SHRM Foundation's
Effective Practice Guidelines Series

Leading Effective Change:
A Primer for the HR Professional

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Leading Effective Change: A Primer for the HR Professional

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FOREWORD

Change—especially major change—affects employees at every level of an organization.

A recent SHRM survey found that 82 percent of organizations had been involved in a change management initiative involving the HR function over the previous 24 months. Clearly, managing change has become an essential part of many managers' jobs.

This report is written for the HR professional who wants to better understand the dynamics of organizational change and seeks guidelines for implementing change effectively.

"Change management" is defined as a structured approach to transitioning individuals, teams and organizations from a current state to a desired future state. It can be applied to situations such as downsizing, introducing a new internal process or adding new technology. Research shows that actively managing change can increase the success rate of these initiatives. This report will provide you with tools to do that.

The SHRM Foundation's Effective Practice Guidelines series now includes more than 20 titles. Created in 2004 for busy HR professionals, the series integrates research findings with expert opinion on how to conduct effective HR practice. It provides the tools to successfully practice evidence-based management. Other recent reports include *Evaluating Worksite Wellness*, *The Aging Workforce*, and *Leveraging Workplace Flexibility for Engagement and Productivity*. To ensure the material is both practical and research-based, the reports are written by subject-matter experts and are then peer-reviewed by both academics and HR professionals.

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Mark Schmit, Ph.D., SHRM-SCP

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John Austin works at the intersection of research and practice as the president of Three Translation Leadership. Prior to his current position, Dr. Austin was a principal at Decision Strategies International and a management professor at Penn State University and University of Washington. He continues to teach executives for the Wharton School, Georgetown University and The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. John has worked with numerous Global *Fortune* 500 companies as an executive development resource.

Dr. Austin has a B.A. in economics from Johns Hopkins University and a Ph.D. in management from Boston College. He is a thought leader in the areas of team leadership, organizational change implementation and strategic decision-making. His research on knowledge-based decision-making teams is widely cited in the academic literature, as is his work on the strategic actions of internal change agents. Dr. Austin's work on knowledge transfer in managerial teams has been used to develop executive teams around the world.

Dr. Austin is an experienced facilitator and an award-winning teacher who has worked with practicing executives on six continents. He has developed leaders and led long-term projects in the areas of change management, scenario planning, team performance, strategic decision-making and strategy execution. His experience with individuals at all levels of organizations enables him to translate broad strategies and concepts into actionable, engaging programs.

Dr. Austin's research has been published in leading management and applied psychology journals, including *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Organization Design* and Organization Science, as well as practice-oriented publications, including *HR Magazine* and *The OD Practitioner*. Dr. Austin's work has been recognized with three Best Paper awards from the Academy of Management and has been mentioned in a number of media outlets, including CNN, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Barron's*. Dr. Austin's new book, *Unquestioned Brilliance: Navigating a Fundamental Leadership Trap*, will be published in 2015.

Rapid and regular organizational change is the new normal in many industries today.

LEADING EFFECTIVE CHANGE: A PRIMER FOR THE HR PROFESSIONAL

Leading the process of change is an essential part of any manager's job. A 2007 Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) survey found that 82 percent of organizations had been involved in a change management initiative involving the HR function over the previous 24 months. In fact, organizations reported more than four major change initiatives on average. Clearly, change management is now a core skill for HR in a majority of organizations.

Although change can be hard to control, it does not have to overwhelm an organization. With disciplined thinking and flexible implementation, change leaders can clarify and focus complex organizational change. A skilled HR team can increase perceptions of fairness, early employee engagement and trust—all of which will improve employees' responses to change.

This report is written for the HR professional who wants to understand organizational change and seeks guidelines for implementing change. Part 1 places the skill of leading change within the context of the HR profession and considers how organizational change affects individuals. Part 2 examines some representative prescriptive change models and considers how managers can use models of change to clarify a complex situation. Part 3 includes guidelines for practice that can improve the effectiveness of almost any change process, as well as case studies and suggested techniques for translating the guidelines into behaviors.

PART 1: CHANGE AND THE HR PROFESSIONAL

Rapid and regular organizational change is the new normal in many industries today. In an American Management Association/Human Resource Institute survey of approximately 1,400 executives, 82 percent of respondents said that the pace of change in their organizations had increased over the previous five years. And 69 percent reported that their firms had experienced severe shifts during the past year.[1]

Responses to the increasing rate and intensity of change vary, but high-performance organizations are more likely to:

- View change as a manageable opportunity.

