The change agent challenge

Three Extranet Classics provide practical pointers on finding, developing, and retaining the change agents that your lean transformation needs.

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The role of the change agent is among the most important, and difficult, in any lean-management transformation. This article brings together a three-part-series: "[The agent and the line](#)," "[The agent and the institution](#)," and "[The agent as an individual](#)," each of which is available for individual download by clicking on the hyperlinked title.

"Work harder, earn the same, and miss all your pre-existing targets," was how one lean program leader recently summed up his company's value proposition to potential change agents. Perhaps it should be no surprise that difficulty in recruiting, deploying, developing, and retaining change agents is cited by companies as the biggest impediment to a scalable, sustainable lean program.

Change agents are vital in lean transformation. They provide both the **technical know-how** and the **social support** needed by managers and front line teams alike as they learn and adopt new lean practices. Change agents fix problems too: usually recruited from within the organization, they can use their knowledge and contacts to detect and diffuse political issues that might otherwise threaten to derail transformation efforts.

Problems with change-agent programs occur because companies fail to integrate three essential but potentially conflicting views of the change-agent program: those of the line, the institution, and the individual. We begin by focusing on the delicate **relationship between the change agent and the frontline** organization that will eventually own the new lean process.

The agent and the line

The best change agents for the line are usually the **best people from the line**—charismatic individuals with extensive experience in the company's processes and technologies. Often it is effective to include outsiders with deep lean expertise in the change-agent population as well, but our experience suggests that this should be done with care. Too many new faces, and the change agents begin to lose vital credibility with line managers and staff.

Making a real sacrifice

Naturally, these high performers are exactly the individuals that the line is most reluctant to give up, and a frontline team that feels it has been robbed of its top talent by a lean initiative may not be well-disposed towards it. To overcome their resistance, line managers need **something in return**, a priority place in forthcoming improvement projects, for example. They also need **encouragement from above**. Communication from top management on the importance

of the transformation program can be very effective, as can demanding "quantum" improvement targets that line managers will find it difficult to achieve without help.

Balancing closeness and distance

Once change agents are in their role, they need to be **visible and available** to the line—at least 50 percent of change agents' time should be spent out on the shop floor, engaged with line personnel. The resulting regular **informal contact** with shop-floor staff is a powerful tool in building relationships between change agents and frontline teams. The best programs supplement these efforts with more formal processes to ensure change agents and other levels of line management interact effectively. They do these by encouraging managers to participate in lean training and change projects, and through a sparring-partner approach in which managers meet regularly with change agents to discuss progress and resolve issues.

Effective programs balance the **strong relationships** between change agent and line with **appropriate distance**. They will ensure that change agents don't report to their old line managers, for example, to prevent them being overloaded with day-to-day tasks that have little to do with the transformation. They will also ensure that the effect of the transformation project is independently measured, so that change agents can be held accountable for its progress and publicly rewarded for its success. Finally, once a transformation project is up and running in an area of the business, the best programs avoid over-reliance on change agents by reducing their support in an orderly fashion, ensuring that the line takes over responsibility for ongoing improvements.

The agent and the institution

"We need a formal career program to be able to recruit change agents. We need 20. Today, we have two," the head of lean at an energy company told us recently.

For any organization, **full–time change agents** are an **expensive** resource. Not only does staffing the change-agent program involve the creation of a whole new indirect function, it typically makes use of some of the best and most productive people form the line organization. Institutions therefore need to ensure their change-agent program delivers far more in value than it costs to run, that it delivers its value as rapidly as possible, and that its value is sustainable over the long term. A company can maximize the ability of its change agents to deliver with some smart decisions about the way the program is staffed, managed, and supported.

Avoiding false economies

The high cost of a change-agent program can tempt managers to skimp on the number of agents recruited. They should resist this temptation. Particularly in the early days, it **makes sense to overinvest** in the agent program. Overinvestment in quantity is important as some of those brought into the program will find it doesn't suit their abilities and will drop out early on. By overstaffing, companies ensure that they will still have the personnel they need to meet the needs of the transformation program. Companies should overinvest in quality too. The first tranche of change agents are likely to become the leaders and

trainers of later groups. While it is always important to put strong individuals in change-agent positions, this importance is doubled during the early phases of the program.

