

How To Get Top-Notch Change Agents

BY EDWARD J. CRIPE

MANY CHANGE-AGENT PLACEMENTS ARE UNSUCCESSFUL, DESPITE THE CANDIDATES' EXCELLENT CREDENTIALS. HERE ARE SOME APPROACHES FOR SELECTING AND EVALUATING HIGH-PERFORMING CHANGE AGENTS.

A company actively recruits and hires a new organization development manager to lead a major change effort. He has excellent credentials, including a Ph.D. in organizational psychology. But after one year on the job, it is clear that he isn't meeting expectations. In fact, he is ineffective and a poor fit with the organization's culture.

In another company, a high-performing line executive is appointed to lead a quality-improvement process. In the first six months, a lot of progress is made. A steering committee is formed, task forces are established, and training is initiated at all levels of the organization. But during the next six months, some executives start resisting the effort, slowing progress. In the second year, the new quality director becomes increasingly frustrated and asks to be transferred back to a line job.

Those are just two cases of the many possible scenarios in which newly hired or promoted change agents don't meet expectations. My own somewhat unscientific poll estimates that about 40 percent of new change agents aren't meeting the

requirements of their positions six months after they are hired or promoted.

The negative effects on organizations in which change-agent placements fail can be enormous. Bad placements waste recruitment and relocation costs. Improvement efforts tend to get bogged down or sidetracked. Key people may become discouraged and give up the floundering change effort, choosing instead to return to their regular work tasks. And people who initially resist the change efforts acquire more ammunition to continue resisting.

Why do problems with change-agent placements exist? What factors contribute to successful placements? Why are some change agents perceived as not meeting expectations?

Problems in selection and evaluation

Failed change-agent placements may be due in part to flaws in the selection process.

People involved in selection don't always understand the base competencies of high-performing change agents. A limited amount of research

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has explored the skills and knowledge necessary to the successful performance of change agents. Consequently, the selection criteria may be unclear, undefined, or inaccurate. Typically, the criteria prescribe the educational background and amount of experience required for such jobs. Those criteria can be valid in that the appropriate background can help build competencies, but such criteria don't indicate the degree of competency that is necessary for superior performance.

In determining selection criteria, it's important to answer these questions: How can competencies be recognized during the interviewing and selection process? What specific behaviors must be observed in order to determine the existence of necessary competencies? How can competencies be developed to help unsuccessful change agents become successful?

The selection criteria should enable those involved in the selection process to evaluate candidates' competencies. Sloppy interviewing by untrained interviewers and haphazard reference checking typically result in unsuccessful placements.

Performance expectations and measurements that are inadequate or missing can contribute to the problem. The chances of a successful placement increase when expectations and measurements, along with base competencies, are an integral part of selection.

Even when the selection process is effective, a change agent's performance may be seen as ineffective. That may be due to inadequacies in the organization's performance-appraisal system.

The results attained by change agents are difficult to measure. Organizational-attitude surveys can track a company's progress with change efforts, but the accuracy of the surveys can be influenced by variables outside the control of change agents. A highly competent change agent who does all of the "right" things still may not be successful in changing an organization's culture or implementing a total-quality process—particularly in cases in which adverse business conditions demand short-term survival actions.

The McBer and Company Competency Model

This model is a list of competencies for successful change agents. Companies can customize it to their own purposes by deleting some of these competencies or adding other ones.

Interpersonal-skills competencies

- ▶ the ability to express empathy
- ▶ positive expectations of people
- ▶ genuineness.

Diagnostic-skills competencies

- ▶ knowledge of the principles of individual- and organization development variables and systems
- ▶ the ability to collect meaningful data from individuals and organizational systems through such means as interviews, surveys, and observations
- ▶ the ability to draw conclusions from complex data and make accurate diagnoses.

Initiation-skills competencies

- ▶ the ability to influence and market skills, and to identify and persuade prospective internal customers to use services
- ▶ the ability to make presentations in a concise, interesting, and informative manner
- ▶ the ability to manage groups and group dynamics
- ▶ the ability to engage in problem solving and planning, and to make recommendations and help customers with problem solving, goal setting, and planning to improve organizational performance.

Organization-skills competencies

- ▶ the ability to design adult-learning curricula and organizational-development exercises
- ▶ the ability to administer such resources as personnel, materials, schedules, and training sites.

A new CEO appointed in the middle of a change effort can have a negative or positive effect over which the change agent has no control.

The organization's performance-appraisal system may simply be ineffective in measuring success. Appraisal criteria for change agents are often subjective. "Instilling confidence," "affecting the bottom line," and "being an excellent facilitator" aren't easily measurable and verifiable. But many change agents are evaluated according to such criteria.

On the other hand, evaluating a change agent's results using only quantifiable measures—such as the number of employees trained—doesn't paint a fair and accurate picture of performance. Performance evaluations should be preceded by regular reviews in which objectives are established and expectations are negotiated.

An appraisal system appropriate for measuring the performance of change agents may not fit an organization's culture. That poses an interesting dilemma. Is it better to have a change agent be a good match with the existing culture, or with the culture that the organization is striving toward?

Possible solutions

Here is what some organizations are doing to improve the success rate of change-agent placements. The approaches can be customized to individual organizations.

Emphasizing competencies. Selection criteria should focus on research-based competencies for successful performance in change agents. A study by McBer and Company identifies competencies in several areas. (See the box on this page.)

The McBer list of competencies can be useful in establishing selection criteria for the position of change agent. But there are pitfalls. For selection criteria to be valid, competencies should reflect a specific job in a specific organization. For most change-agent positions, the McBer list is likely to be 80 to 90 percent accurate; companies using the list can increase its accuracy by adding other competencies that are essential to success or deleting competencies on the list that aren't relevant to success. An even better approach is for organizations to develop their own change-agent competency models.

