

## **What is the Change Agent Role?**

The label “change agent” is often accompanied by misunderstanding, cynicism and stereotyping. Managers, employees and HR professionals alike have questioned the value of this role in their organization.

However, as organizations of all kinds face unrelenting changes in their environment, the need for individuals who are capable of turning strategy into reality has created a new legitimacy for the change agent role – which is often located within the Human Resource function. There are several reasons for this trend:

- Human resource professionals have made significant strides over the past decade in becoming business partners; demonstrating the value they can add to the business
- Executives are looking for where the change process can best be managed
- Most business strategies require major changes in people-related issues; Human Resource professionals develop and manage the key “people” systems needed to support organizational change

Dave Ulrich in Human Resource Champions (1997) goes even further advocating that creating a renewed organization is the deliverable expected from the “change agent” role in Human Resources. Virginia Murray an Executive Search consultant comments that almost all searches for the senior HR role now include “change leadership” in the job specifications.

But what, exactly is the “change agent” role? Is it to represent management with employees as change is implemented? Is it to introduce and champion new initiatives intended to improve organizational performance? Is it to monitor and influence climate and morale?

Broadly speaking the most important contributions to be made through the change agent role are those that sustain the organization’s current performance and assure its future performance i.e.

- Enabling people to work effectively as they plan, implement and experience change
- Increasing people’s ability to manage future change

## **Competencies Required for Effectiveness**

Despite the multi-faceted and ever changing demands on HR professionals as change agents, there are definable competencies that can be understood and learned.

The Hay/McBer group an international consulting firm specializing in the competency field have identified change management as increasingly important for organizations of the future.

Dave Ulrich has completed extensive research in this area as well. His research, validated by HR professionals and their line manager “clients”, showed that successful change agents had the ability to:

- **Diagnose problems** – Understanding both the business drivers and the organization well enough to identify performance issues and analyze their impact on short and long term business results
- **Build relationships with clients** – Forming partnerships with mutual responsibility for the outcomes of the change effort. Because the risk is higher than with most other HR roles the level of trust required is much higher. Management consultant Ric Reichard uses a simple formula to describe the issues which are usually at play

$$\text{TRUST} = \frac{\text{perceived competence} + \text{relationship}}{\text{RISK}}$$

Often the client and the change agent over emphasize one or the other (competency or relationship) especially when the risk increases while the challenge is to balance both to achieve the necessary level of trust.

- **Ensure that the Vision is Articulated** – Interpreting the hopes and motivations of the workforce through the Vision statement.
- **Set a Leadership Agenda** – Defining the ongoing role for leaders, such as communications, role modeling, reinforcement of desired behaviours etc. This requires the HR executive to understand intimately the dynamics, history and competencies of the leadership team and to have the tenacity to insist on the agenda’s accomplishment.
- **Solve Problems** – Recommending solutions, a common expectation of HR professionals is not the same as solving problems. When it comes to the change agent role, the problems encountered are often loaded with emotional and political dynamics. The change agent must possess the insight to recognize the problem, the sensitivity to see its importance to those involved, the courage to take honest and often difficult measures to resolve it and the credibility to be heard.
- **Implement Plans to Achieve Change Goals** - Successful organizational change on any significant scale can be attributed to the right strategy and appropriate change in organization culture. Culture change, in turn, relies heavily on aligned and supportive people policies, systems and processes. In short, the implementation plan is an HR plan for both the HR function and for management.

Complementing the competencies identified above, we would add the following as essential for effectiveness as a change agent:

- superb communications ability – in all directions
- knowledge of the business; products/services and core work processes

- keeping a business perspective – both macro (mission/vision) and micro (what line managers cope with)
- planning and project management skills
- ability to tolerate ambiguity
- managing resistance
- risk taking
- managing conflict

It is apparent that these are a blend of personal attributes and developed skill sets. A change agent working at the strategic level cannot be effective without them.

Having a clearly articulated competency model for the change agent role is one thing; acquiring the knowledge and skills to function effectively in this role is another. Effectiveness in any role is a combination of competence and confidence. Following are four elements that are essential in developing both:

### **Education and Training**

Formal education and training that is comprehensive enough to really equip an HR professional for the change agent role is quite limited in this country. However, several Universities, such as University of Toronto and Queen's University are now offering change management programs within their Executive Development divisions. These range from 3 days to 15 days of professional development sometimes with a practicum component.

### **Practice Opportunities**

Five years ago we would have encouraged HR professionals to find some “neutral” territory for practicing their new skills. Today this is clearly impractical as organizations demand that the skills be put to use immediately. The change agent is not exempt from this reality but the “practicing” is often more visible and the risk higher than in other aspects of the HR role. This is where the next two elements come into play.

### **Feedback & Reflection**

*“Good judgement comes from experience, experience comes from bad judgement”* – the simple (however painful) truth in that expression is familiar to everyone. The most important thing you can experience as a change agent is not success. Nor is it failure. It is honest feedback about your performance and impact and the time to reflect on and learn from it.

### **Support System**

For HR executives functioning as change agents, there is often no one inside the organization to talk to. The issues are often too strategic or too sensitive to discuss openly. A support system should include people who know the nature of your work and the satisfactions, stresses and risks associated with it. One of the most important people in your support system will be the colleague whom you can count on to challenge you, help you see your shortcomings and follow-up on what specifically you are doing about them.