# Seven Suggestions For Leading Successful Change

**By Carl Aspler**


### Introduction

This article does not pretend to be an academic piece on change management. The comments and opinions are based on 33 years of work in the field of organizational change. From time to time I have inserted references, but not in any exhaustive way.

My first big challenge was in 1973 when, as part of a community initiative, we successfully started up a multiservice social service agency in a neighborhood where many residents and businesses were opposed to the idea. This development work continued in 1979 when as manager of training, we started to develop a democratic team-based culture in an organization, The Ministry of Correctional Services, where the culture of paramilitary command and control, was the prevailing order of the day. We also had some challenges in trying to get communities to accept hallway houses in their neighborhoods. Since then I have been involved in consulting, training and coaching a wide number of organizations, including GE Canada, where I worked as Manager, Organization Change. Since 1995 I have operated my own business where helping organizations manage change has been a central part of my practice.

My intent here is to share some my observations on managing change and provide some ideas to those considering enhancing their efforts in this area.

### People Issues, Poor Cousin From The Country

In recent years there has been a new buzzword circulating in the halls of management thinking. It's called "Change Management". This new focus on change is not surprising. As organizations are forced to adapt at an ever-increasing pace, it has become apparent that many of the change efforts have led to more of a bumpy ride than was expected. When questioned under the hot lights, people involved in the change will mostly concede that it is the people issues that have often been the stumbling block to effective execution. They will tell you that t is a whole lot easier to write up the new procedure than it is to get people to follow it. Even a quick review of the management literature on project failures consistently points the finger at people-related challenges.

When I worked at GE, we had a formula, E = Q x A. In this formula, "E" represents the effectiveness of the change. "Q" represents the *technica*l side of change – the "quality" of the problem solving effort, while "A" represents "acceptance", the *people* side. This formula was developed as a result of GE's research looking at factors related to project success. Note that "Q" and "A" are multipliers. If either "Q" or "A" is low, then the effectiveness of the change will be compromised. What became clear was that success not just good "Q". Over 98% of all changes evaluated as "unsuccessful" at GE also had good technical solutions or approaches.

Despite the fact that many people recognize this relationship, with or without the formula from GE, organizations still undervalue the people component in making changes. When a project runs into trouble it is usually the “Q” that gets the additional resources or attention. Seen as too “feely-touchy”, “A” is typically avoided and often jokingly externalized (and thereby dismissed) as the domain of Human Resources.

There may be a number of reasons why organizations avoid the “A”. It is the hard-nose skills – operations, sales, engineering, marketing that people were educated and hired for. People are inclined to act within their own field of expertise and ignore or avoid areas where they feel less capable. Much of the focus in selecting people for jobs has been on getting the job done. A number of years ago I represented GE on a focus group hosted by an important business school. A number of employers attending indicated that there still needed to a lot work done on improving the interpersonal skills of young graduates. While there has been some progress since then, I notice that this component is still underdeveloped and often limited to a 15 minute discussion on the quality of team work during a group project, or the token 2 hour session on Myers-Briggs. So what we now have are organizations, where there is pressure to make the changes, and get things done fast by managers who feel unskilled or unready to manage the people challenges.

Even in cases where there is widespread knowledge among intelligent people that the people obstacles are critical, the allocation of time and resources may be inadequate. The people stuff still comes out like a poor cousin from the country. In many Six Sigma training programs I have seen weeks and weeks of technical training, and a maybe a few days on developing skills on the people side. This misallocation of time and resources continues despite evidence that points the other way. In research conducted in 2008 Six Sigma practitioners around the world were asked which characteristics or skills they thought were the most important for success as a Black Belt. The results: Communication, Leadership, Technical, Analytical and Interpersonal skills, in that order .[1]

### Where To Start: It’s About a Conversation

In order to ensure that we are making the right moves, we need to step away and look a bit of the dynamics of change. It doesn’t take a Nobel Prize in intelligence to realize that stress is created whenever people are put into a situation of uncertainty. We stress out when we sense that we no longer have our hands on the steering wheel. We have all been there. When the anchors we rely on are removed, there is an uneasiness and discomfort. [2] Even the smallest single-cell organism “knows” that when there is a disequilibrium created in its environment, it will attempt to escape, or ultimately adapt. The question then becomes, “How do we help people re-establish a sense of control?”