- See themselves as resilient.
- Believe their change capabilities are greater than those of their competitors.
- Communicate their vision and values often.
- Put training resources toward improving managers' change-management skills.

Embracing change as an opportunity rather than as a burden can help organizations grow and thrive. And nurturing skills of change management can help HR professionals lead their organizations through the difficult transitions often associated with major changes.

A 2007 study by SHRM, *Change Management Survey Report*,[2] demonstrated that change

management has moved to the core of the HR profession, and subsequent surveys supported that conclusion. Between 2008 and 2012, "managing change and cultural transformation" has consistently appeared among the top five HR topics assessed in the *Creating People Advantage* report by Boston Consulting Group/World Federation of People Management Associations.[3] Simply put, managing change is a core HR skill needed across the globe in the present and the future.

Types of Change

Generally, the most change occurs in large, publicly traded, for-profit organizations, but smaller organizations report an average of more than three planned changes

Figure 1: Changes Planned or Implemented During the Past 24 Months

Change	Percent
New/revised performance management process	58%
Facilities change	57%
Organizational culture change	54%
New/revised HRIS	53%
New/revised IT systems	51%
Organizational repositioning or re-alignment	45%
New/revised financial/accounting systems	41%
Major staffing changes	40%
Diversity or cross-cultural communication initiatives	38%
Operational changes in response to legislation/economic conditions	33%
Product rebranding	26%
Acquisition	25%
Offshoring or outsourcing	16%
Merger	10%
Initial public offering or corporate ownership change	8%

Source: Benedict, A. (2007). *2007 change management survey report.* Alexandria, VA: Society for Human Resource Management.

per year. Change management is an important skill to develop regardless of the size of the organization. A change in a smaller organization may seem easier because it involves fewer systems and people. But to complete the process, a small organization usually has fewer staff available and few, if any, outside consultants—and this brings its own challenges.

The most common types of change identified in the SHRM survey mentioned above are listed in Figure 1. Most HR managers reported that in the previous 24 months their organizations had revised performance management systems, changed facilities, addressed organizational culture changes, implemented human resource information system (HRIS) changes or made other IT system changes. With the possible exception of facilities changes, all of these are complex, multisystem transformations. Such initiatives require careful change management processes, in which HR plays a central role.

HR's Role at the Organizational Level: Driving Change

Human resource management is a boundary-spanning function, both vertically and horizontally. This uniquely positions HR professionals to drive change initiatives through any organization. However, as Figure 2 illustrates, this role does not always translate into involvement throughout the change process. HR tends to play a larger role prior to the implementation of change and a much smaller role during and after implementation.

Prior to a change, HR managers often assess organizational readiness for change, analyze the impact on key stakeholders, design training, and plan and coordinate communication about the change. Later in this report we will consider ways to expand HR's role during and after implementation.

HR's Role at the Individual Level: Guiding Employees

Although HR professionals must work at the macro level to implement organizational change, it is vital to understand the effects on employees at the individual level as well. The processes a firm's HR team puts in place to guide employees through major organizational changes can influence many aspects of each individual's response, including job satisfaction, stress and ongoing commitment to the change.

Job satisfaction and intent to leave

Often, an employee's feeling of uncertainty around a change will reduce job satisfaction and increase his or her intent to leave. Supportive HR leadership and the perception that change is well planned can reduce psychological uncertainty. Uncertainty will increase if change becomes more frequent or if the change fundamentally alters an individual's work.[4]

Stress

There is no denying that change creates stress. Researchers have found that if individuals view a change as equitable, are engaged in the change process, have accessible leaders and feel connected through communication about the change, stress can be markedly reduced.[5]

Commitment to the change

Commitment to a change increases employee retention, compliance and job satisfaction. An HR team can help increase commitment by improving quality of communication about the change, perceptions of justice, trust in management and employee input in the change process. Individual differences play a significant part in

