

How to Become a Change Agent

By

Linda D. Henman, Ph.D.

People don't fear change; they fear the unknown. As a senior leader, shining the flashlight into the darkness so others can see their way through the transition will define a prominent and recurring role for you—that of change agent. During turbulent times, those around you will count on you to present a confident, self-assured demeanor. They will want you to let them know they can trust you—trust you to take charge and to stay in charge. In short, they will want you to show no fear.

As with all fears, those associated with change are due largely to the *perception* of what might happen rather than to the likelihood of it actually happening. The perception that failure will occur, therefore, immobilizes people at the exact time that they need to spring to action. If you were to ask a hundred people for an antonym for “success” at least ninety-nine would say “failure.” I submit that the opposite of success is not failure: it's the unwillingness to try again and to learn from setbacks. Thomas Edison, arguably one of the most successful inventors of all time, wrote this about his numerous attempts to invent the light bulb: “I have not failed. I've just discovered 10,000 ways that don't work.” (Apparently he wrote this in the dark, however).

Accept the fact that most people, most of the time, do not like change, unless it is their idea. So, if you want to become a change agent, you will need to find a way to address the self interest of stake holders in the status quo. This is not so easy. But if you take the time to understand the aspects of the status quo that they most relish, you'll be far ahead in winning them over to the change.

The next step is to make sure you understand your own issues with change before you try to help others with theirs. If you resist a particular change that seems imminent, the condition will be contagious. What are you holding on to? What do you fear about the change? If you are in a position as a leader, the single most important thing you can do is to cause a change reaction, not a chain reaction. Be consistent, clear, and endlessly repetitious.

1. Instead of responding to short-gain, “flavor of the month” tactics, make sure proposed changes support the long-term strategy of the organization.
2. Try to keep everyone focused on the desired outcome. Constant reminders of the end goal will help people better tolerate temporary inconveniences.
3. Understand that when people face major changes, they typically go through three stages: Awareness, adjustment, and advancement. The process can take days, weeks, or months, depending on the person, and some people never move past their constant struggle to adjust.
4. Three skills tend to separate those who can deal effectively with change from those who cannot: Problem solving, relationship building, and flexibility. When major or multiple changes are on the horizon, encourage people to solve problems

associated with the change as soon as they are aware of them, to build rapport among themselves, and to remain open to innovative solutions.

5. Whenever possible, persuade others to separate their emotions from the change or the problems it has introduced.
6. Don't let yourself or others get trapped into thinking there is only one solution to any problem. Brainstorm creative solutions and then see options as having pros and cons, rather than being "right" or "wrong."
7. If innovation requires thinking "outside the box," try talking to someone who actually lives outside the box. Sometimes those too close to the problem don't see the obvious. Listen to outside voices.
8. Finally, remember the "5 E's" for taking charge of change:
 - Experiment with new approaches
 - Educate others about what lies ahead
 - Exemplify openness yourself
 - Empower others to control what they can control
 - Engage everyone who is affected by the change

People change when the pain of staying the same overcomes the fear of change. However, sometimes people don't perceive the pain before significant damage has occurred. Like insidious heart disease, symptoms of impending destruction may go unnoticed. As a change agent, your job involves building a culture of change, one that supports the long-term strategy of the company. There are two kinds of organizations: those with a strong strategy and culture of change and those going out of business. In other words, what got you here won't necessarily get you to the next level, but becoming a change agent just might.

Dr. Linda Henman, the author of *The Magnetic Boss: How to Become the Boss No One Wants to Leave*, is a leading expert on setting strategy, planning succession, and talent development. For more than 30 years she has worked with executives and boards of directors that are in transition. Some of her clients include Tyson Foods, Emerson Electric, and The United States Air Force.