While there are a whole variety of change management approaches and tools, it basically comes down to having a discussion about people and what needs to get done to make things better. Whatever helps create and promote that discussion is heading in the right direction. In my own practice I have developed a “Pre-light Checklist” which allows the person steering the change to identify some key tasks that needs to happen in order to create greater buy-in and support. This checklist is akin to the aid that flight crews use before takeoff to ensure that they have covered all the bases. In this case the goal is to make sure that those managing the change have not forgotten anything, and of course to create a sense of focus, since dealing with the people issues may be common sense, but it is not common practice. Such a checklist can also provide a means of monitoring progress and attending to new and emerging issues on the people side of change.

**Simple Tools Need Skills to Execute**

One of the challenges I have seen is creating simple tools that help facilitate the conversation on "A". Even where there is a concerted effort to teach change management, the focus can be very theoretical and impractical. In one company's program there was a recommended tool where the change agent would examine all of the objects in a stakeholder's office – the coat hanging on the rack, the pictures on the wall, the way the desk was organized - to get a sense of the organizational culture. From this analysis, one could then proceed to a greater appreciation of how that person can be accommodated in a change situation. While this exercise can make people more sensitive to individual needs, preferences and culture, I could see from the looks on all the people's faces that no one in the organization would ever actually use this type of tool. I guess there is no end to what can be created by a consultant primed with two or three glasses of wine.

In other cases the various tools become an end in themselves. People are encouraged to fill in a stakeholder analysis as a means of identifying stakeholder needs and ways to influence them. This can be a very powerful tool and of course is an excellent way of creating a discussion on stakeholder needs. To carry out the stakeholder influence to its logical conclusion, there should be a clear set of actions that "springboard" from the analysis. Typically such actions often involve an interaction or discussion with a stakeholder or group. It is here where things can break down, because the skills or confidence of actually having that conversation may not be there. Filling out the stakeholder analysis is a good first step, but to carry out its suggested plan may require the project leader to actually engage in an uncomfortable negotiation where there is some disagreement. To execute this negotiation may require some empathy or strong listening skills or the ability not to get defensive and maintain a positive blame-free discussion.

I have noticed a reluctance to solidly engage in "A". A number of years ago when I visited a company's Six Sigma Trade Fair. I had the chance to wander around and visit a number of displays where project teams were showcasing their Six Sigma projects. There was much information on measuring, analyzing and performing the technical tasks associated with the project. However when I asked how they were managing resistance, the conversation lost a bit of energy while people were trying to explain what still needs to happen. There was a lot of "we need to keep Finance in the loop", or "We need to have a more productive way of discussing the situation", etc.. It ends up that filling out the boxes on the stakeholder analysis is a lot easier than actually dealing with the people you have identified.

What this means is that any training on change tools, where the tool becomes the prime focus can be a half measure unless the person has some training or skills development in the interpersonal domain.

Something else that gets in the way is the tendency to keep things too vague and general. When we talk about what we would like to see happening, we use words such as "support", "team-oriented", "proactive, "engaged", and so on. Even in conversation with teams working on changing people's behavior, we seem stuck on the ceiling, unable to avoid the big words.

One way to remedy this is to ensure that people are talking about specific behaviors and actions. We need to take the "high altitude" generalities, such as "We need to work on their support" and reduce these to the specific behaviors or actions that we are looking for. When we able to define what "support" looks like in terms of behaviors and actions we are in a better position to evaluate it and identify what can be done to promote that behavior. What is more, we are in position to reward and recognize it. When there are no consequences for behaviors, either on the part of the people steering the change, or those whom we are trying to influence, then it should come as no surprise when nothing happens. The issue of recognizing behavior change as a success factor in organization change is a major topic of itself and probably merits a paper on it's own.[3]

## The Opportunity of Greater Reinforcement

We know that we can teach a person to do almost anything in the classroom, but to actually have them use the skill in real life can be a challenge. As with any new skill or habit, people need to be supported and reinforced in practicing the new behaviors. There may also be a learning curve where initial efforts run into speed bumps and other challenges. Too often, senior managers assume that people will, once exiting the classroom will be able to "fly solo".

I believe there are two things that organizations can do to promote success. The first is to supervise the trainees on the behaviors and techniques that they learned. . Because of the more comfortable and natural default to the technical side of project management, most supervision discussions tend to focus on the non-people elements. When a senior leader actually asks how a Black Belt or project leader has managed resistance and questions them on their action plan, the trainee will quickly learn that this is something they have to take care of. There is an expression, "If it don't get measured, it don't get done". If no one asks or talks about the people issues in change, especially if this is a senior person, then this basically sends a clear message that it may not be that important. I believe that this failure to properly supervise people on what they have learned can be the biggest single stumbling block in the entire exercise of translating concepts into real-world behavior.