Figure 2: HR Involvement in Major Changes
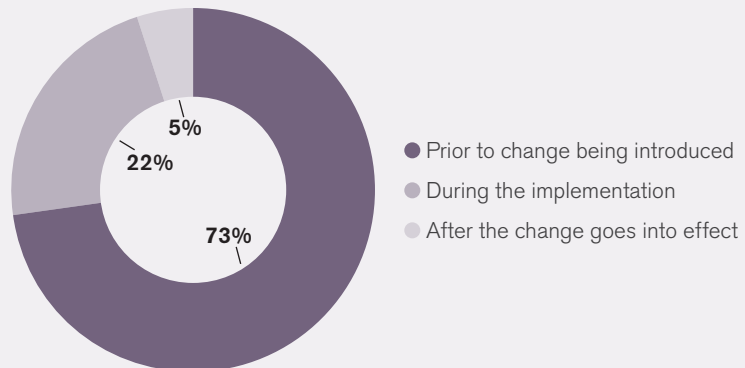
5%

22%

73%

- Prior to change being introduced
- During the implementation
- After the change goes into effect

Source: Benedict, A. (2007). *2007 change management survey report.* Alexandria, VA: Society for Human Resource Management.

Table 1: Prescriptive Change Models

Model	Change phase	Value to HR manager	Similar models
Leadership Model: Kotter Leading Change	Enacting	Leadership development resource	GE Change Acceleration Process; Kouzes and Posner Leadership Challenge
Systems Model: Burke-Litwin Change Drivers	Designing	Assessing readiness & identifying gaps	Senge; Leavitt's Diamond; McKinsey's 7-S
Stakeholder/Skills Model: Prosci ADKAR	Enacting/ Sustaining	Communicating & identifying skills	LaMarsh Managed Change
Recovery Model: Kübler-Ross Change Curve	Enacting	Managing resistance and facilitating acceptance	Bridges' Managing Transitions; Salerno and Brock's Change Cycle

determining commitment. Cynicism, external locus of control, lower tolerance for ambiguity and low self-efficacy can lower an employee's commitment to a change.[6]

In general, researchers have demonstrated that fostering trust, perceptions of fairness and early employee engagement will improve employees' responses to change.

In the next section, we will focus on specific models of change and how HR managers can use them effectively to improve and expand their roles in the change process at the organizational and individual levels.

PART 2: PRESCRIPTIVE CHANGE MODELS

Change dynamics are intimately tied to context, and every context offers unique interpersonal, structural, cultural and competitive dynamics. Despite these different dynamics, HR professionals can benefit from looking at some systematic studies and models of change. Exposure to various models, combined with years of practical experience, will help change leaders define and refine their points of view. Prescriptive models are particularly valuable because they offer specific

guidance, or "prescriptions" for action, allowing HR professionals to learn from others' experience.

In this section, we examine four prescriptive models, each with specific details of value to most organizations. These models are used widely, but not all are considered a "best practice" in every situation. In Table 1, the last column lists other change models that are similar to each of the models highlighted and

are worth examining if applicable to a specific organization.

A Leadership Model: Kotter's Leading Change

Leadership change models address the audience of senior leaders, explaining how they can push change through an organization. Kotter's is the best known of these models.[7]

Kotter's Leading Change Model is a

Figure 3: Kotter's Model

1. Establish a Sense of Urgency

2. Create a Guiding Coalition

3. Develop Both a Vision and a Strategy

4. Communicate the Vision

5. Empower Employees to Act

6. Generate Short-Term Wins

7. Consolidate Gains to Build More Momentum

8. Institutionalize the New Approaches
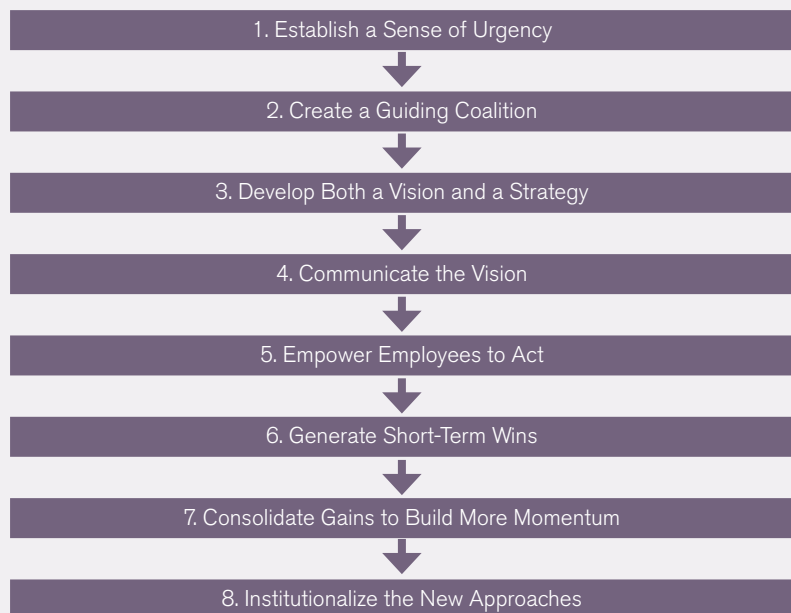
Source: Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading change.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

top-down model of change that starts with the assumption that a proposed change has already been designed. This model gives little attention to assessing the need for change. Its primary aim is to guide leaders through the implementation phase.

