

Key Characteristics:
IT Manager as a Change Agent



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Introduction

Information technology is a dynamic market with rapid evolution. Therefore ‘flexibility for change’ has become a must to have characteristics for today’s IT organizations. These regular change implementations need to be managed properly by someone skilled in managing the process. Change agent can be defined as the person responsible for organizing and coordinating a particular change effort [1]. A good change agent should have a comprehensive knowledge on human behavior, excellent project managing skills and ability to understand the organizational/problem context.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the key change agent characteristics with related to a management of an IT organization. The paper includes case studies from one of the leading IT services organizations in Sri Lanka, Revolution Ltd.

Revolution Ltd started as a low cost development center for a European product company 9 years ago. After 5 years of operation, the parent European company has sold its product to another organization and Revolution Ltd had to convert itself to a value based IT Services Company for its survival. This was major transformation to the operations and a new management team was appointed to carry out the change.

Basis of the examples used in the paper are derived from ‘organization development’ attempts of Revolution Ltd during the second era. Organization development can be defined as a complex strategy intended to change the beliefs, attitudes, values, and structure of organizations so that they can better adapt to new technologies, markets, and challenges [2]. As stated correctly in the above definition, changes for organization development require several different aspects to be addressed simultaneously by the change agent. In my opinion, the broad skill set of an IT manager as a change agent can be categorized in to three main areas as depicted below.

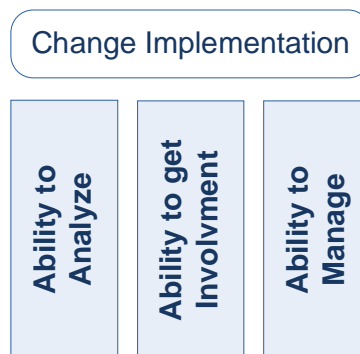


Figure 1: Three main pillars of change implementation skill set

Ability to Analyze

Change agent should have skills to analyze the current problem context in detail. She needs to be able to understand the expectations of the stakeholders and also be

sensitive to the changes in the context. In addition she needs to have a good sense on what works and what doesn't depending on the organization culture. In absence of solid analysis and an open mindset, change agent can fail in their due mission.

Revolution Ltd was operating with flexible working hours from its inception. Some of the newly recruited management members had seen the flexible working times as a productivity-hinder and change initiatives launched without proper investigation has subsequently failed. IT services company deals with educated IT professionals where a unique value system exists in the organizations. Sudden change introductions without proper understanding of cultural dynamics generally produces lower success. It is important to understand that the change approaches should never be a one-way communication, but get all stakeholders involved. In the above case example, existence of flexible-hours was important to compensate late work hours demanded by some projects. Without direct working hour restrictions, a transactional approach that granted lieu leaves for extended working hours has produced better results at a later change initiative.

Change agent should also take care to perform investigations at several levels to get a balanced understanding before committing on a change approach. For example, ignoring the impact on other on-going change initiatives can contribute to unexpected conflicts.

Revolution Ltd has once initiated a change process to update some of the outdated process documentation. The change agent responsible was unable to perform a proper investigation on other parallel change processes in motion. Unfortunately a separate change implementation to obtain a process certification was also undergoing in parallel. Document update program which was insensitive to the process certification program subsequently produced outdated results wasting considerable effort spent on it.

Ability to get Involvement

Change agent should be able to get stakeholders involved throughout the decision making and implementation process. Processes ownership is one of the best motivations for stakeholders which should be promoted by the change agent. New ideas and innovations should be appreciated and different views should be taken in to consideration during the implementation. All these mentioned leadership qualities are must to have for a change agent to be successful in driving stakeholders towards the common goal.

Changing Revolution Ltd to become an IT services company required a significant mindset change of the staff to think as leaders rather than just being followers. The agent who took over the responsibility of this change process was a self enthusiast of the concept of innovations. The process goals were clearly defined and the achievements were consistently presented to the organization to give the due recognition. Being a genuine believer of the process was the main aspect that inspired others to follow her innovation movement.

Eventually she was able to get all different disciplines of the organization (such as development, QA, process) to participate her innovation process. Ability of her to

clearly communicate the aspiration, build the coalitions, handover the ownership were seen as the other reason for success of her change initiative.

Even though collaboration is often praised as better change management approach, it cannot be ruled out the usefulness of commander approach in difficult situations. For statistical decision making of Revolution Ltd, precision task time reporting is an important activity. Unfortunately, several collaborative approaches to build this practice within the organization had failed due to limited acceptance from employees. Despite the attempts from management team, employees never saw the value of precision time reporting but considered as an overhead to the day-to-day work. It was then one of the managers decided to micro monitor and use commander approach to ensure the practice is implemented throughout the organization. During the limited period of micro monitoring, several demonstrations were done to show the value of collected data. Eventually employees saw the value of the practice and the change process became a high success. Management was able to obtain the commitment from employees on precision time reporting. This is a special example where commander approach has proven itself to be more effective over collaborative approaches. A good change agent should have the ability to act the commander role when necessary to suppress restraining forces until they experience benefits of change.

