longer initially
  - Creates a fear that they will find learning new skills hard, and that learning will take time they do not have
- Need to understand what information individuals need to be able to create their own desire to change

## Impact Assessment



This is about being able to assess any change on a like for like basis, identifying what can stay the same and what needs to change. These questions need to be tailored to the business area impacted but will include:

- The impact on processes;
- The impact on inputs and outputs;
- The impact on instructions to be followed by suppliers;
- The impact on information provided to customers.

We no longer deal with one-off changes, so the real skill in assessing the impact of any change is to take an holistic view, drawing together the different impacts of change, rather than examining each change in isolation. Impact assessment should assess the inter-dependencies across multiple changes so that colleagues can redesign their ways of working to include all known changes.

The diagram below shows how a 'Local' Change Agent needs to consider the impact of multiple programmes of change on their area business:





## Transition Planning

Transition planning means identifying all of the activities needed to move from the current to the new ways of working. This needs to be a collaborative exercise as change will only happen if everyone impacted makes a personal commitment to doing things differently. To make this commitment, they will need help to define in detail what must be changed and what will remain the same.

Some of this skill will involve planning, scheduling and the ability to break complex work into a series of simple steps. The skill is balancing the need for order with the freedom to enable colleagues to implement the change in the way that best suits their abilities.

'Local' change agents need to build and maintain the momentum for everyone to play their part in carrying out the transition activities. This means keeping themselves well informed of what progress is being made, stepping in to help break tasks into smaller activities if progress is slow, congratulating people on the progress they are making and creating an environment of support, given directly or by being able to sign post where people can go for more help.

These local change agents have to enjoy building relationships with others, they have to have an ability to build trust between themselves and others by being interested in the experiences that their colleagues are having, demonstrating that interest by active listening, and supporting them through coaching and not dictating what to do next.

Transition activities have to appeal to everyone so it is important that local change agents work collaboratively with their teams to identify what needs to be done and look for volunteers to do the work, with the freedom to do the work in a way that suits their style and their skills. As long as success criteria for each of the tasks are identified up front, does it really matter if someone creates a user guide as a Word document or as PowerPoint slides?

## Change Readiness Assessments

Readiness is a progress check, much like a plane doesn't take off unless the crew know all of the passengers have their seat belts on. 'Local' Change Agents need examples of all of the factors to look for to assess if those impacted by change are ready for its adoption. These indicators include:

- Notifications have been sent to the customers and suppliers of the affected areas. This demonstrates that those affected are ready for the change because they have considered the upstream and downstream impacts of their own changes, and kept those affected informed of what changes they need to make.
- Processes have been reworked to reflect the changes. These changes can include the removal of meetings, reports and performance metrics that are no longer relevant because the work they relate to is no longer happening.
- There is broad participation by those affected in training and workshops that walk through the changes and give people a chance to understand the specific amendments to their own ways of working. Readiness involves achieving a 'tipping point' of involvement, where there are more people prepared for the change than there are on the outside, ignoring the change.



## Conclusion

It is only by investing in the skills of 'local' change agents that organisations can develop the necessary critical mass needed to implement the high volume and high frequency that is now the norm.

As someone who has been building capability for change in many industries for many years, I feel we are now entering a paradigm shift in the professionalising of change management. Change management is becoming democratised, recognised as an essential skill set whatever your role or position in the organisation and our training and development activities will need to support this.