Kotter's model (see Figure 3) and other leadership models can be most helpful to the HR manager as guides for leadership development. If a firm will be undertaking changes in the future, leadership models provide ideas about the capabilities senior managers and executives will need to develop to make those changes successful. Two other models with audiences and intentions similar to the Kotter model are GE's Change Acceleration Process[8] and the Kouzes and Posner Leadership Model.[9]

A Systems Model: Burke-Litwin Organizational Performance

Systems models draw attention to the interconnection of various organizational systems. Much more than other change models, systems models focus on situational analysis and data collection. They are valuable aids during the designing change phase because they help guide data collection,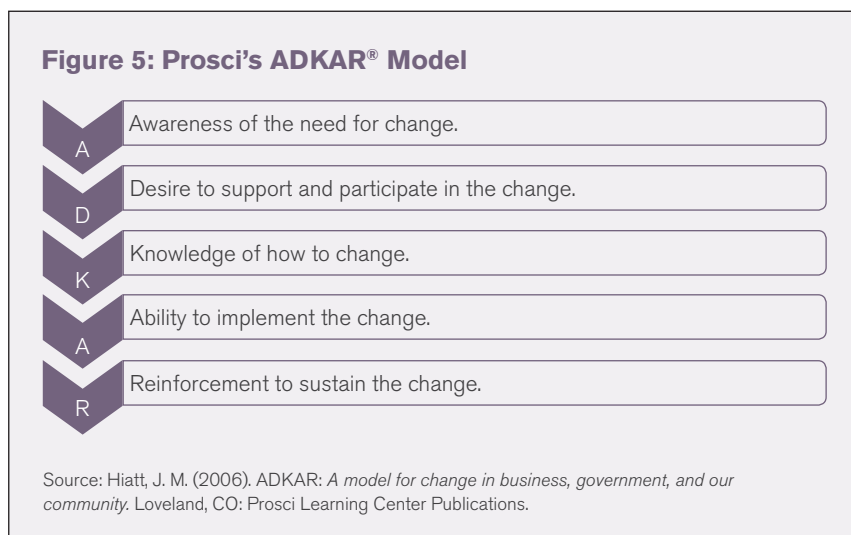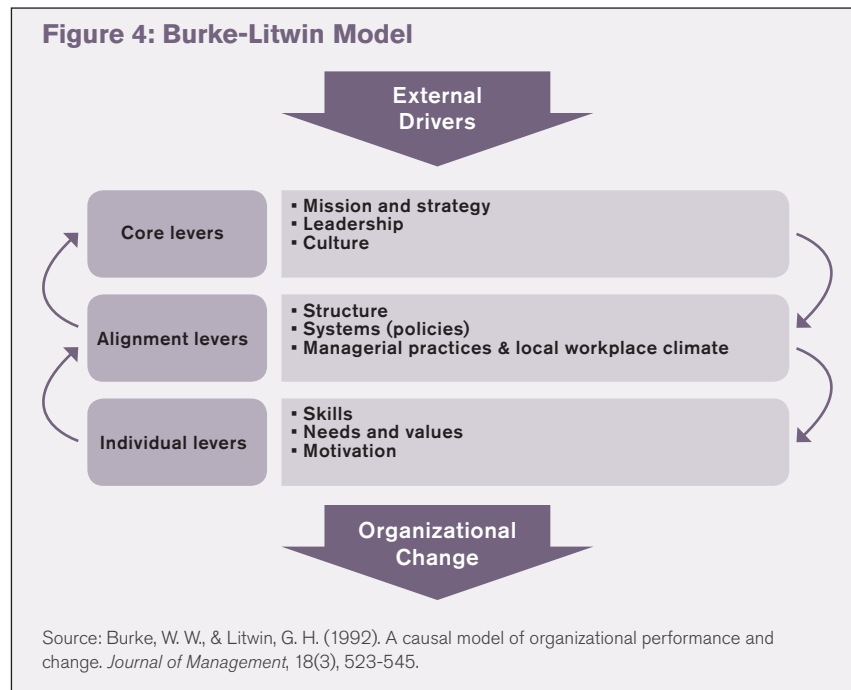 gap analysis and initial action. Systems models start with the assumption that the beginning point of any organizational change is a well-grounded understanding of the current situation. Barriers to change can often be traced to misalignment between systems.