Change agent should always be an active listener open for ideas from others. Even though negotiation skill is an important core competency for change agent, she should not misuse the negotiation skills to hinder grievances from others. Revolution Ltd had initiated a change process which is non-core to the business, but with lot of lateral value addition. The change movement was driven by a strong leader with good negotiation skills who was able to negotiate and get the best resources to implement the change process. The resources were pulled out from core business proceedings and core business had to suffer from a productivity setback due to the unbalanced resource allocation. In order to avoid such issues, change agent need to have a balanced and fair interest on overall operations of the organization and should not misuse negotiation skills or authority.

According to Jim Canterucci, level 5 champion change agent should have ability to publicly challenge the status quo of practices causing a sense of crisis or imbalance [3]. These techniques should be performed by a skilled change leader who is able to manage any negative consequences. Level 5 techniques should not be overused which can cause a loss of trust and confidence. One of the managers in Revolution Ltd had often used exaggerated stories and set unrealistic expectations to gain the attention for her change movements. Regular use of these techniques caused a loss of confidence of the own staff and therefore it is important that the change leader consciously use the extreme change management theories only as appropriate.

Managing the resistance is a common challenge of a change agent. Managed resistance is generally healthy as it promotes discussions and innovations. When it comes to change, resistance can be broadly categorized as initial and experimental [4]. Initial resistance is largely natural human behavior and can be overcome by properly communicating change process benefits to everyone whereas experimental resistance should be accepted by the change agent as a feedback to the process. Most literature assumes the goal of change management to be the successful implementation of expected change. But it is possible that the identified change not be the optimal

solution for the problem in hand and the change agent implementing something counterproductive.

In Revolution Ltd, once it was decided to merge QA discipline with another discipline to increase amount of billable hours. Initial decision was to merge QA and PM disciplines but experimental resistance was observed both from internal and external stakeholders. The manager responsible of the change has had a reevaluation of decisions and identified that the PM and QA disciplines were with conflicting interests. It was later decided to merge BA and QA disciplines which produced much better results. When experimental resistance is observed, it is important that the change agent review her plans, do an approach assessment and improve as necessary. Thereby it is evident that the ability to accept changes to own proceedings is another important skill of a good change agent.

Ability to Manage

In most of the literature change management skill set is described biased to human behavior understanding and management. This can be true for alpha level or small scale change initiatives but the enterprise scale change initiatives demand deep management skills of the change agent. Mainly the management skills are twofold. Change agent should be able to self manage and also manage the change implementation project.

Good change agent should have strong ability to self motivate. Generally change movements receive their hype attention at the launch but attention goes down as time passes. Despite that fact, change agent should be able to keep herself motivated and also inspire passion in others throughout the change implementation.

A manager in Revolution Ltd was with lot of new and innovative ideas for organizational improvements. She has initiated many change initiatives but was unable to keep her motivation to follow-up the implementations to the end to see results. Unfortunately she has lost the confidence of other employees as someone who can make a difference. Therefore living and believing the future is an important skill that should be available in a good change agent. She should be persistent and keep her determination even though the recognition to own work is minimal.

Change agent should also be a good project manager who can drive a change implementation to succeed. Larger change efforts are often carried out as full scale projects where skills such as estimating, planning, resourcing, leadership, supervision, communication, etc are mandatory. A change agent preferably should carry agile management skills when managing complex change initiatives. Complex initiatives are less predictable but more dynamic and sensitive to the environment changes. Change agent should be able to anticipate the emerging changes that could occur and make favorable use of any opportunistic changes occur.

Revolution Ltd was planning 40% revenue growth during financial year 2008-2009. The plan was to obtain more work load from the existing customer base. This approach was in execution until the recession factor caused existing customers to slowdown their operations. The emerging recession situation had a negative effect on the planned growth process of Revolution Ltd. It was then the Revolution Ltd

marketing team observed the trend of European organizations moving their fixed cost base to variable costs. This was seen as an opportunity by the Revolution Ltd management team where they were able to place resources in to those organizations that reduced their permanent staff due to recession factor. The adaptation to the emerging changes and correct use of the opportunities helped Revolution Ltd to achieve its revenue targets for the year.

Therefore it is important for a change agent to have the ability to adapt as required. Generally pure planned approaches are not sufficient and suitable for non trivial change implementations. Change agent should be able to appropriately use a mix of the approached for optimal results. For example for most of the change implementations, beginning and end phases are with high predictability and thereby can have planned approaches for execution. For the mid phased of the change implementation, change agent should be prepared to accept emergent changes and make use of opportunistic changes to obtain optimal results.

Conclusion

IT organizations consistently run through change processes due to the nature of its industry. Therefore in particular IT organizations should invest to explicitly build change management capabilities of its management team members for better results.

As we have discussed great change agents carry good analytical skills, ability to get people involved and strong management skills. They live in future and able to inspire others to believe in the change.

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