

A research study highlights the capabilities that enable professionals to be effective change agents in their organizations.

# Three Qualities of Highly Successful Change Agents

BY ALASTAIR RYLATT

**W**hy do some leaders and managers succeed against the odds to facilitate and influence change? There are many theories and viewpoints, but there is little guidance on what distinguishes low-performing change agents from high-performing ones.




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To address this gap, as part of my PhD thesis for the University of Technology at Sydney, I undertook a study to closely compare the journeys of 31 managers who all in their own way were attempting to implement change within their organizations and industries. These explorations led to some surprising and noteworthy findings for training and development professionals interested in identifying or becoming exceptional change agents.

### Standing apart

As a starting principle, to be exceptional in influencing large-scale change requires an excellent grasp of the complexities and tensions of organizational culture and the sources of power and authority. High-performing change agents stand apart from others by virtue of their ability to negotiate more expansive and powerful job profiles that increase their capacity to generate meaningful outcomes.

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Much of this enhancement was built on perceived credibility and goodwill. Six skills assist change agents in doing their work:

- building relationships
- mobilizing the efforts of others
- planning and evaluating
- exercising power and influence
- resolving ambiguity
- taking responsibility.

The individuals who struggle most with influencing the nature and direction of change are those who lack the formal authority, time, and confidence to facilitate change. The study

found that poor performers are less resourceful than more successful change agents.

Deeper analysis revealed three capabilities that differentiate high- and low-performing change agents: taking responsibility for resolving difficult challenges, articulating compelling reasons for change, and ensuring accountability over time.

### Take responsibility for resolving difficult challenges

Exceptional change agents become energized when confronted by complex problems. They find more reserves of resilience, courage, confidence, and grit than lower performers.

Typically these individuals believe that they have the choices, capabilities, and resources they need to drive action. They are motivated and skilled to build a dynamic array of social networks and connections in clarifying areas of confusion or uncertainty.

Their success is in large part due to their capacity to keep up-to-date on the latest thinking. They find the time to research best practices and explore the feasibility of incorporating emerging technologies into their business. More important, they have a belief in what they are doing and the motivation to make a difference. They tend to stay steady and do not flee when the going gets tough.

Personal qualities related to the ability to resolve difficult challenges appear to stem from an accumulation of life experiences that have shaped belief in their ability to overcome any obstacle. Exceptional change agents are more likely to recall memories of past managers, individuals, and even family members who have informed them how to overcome adversity and difficulty.

To them, change management is just another challenge they face in

## Learn From Exceptional Change Agents

For my doctorate thesis from the University of Technology at Sydney, I studied 31 business people from the private and government sector in Australia for 12 months. I observed that some individuals were more successful in facilitating organizational or industry change than others. Here are a few of the questions that could be posed to identify and learn from successful change agents:

### Resolving difficult challenges

- Can you share with me a time when you took responsibility for resolving a difficult challenge? What did you do in this situation?
- What did you like or dislike most when you were faced with this difficult challenge?

### Communicating compelling reasons for change

- Can you give me an example of how you might adapt your language and delivery to better communicate the benefits or reasons for change?
- What do you consider when confronting resistance to change?

### Ensuring accountability over time

- What have you learned in your life about the best way of engaging others in change?
- When do you call on senior management for assistance? When would you avoid talking to senior management?

their lives and, as in the past, they believe in their ability to overcome and prevail by being resourceful and solution-focused.

### Articulate compelling reasons for change

Higher performing change agents are meaning makers who have a consistent ability to articulate compelling reasons for change. They carefully craft and customize their messages to increase their chances to inspire and motivate people into sustaining their efforts. They are able to inspire action by providing clear and unambiguous messages and scripts on why commitment is necessary.

In my study, the influence of these key messages on the commitment of others appeared to be highest when individuals have the ability to exert their power and influence on the meaning making of others, through either formal or informal authority. The desire for a clear script is driven by the human need to simplify complexity and ambiguity. Not unlike a core message in a political or community campaign, a well-formulated and well-communicated script galvanizes personal curiosity and entices action.

Compelling scripts provide vital clues about what to do to bring about change, and also arouse strong self-belief and inner confidence that change is indeed possible. When this occurs, people appear more willing and able to reprioritize their time and organize themselves to move forward. To this end people need assurance and hope that visions for the future are worth working toward and are achievable.

### Ensure accountability over time

The final success factor of an exceptional change agent centers on the ability to access and nurture power



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relationships to generate personal accountability for change. Change agents are not timid; they are willing and able to call people accountable. They use a combination of compliance measures such as key performance indicators that hold people accountable for their actions and encourage contribution.

The higher performing change agents in my study had a high amount of collaboration—not only within their business, but also externally. This includes leading steering committees; participating in staff education, engagement, and work redesign programs; and incorporating objectives in business planning processes.

In the modern workplace, change agents must fight for attention as people try to make sense of many and varied priorities. One way to stimulate accountability is to ensure that there

are sufficient levels of healthy debate in the system.

For this, the change agent must provide enough clarity, protection, and order to help people make useful contributions without too much or too little heat in the system. Too much heat can create unhelpful stress, aggression, and withdrawal, but too little heat can generate ambivalence and lack of commitment.

In the dynamic workplace of the 21st century, we need individuals who have the passion and resilience to foster higher levels of capacity and contribution to change

Learn from these individuals who are better performers—become curious about what they do that sets them apart from others. Being an exceptional change agent may not guarantee that you will experience success every time, but you will establish a track record of getting results when others may have given up or moved on to another project or activity.

Exceptional change agents are unlikely to give up easily. They are there for the long haul, with all its messiness and twists and turns.

■ **Alastair Rylatt** is director of Alastair Rylatt Consulting, which specializes in leadership development, change management, and executive coaching; [alastair@alastairrylatt.com](mailto:alastair@alastairrylatt.com).

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