Once an organization has a competency model, it needs to determine whether candidates for change agent

possess the necessary competencies. One way is to give them opportunities to demonstrate competencies through role plays or exercises, using such assessment-center methods as having specially trained assessors observe and evaluate. Designing and conducting an assessment center for selecting change agents may be costly and time-consuming, but it may also be very effective.

A less-costly approach involves using interviews to evaluate whether candidates possess the necessary competencies. This approach—known as competency-assessment interviewing or the critical-incident method—involves a structured, focused “probing” strategy. Instead of asking standard interview questions, the interviewer uses an investigative approach to elicit from interviewees which of their own job experiences they view as critical.

The critical-incident method digs deeper than what candidates say are their values—to uncover what change agents actually do rather than what other people may think they do. The objective is to gather the most accurate performance data possible, not to get candidates’ ideas about what they might have done in other circumstances.

Interviewers shouldn’t expect candidates to draw conclusions about what it takes to perform a particular job. Instead, interviewers should ask candidates to describe the times at which they’ve felt successful and the times when they thought their performances didn’t meet expectations. Interviewers should press for information about the candidates’ behaviors, thoughts, and actions during the times described.

The technique is most effective if interviewers have received training in conducting competency-assessment interviews and interpreting candidates’ responses.

Asking about critical incidents typically identifies about 20 percent of the behaviors exhibited by successful change agents. Those behaviors or actions can help determine the base competencies that are critical to job success.

In addition, competency-assessment interviewing helps determine a job candidate’s level of technical

knowledge and interpersonal skills.

Adding discipline. Adding discipline to the selection process is another approach to improving success. It’s surprising how sloppy some organizations have become about such basics as checking employment references. Speaking with a candidate’s former superiors, subordinates, and customers can help confirm other data.

Contracting. Another way to improve the chances of successful placements is to contract with change agents to achieve both long- and short-term objectives. This approach recognizes that change agents are “knowledge workers” who require measurement and appraisal systems that use objective criteria and take into consideration organizational factors beyond the control of the agents.

Organizational change tends to happen slowly; the final outcomes of a change effort may not be known for several years. Still, it can be useful to specify flexible objectives, review them quarterly, and modify them as needed. Those actions help convey progress and identify problems, so that change agents and their bosses can find solutions before the problems become serious.

The objectives should include expectations regarding a change agent’s behaviors and competencies. But in order to develop their own mission and objectives, change agents need to understand an organization’s mission and strategic plan.

For example, soon after being appointed, the quality director in a major service organization created this mission statement: “To help create a participative work culture, as measured by our organizational-climate instrument.”

The director and her team also drafted a list of objectives:

- ▶ “Ensure that executives understand the basic concepts of service quality, by conducting workshops and through one-on-one coaching. Measure by obtaining written feedback from each executive at the end of the year.”
- ▶ “Increase executive-level commitment to the quality-improvement process. Begin pilot implementation in at least two divisions.”
- ▶ “Establish credibility with executives as the corporate resource for

quality improvement in service. Year-end feedback from executives will show that at least 70 percent of them are satisfied with the technical expertise and consulting skills of the director and are effectively using her as a resource."

The director presented and discussed the mission statement and list of objectives in a four-hour meeting with her immediate supervisor, the CEO, the president of the company, and her six-person staff, including two administrative-support people.

The focus of the meeting was, "How can we make this change process successful?" Meeting attendees discussed the resources needed, possible barriers to the change effort, and ways to overcome them. They agreed to hold quarterly reviews. The meeting helped build ownership and gain the commitment of all those involved. It also uncovered areas that needed resolution by senior executives.

Clearly, the director had several positive things in her favor—mainly, a CEO and president committed enough to devote four hours up front and several hours each quarter to reviewing the objectives. Many change agents have to settle for discussing and negotiating objectives and expectations with only their immediate supervisors.

Contracting is based on the traditional management-by-objectives philosophy, which fell out of favor a few years ago due to cases of poor and unethical execution. But when used properly, MBO concepts work well, particularly for hard-to-define positions such as those of change agents.

Speaking the language. It's recommended that change agents think and communicate in the language of their internal customers, largely line executives. Not knowing such terms as "ROI" and "net profit" has been the Achilles' heel of many change agents.

Communicating in the internal customers' own language doesn't mean that change agents can't introduce new terms as part of an educational process. But change agents will experience more positive results when they simplify principles and eliminate change and quality jargon from their speech. Busy executives like their communications concise and to the point.

In addition, change agents should know what motivates executives and what value the change effort can add to business outcomes. Sometimes, change agents can be so passionate about instituting change that they forget why change is necessary—namely, to improve an organization's competitive position and financial performance as well as enhance employees' work lives. Line executives need to feel confident that their personal and business goals mesh with those of the change agent. I've seen talented change agents stumble because they viewed their roles too narrowly. They led crusades to improve quality but forgot about financial objectives.

The best change agents are flexible, customizing their approaches to meet changing business conditions. They are persistent and keep their eyes on their mission and objectives.

Even when an organization carefully follows all of the recommended approaches, it shouldn't expect to find Mr. or Ms. Perfect Change Agent. The key is to find someone who is the best fit and to help him or her develop into an effective change agent.

It's important not to rule out qualified internal candidates whose shortcomings are already known. After a honeymoon period with an external candidate, an organization may discover that the newly hired person from outside the company has more serious inadequacies than the internal candidates who were passed over (and who may have left the organization as a result).

Implementing change is a formidable task. One key to success is having a competent, highly motivated, and satisfied person in the role of change agent. ■

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