AN AGILE LEADER'S GUIDE TO CHANGE MANAGEMENT

A five-step approach for executing organizational change to maximize impact

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The renowned organizational consultant and scholar Warren G. Bennis was once quoted as saying, **"In life, change is inevitable. In business, change is vital."**

In today's rapidly evolving economy, in which enhancements in technology deliver data-driven insights faster than ever, business leaders face constant change. While technology and communication advances enable more informed decision making, the time in which to make those decisions — and more importantly, to manage change around them — is shorter than ever. Still, just as change is vital to business, change management is vital to effective leadership.

Many leaders are realizing that to deal with today's changes, as well as inevitable forthcoming changes, they need to be more agile. This requires deliberately taking action toward embedding change within the organization. Weaving change into the fabric of the organization is key to keeping everyone — from the C-suite to the entry level — moving in the same direction.

Research continues to show that 70% of change programs fail, largely due to employee resistance and lack of management support.[1] However, companies with effective change management practices are 3.5 times more likely to outperform their peer organizations. Additionally, companies with a structured approach to change management have 2.5 times greater financial returns.[2]

Whatever the reason for a change initiative in an organization, my experience with clients is that these types of transitions typically bring a unique set of challenges that, if not managed properly, can lead to failure. **How can you make sure your organization doesn't end up on the wrong side of that statistic?**

1 Boris Ewenstein, Wesley Smith, and Ashvin Sologar, Changing Change Management, McKinsey, July 2015

2 Connie Folk, The Inconvenient Truths About Organizational Change Management, Column 5 Consulting, June 2015

The most common reasons change initiatives fail — from miscommunication to lack of commitment — all have one thing in common: People.

And now that change is constant, how do you build managing change into your core capability as a leader, as an organization?

In times of intense movement, challenges, and unpredictability, what can leaders do to effectively manage change?

Build a purposeful culture

Traditional thinking said an organization's culture should be a constant. In today's environment, this is true of organizational values, but no longer of culture. A static culture is similar to a static business strategy: doomed to fail.

Agile leaders are receptive to change, and build the capability to change into their cultures. Disregarding the role of culture in effective change management can lead to resistance and lack of commitment around change initiatives, which ultimately hinders organizations from adapting to market competition, overcoming obstacles, innovating, achieving goals, and motivating high performance.

Agile leaders understand that success starts with people, and people buy into culture. **Therefore, successful organizations embrace a change-friendly culture**.

Identify the "why" and gain buy-in

One of the paramount traits of an agile leader is the ability to influence. An agile leader understands what motivates and

drives their people. They know how other people communicate and leverage those insights to effectively communicate ideas and gain support.

This is a particularly important skill when initiating and executing change. By identifying the "why" behind the change and how it will positively impact business, agile leaders are able to align other leaders within the organization, who in turn motivate their teams. This trickle-down approach to change management helps eliminate resistance throughout the company, as well as discord within leadership teams.

Make a plan and communicate it

Whether adapting to change fits in with existing processes or requires new processes, a sound plan and communication strategy are important ways agile leaders effectively manage through it.

When implementing change through existing processes, agile leaders ensure those processes should undergo only minor tweaks. On the other hand, when a change requires a new process, it is rolled out incrementally. This is done by introducing one small change at a time, waiting until it's fully adopted, then implementing an additional, complementary change. This helps make the new process second nature, as opposed to jarring.

Most importantly, agile leaders execute an effective communication strategy to support change. This is often the difference between success and failure in change initiatives. Ensuring transparency and an open forum in which employees can voice

their questions and concerns will help make the process feel more collaborative and the change more acceptable.

Anticipate resistance and identify champions

No matter how much planning and communication goes into change management, there is bound to be resistance. Agile leaders stay ahead of this by anticipating pushback and putting a strategy in place to overcome it; they realize the need to establish feedback mechanisms to understand what is and is not working when it comes to change, and what can be done differently.

It's not hard to identify resistance to change — lack of enthusiasm, skepticism, and avoidance are just three signs that are easy to pick up on, even through body language. But it's also not hard for agile leaders, who are attuned to their people's behavioral styles, to recognize champions of change — in other words, the people who are enthusiastic about and motivated by it.

Agile leaders leverage these insights and deploy the change champions to motivate the change resistors. As mentioned, a critical skill of agile leaders is the ability to influence. In this instance, they are indirectly influencing those "resistors" by way of their champions. So long as resistance to change doesn't catch leaders off guard, they can adapt and manage through it.

Agile leaders understand that people don't want change to happen to them, they want change to happen with them. In other words, when employees feel they have a voice, are involved, and can provide input and feedback, they have a greater sense of ownership and will participate, which dramatically improves engagement and performance.

Use people data

There are two sets of people data essential to anticipating how employees will respond to change: an **employee experience survey** to measure engagement and **behavioral data** to measure your employees' drives and needs.

Leaders are sometimes surprised by the results of employee experience surveys — caught on their heels, they are skeptical and slow to react. Agile leaders, on the other hand, embrace the results and view them as a way to pinpoint underlying issues blocking efficient change management.

How does people data and employee experience surveys relate to change? The surveys can help you identify where employees fall in a matrix of engagement and performance. High performing, highly engaged employees are likely to be champions of change, while low performing, disengaged employees are most likely to resist it.

Armed with this knowledge, agile leaders use behavioral data, like **The Predictive Index Behavioral Assessment**®, to create a

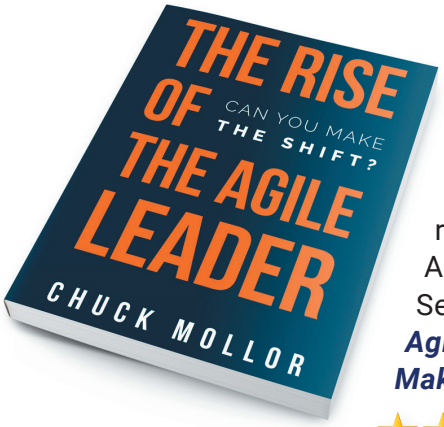
plan that involves employees in the change management process based on their natural strengths and abilities.

For instance, employees who are naturally more dominant and want to drive change can lead projects or key initiatives. These drivers can be complemented by employees who are more stabilizing and can help keep projects on track, as well as those who are skilled at executing. Some employees will see change as a threat or risk, and will need to understand how the change will impact their ability to still do their job.

Behavioral data and analytics not only help agile leaders understand how to effectively manage change, but also help understand how managers will help manage change and what support they will need to be effective.

Not everyone will always be on board with change, and that's okay — agile leaders embrace that, but don't let it discourage them. After all, in today's constantly changing environment, they can't.

By giving employees the opportunity to be change agents, agile leaders are able to stay true to the organization's purpose, mission, and cultural values — and ultimately will make the company and its people even stronger.



To find out more about how to hone your agile leadership skills, read Chuck Mollor's Amazon #1 Best Seller, ***The Rise of the Agile Leader: Can You Make the Shift?***