Another important aspect of reinforcement is the extent to which the person who is supposed to use the various tools or skills is able to access coaching or advice following the initial training. In the better-managed organizations, training is only step one; conducting one-on-one or group coaching on specific challenges, as well as hosting "clinics" or best practices sessions can be a very powerful step two.

## Organizational Responses to Change Management

In response to the growing concern about people issues in change, organizations are now doing what they know how to do very well. They are assigning people to the problem. From time to time I am coming across people with the title of "change manager" or "director of change management". While I see managing the people side of change as everyone's business, and not something that belongs in one department, assigning a specific role is a good start. It creates a locus of responsibility and a catalyst in promoting, training and coaching around change skills and practices. I certainly can't complain about this solution, having been "manager of organization change" myself for seven years.

How effective this will be depends on the importance that senior executives assign to this role. There is a risk that this can be a token recognition or a way of compartmentalizing change management in a way that allows others to get off the hook. This compartmentalization may continue to maintain the people element of projects as something separate and apart from the “real: business of change, i.e. creating new products, changing processes, or restructuring the organization.

In the early 90s there was a flood of organizational process improvement initiatives. In many cases the responsibility for these was dropped into the hands of HR or other centralized support groups. One factor that diminished the success of some these initiatives was the tendency to keep the ownership and accountability of these initiatives out of the hands of those who actually owned the processes being improved. One the things that Jack Welch did at GE, when the GE Work-Out initiative began was to communicate to business leaders that they were accountable for the success of the Work-Out process.[4] While he did get businesses to have a small group of Work-Out coordinators and consultants, this was seen clearly as a means of helping the businesses get things going during the initial start up.

So, assigning a change management role can be a good way of kick starting solid practices within the organization, as long as one of the deliverables of this role is to create more ownership among other managers for the people side of change.

**Conclusions**

Most organizations are aware of the need to focus on people issues in times of change. Change is no longer a one-time event where we are thrown into a bit of uncertainty and then work our way to a more comfortable adaptive steady state. If there is a steady state, it doesn’t last for very long. We will always have one foot in the old way and one foot tentatively and uncertainly in the new way of doing things.

In managing these changes, organizations need to feel more comfortable around actively building a people or influence strategy. This is often difficult for the reasons I have mentioned. There is also a misconception that dealing with “A” takes too long and slows everything down. This is not the case. I have seen examples where people attempt to implement as quickly as possible, and then get into all kinds of delay as they try to deal with rework, retooling and reselling because of the initial lack of buy-in.

The better thing to do is to imagine, from the outset, that “Q” and “A” are in fact parallel paths. Imagine the DNA molecule, made up of two parallel strands, one being “A” and the other “Q”. There are short bridges connecting the strands all along their length. As one is talking about something “Q”, such as how to measure some organizational performance, the conversation needs to jump to the opposing strand “A” to discuss how people will react to this measuring and how to make those affected more comfortable in the process. [5]

In this light, working on the people and technical issues are seen as joint exercises. When a change management initiative works on both together, then we often witness less rework, since issues are dealt with before they become serious problems. My experience is that projects managed this way actually take less time to execute and are more successful.

**Recommendations**

In concluding I would like to make a number of suggestions that can help in any change management strategy.

1. The people side of change is often ignored or undervalued. Anything you can do to raise the awareness of this can help promote a more balanced approach to project success. Having people reflect on their past change experiences (positive and negative) is a good place to start.

2. Change may not be comfortable for people. The important question that provides the platform for success is “How do we help him/her/them feel more comfortable?” “How do we manage this project or change in a way that helps people feel that they have greater control?” It’s not about manipulation. It’s about understanding and meeting needs. We have no hesitation in doing this when we want our customers to buy a new product. We need to bring that type of thinking when it comes to internal changes as well.

3. When we are “station stop” on the subject of people we are halfway there. The tools and concepts are merely a means of forcing us to have that conversation. The tools should become a means to an end and not an end in itself. They should be simple and practical. The tools based on the GE “Change Acceleration Process”, or CAP is one example of a set of simple, field-tested tools have been used successfully in a number of organizations.[6]

4. Training on tools needs to be accompanied with development in the skills that will help operationalize the tools in the real world. This means training in listening, negotiating, joint problem solving, assertive communication, etc.. It also helps to define specific competencies for these roles, so that the appropriate support functions such as HR, can create meaningful and relevant training and development opportunities. See point below.

5. An important component of success is the ability to describe behaviors in very clear, tangible ways. When we are able to define what success “looks like” we can evaluate it, we can train it and we can reinforce it. A good place to start this discussion on behaviors is with the senior group who will be role modeling positive change management. In this case we want to ensure that the people leading the charge on change are seen as behaving in ways that are observably supportive. This may mean that the change management tools are not just for the project leaders lower down in the organization, but that the leadership team should be using these when they are contemplating an important initiative or strategic direction.