Managing change agents

The **management structure** put in place for change agents will be decisive in determining their effectiveness and focus on their role. Companies should at least create a new, dedicated change-agent role; many find it useful to have different types of change agents, with some focusing on technical problem solving while others act as coaches and facilitators, for example. Agents should report to managers in the transformation program, not the line, to avoid conflicts of interest. They should be helped to support each other too, for example by ensuring that at least two change agents are staffed to a site or business unit.

The long-term value delivered by change agents can also be determined before the first one is even recruited. By working with the HR function to **determine likely career paths** for agents after the initial transformation program, companies can make the job itself more compelling, easing the recruitment challenge, and can reduce the loss of highly trained and talented individuals to other organizations at the end of the project. Some companies send their change agents back into senior line positions, while others choose to maintain the function over the long term, to help the line energize and renew its own continuous-improvement efforts.

Finally, the change-agent program itself should make use of the same **lean processes** it aims to deliver in the wider organization. By simplifying and standardizing processes, eliminating unnecessary administration, and building infrastructure that allows new practices and processes to be easily codified and shared, companies can ensure that their people spend the maximum possible time delivering real improvement on the ground.

The agent as an individual

"We expend money and time training and developing our change agents, only to have them hired away by other firms. How can we meet their expectations?"

Keeping high-performing change agents in the organization over the long term is difficult, as this comment from a senior manager industrial company suggests. To succeed, any change-agent or navigator program must offer a **compelling value proposition** to individuals, so that the best people are encouraged to join the program. Once they are there, the program must be able to **support the development** of those individuals so that they deliver the very best that they are capable of. It must be ruthless too, constantly scrutinizing change-agent performance and reacting quickly to remove unsuitable individuals from the program.

Sourcing change agents

Marketing the program to potential recruits is essential. The most successful programs build on communication efforts from senior leadership to create a 'buzz' that the change-agent program will be a key priority for the organization. This buzz can be exploited internally, to

encourage high potential recruits to apply, and externally, to bring in individuals with needed skills.

As a transformation is rolled out across the organization, its appetite for change agents will increase. The recruitment program needs to recognize this and, from the start, should be established to deliver a **pipeline** of recruits **for future phases**, not just a team for the immediate needs. This pipeline approach also helps to keep the program full staffed, allowing the few individuals who don't make it through the program to be replaced.

It pays to be **open minded** in recruiting change agents. While senior team leaders and managers from the line organization are the traditional hunting ground for the right kinds of skills, recruiters should also look for high-potential candidates in lower organizational levels and from other functions.

Building change-agent capabilities

No organization is going to find fully-formed change agents among its own ranks, so recruitment will need to be supported with **extensive skill-building efforts**. This skill building will include not only formal training in the form of lean courses and boot camps, but also informal mechanisms—which turn out to be just as important. For example, staffing individuals with complementary skills on the same project brings a wider range of strengths to the immediate task, and helps both individuals to broaden their own capabilities. In addition to the technical aspects of lean, training should pay equal attention to soft skills. Change agents need to form a team that can work effectively together, and then go on to interact extensively with all levels or the organization.

Skill development is also an invaluable tool in change-agent retention. Agents quickly become targets for poaching, both by the line organization and by other firms. An explicit "**learning ladder**" with a detailed program of learning and increasing responsibility will encourage change agents to remain in their role. This ladder should lead, post project, to a senior role in the line organization or the company's permanent continuous-improvement infrastructure. In practice, we have found that the promise of accelerated career progression is a far more effective motivator for individuals than cash rewards, which can be counterproductive by creating a sense of elitism that drives a wedge between the change-agent program and the line. Another strategy that can be powerful in both motivating and developing change agents is regular **exposure to senior leadership** for coaching and development.

Finally, the best organizations ensure that they are not wasting the extensive support they give to their change agents on unworthy individuals. **Frequent performance evaluations** ensure that the program leadership can quickly identify underperformers. Individuals that don't respond to feedback should be removed from the program quickly, before they have the chance to damage its reputation∎

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