The Burke-Litwin Model (see Figure 4) identifies and links 12 organizational and individual

Figure 4: Burke-Litwin Model

External Drivers

Core levers
- Mission and strategy
- Leadership
- Culture

Alignment levers
- Structure
- Systems (policies)
- Managerial practices & local workplace climate

Individual levers
- Skills
- Needs and values
- Motivation

Organizational Change

Source: Burke, W. W., & Litwin, G. H. (1992). A causal model of organizational performance and change. *Journal of Management*, 18(3), 523-545.

Figure 5: Prosci's ADKAR® Model

A — Awareness of the need for change.

D — Desire to support and participate in the change.

K — Knowledge of how to change.

A — Ability to implement the change.

R — Reinforcement to sustain the change.

Source: Hiatt, J. M. (2006). ADKAR: *A model for change in business, government, and our community.* Loveland, CO: Prosci Learning Center Publications.

levers.[10] Understanding these levers will help an HR manager design readiness-for-change assessments and guide conversations. Senge's Learning Organization Framework is probably the most widely known of the systems models.[11] Others are Leavitt's Diamond[12] and the McKinsey 7-S model.[13]

A Stakeholder and Skills Model: Prosci's ADKAR

Prosci's ADKAR Model[14] (see Figure 5) is one that focuses the change leader's attention on identifying stakeholders, motivating them to support the change and giving them the skills needed to succeed when the change is implemented. Like

Figure 6: Kübler-Ross Change Curve
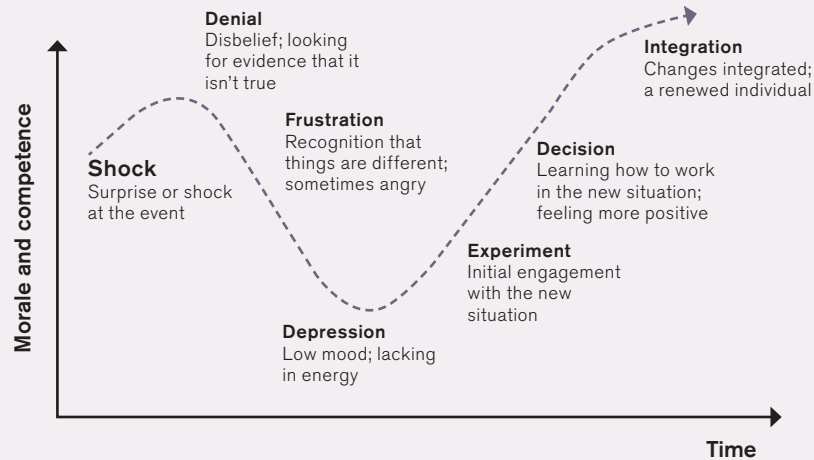
Source: Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying.* New York: Macmillan.

Kotter's Leading Change Model, ADKAR is most relevant during the phase of enacting a change and has little to contribute during the design phase. Unlike Kotter's model, ADKAR offers some guidance for sustaining a change. Models like Prosci's ADKAR that address stakeholder identification, framing and communication provide value throughout the life of a change initiative.

Motivating others to support the change often falls to the HR manager. Prosci's ADKAR and similar models, such as the LaMarsh Managed Change Model, can help HR managers design appropriate skills development initiatives to support a change.

A Recovery Model: Kübler-Ross Change Curve

Numerous change models evolved out of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's classic work on the stages of grief, describing how people confront death.[15] When applied to organizational change, the Kübler-Ross Model (see Figure 6) primarily describes how individuals react to the demand to change and addresses individuals' resistance to change.

One drawback of recovery models is that they *assume* resistance to change, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Recovery models identify the introduction of change as a trigger for negative reactions. They do little to inform the design of the change, but try to minimize barriers and resistance to the implementation of a change initiative.