6. Basic training in tools and techniques have a better chance of viability “in vivo” when the skills are reinforced and encourages by effective coaching and constant supervision. Having project reviews where the accountable leadership actually asks, questions, and pushes around the people side of change can help prevent the natural default into the technical side of change.

7. Incorporating a people approach into managing is what effective leadership is all about. It’s not only about change initiatives or specific projects. It’s about running the business. A helpful beginning can be to assign some people to a function called

"Change Management". However this should be seen as a transitional role whose ultimate goal is to internalize the A thinking and skills into the day-to-day work. To make sure this happens the role needs to have clear measures that relate to building internal capacity. Since this capacity goes beyond just projects, it should have strong links to Operations and other support roles that are there to encourage culture change.

**Footnotes and References**

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[1] Michael Marx, *Teaching Soft Skills Makes For Six Sigma Success*, iSigma Magazine, January 15, 2008.

[2] There are lots of resources on the change process. William Bridges, *Making Sense of Life's Transitions* (Addison-Wesley, 1980) and his book Managing *Transitions: making The Most of Change* (Addison-Wesley, 1991) provides a good understanding of the personal journey around change. *Managing Change and Transition* (Harvard Business Essentials, Harvard Business school Press, 2003) provides a series of articles on the subject. Chip Heath and Dan Heath's Book *Switch: How To Change Things When Change Is Hard* (Random House Canada, 2010) provides some tactical advice and case studies on how to help people make changes.

[3] Ultimately we are talking about behavior change. Almost every significant process change will require a behavior change on the part of those involved. One of the important change tools in the model that I use is to identify what specific behaviors have to change and to assess what needs to support these changes. If one imagines that the new behaviors are like the roof of a building, then we need to identify those pillars that will support the roof. This could include skills development, whether we need to change our measures, how we reward or recognize those desired behaviors, and what protocols, norms and technology may need to be adjusted or changed to support the new behaviors. When we are unable to do this effectively, behaviors can easily revert to the "old ways".

[4] Work-Out is a group problem solving process originally developed by GE in 1989 as a means of involving employees in removing bureaucracy and low-value work from the business. It was considered to be an important empowerment tool in that employees, without their managers present, were responsible for identifying and fixing problems. For additional information on Work-Out, refer to *Speed, Simplicity, Self-Confidence*, Noel Tichy and Ram Charan, Harvard Business review, September-October 1989, pp. 112-120. There is also a more recent article, The *Work-Out Process at General Electric, A Story in Culture Change*, downloadeable as a pdf from:
http://www.carlaspler.com/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=16&Itemid=43

[5] If I keep talking about biological examples and analogies, it's because I am trying to show off that my initial degree was in cell biology and genetics.

[6] I have used the GE "CAP" approach since it was introduced in approximately 1992 when I was one of the people responsible for helping promote its use within GE. Since then I have

adapted the materials and tools and revised them to my own practice within a wide variety of organizations. There is a brief summary of the GE approach at: http://bvonderlinn.wordpress.com/2009/01/25/overview-of-ges-change-acceleration-process-cap/.

There is also additional information on my web site: http://www.carlaspler.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=21:managing-and-influencing-change&catid=14:training-programs&Itemid=36

## The Author

Carl Aspler has worked as an organization change specialist for over thirty years. He has worked as an operations manager, trainer, and manager of executive development.

Carl has facilitated hundreds of meetings, strategy sessions and teambuilding events in both the public and private sector. He has designed action learning programs and taught courses in leadership, coaching, facilitation skills, conflict management and problem solving in a wide variety of settings from high tech, financial services, manufacturing, entertainment and the service industry. His programs have been delivered in Canada, The U.S., Europe, Australia and the Caribbean.

Since 1995 Carl has managed Carl Aspler & Associates Inc., a firm specializing in organization change, facilitation, teambuilding and training. His clients have included the Canadian government, Sears, Maple Leaf Foods, Home Depot, Bombardier, Vincor International, Desjardins Financial, Rolls-Royce, Xtrata, Bell Canada, Nike and the many businesses of General Electric.

From 1997 until 2003 he was involved as a faculty member of GE Capital's Center for Learning teaching change management as part of GE's drive towards Six Sigma quality. He has also been part-time faculty at University of Toronto's Diploma Program in Adult Education as well as the Ivey School of Business. He was also a consultant with Queen's University's Centre for Enterprise Development.

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