The strength of recovery models is that they invite and facilitate discussion of the emotional consequences of organizational change. Many employees have an emotional response to change, even if they do not express it openly. Recovery models give legitimacy to these emotions, make them easier to address and help HR managers prepare

for resistance to change. Models similar to Kübler-Ross's are Bridges' Managing Transitions Model[16] and Salerno and Brock's Change Cycle.[17]

Applying Prescriptive Change Models

None of the four prescriptive change models described here, nor any others, will perfectly fit a given situation. Organizational change is a complex system problem. Each change has unique dynamics and will require a specific change design.

However, prescriptive change models offer a useful starting point for designing a change process (see Table 2). The change models help leaders identify potential missing pieces in their plans. The role of any change team is to adapt models to fit a real-life situation. The team members should identify a change model that best matches their specific initiative and then modify the model to fit the context. One common approach is to:

1. Identify a "close match" change model.

2. Conduct a situational assessment.

3. Look for the blind spots in the chosen model while matching it to the situation.

4. Find a secondary change model that can address the blind spots or modify the initial model to fit the context.

By the end of the process, a newly created custom-fit model can be used as the scaffolding around which the change team builds a specific action plan.

Table 2: How to Apply Change Models

Model	Useful for	Focus
Leadership Model/ Kotter	Senior leaders driving change initiatives	• Guides implementation of change • Top-down model • Points to capabilities needed to lead change
Systems Model/ Burke-Litwin	HR managers assessing readiness for change	• Shows interconnectedness of organizational systems • Emphasizes situational analysis and data collection • Guides gap analysis and planning
Stakeholder/Skills Model/ADKAR	HR managers supporting change and motivating others to support it	• Helps in identifying and motivating stakeholders • Promotes communication and provides skills for success • Offers guidance for sustaining a change
Recovery Model/ Kübler-Ross	HR managers preparing to handle resistance to change	• Addresses emotional consequences of change • Explains individual reactions, resistance to change • Helps in reducing barriers and resistance to implementation

PART 3: GUIDELINES AND TECHNIQUES FOR FACILITATING CHANGE

Organizational change can be complex and confusing not only for ordinary employees but also for those trying to facilitate the process. In this section, we divide the process into three phases and look at each in detail: 1) the designing phase, 2) the enacting phase and 3) the sustaining phase. These three phases coincide with three "translation moments," when strategic leaders turn abstract ideas into action.[18]

For each of the three phases, we identify specific *common barriers*, *useful techniques* and *guidelines for practice*. Guidelines for practice are specific actions that change leaders, especially HR professionals, should include in any change process. In most cases, these guidelines are revisited repeatedly throughout a change initiative.

We present these phases as a linear progression for the purposes of clarity, but in reality most organizations cycle through each phase more than once. For example, an organization will often reconsider a decision made during the design phase while a change is being implemented, and then reconsider it again as the change is extended to new contexts.

Three case studies detailed on pages 8, 10 and 14 are drawn from real change initiatives in process. HR executives from these companies agreed to tell their stories, revealing the good and the bad, provided the examples remain anonymous. Change is often a sensitive topic within organizations, and few companies are comfortable sharing their challenges publicly. Even changes that are deemed successful have probably upset the status quo. As one HR executive noted:

"Organizational changes can never be categorized as just successful or not. Reality is not that binary. In every change, some things work as expected and some things don't. You just work hard to make sure it is the high priority outcomes of the change that fall on the more successful side."

Phase 1: Designing Change

A surprising number of change models start with the assumption that the change itself has already been defined. Even models that start with a step called "define the change" provide little guidance. But clearly defining the change is an essential part of the process.

Ensuring that changes are pursued for the right reasons from start to finish and that they are the right sorts of changes for the organization should not be an afterthought. HR professionals should revisit the question of whether a change fits their organizations' goals several times throughout the process, not just at the beginning.

Barriers to designing change

Generating a well-designed change is not as simple as sitting down and brainstorming with a group of executives. Predictable traps can get in the way of this first phase:

- **Limited mindsets.** Every decision is filtered through the

assumptions and experiences of the decision-making group. Unfortunately, these assumptions and experiences are usually not discussed openly. Reliance on an industry's or a firm's conventional wisdom and a lack of diverse experiences among members of the decision team can contribute to a limited mindset.[19] If the change design team is not alert to its blind spots, members will limit their options even before considering them.[20]

- **Overconfidence.** Overconfidence can mean that the change team members believe they know more than they really do, or that they are unaware of the multitude of things they do not understand. Overconfidence causes leaders to believe they can predict the future and to ignore the uncertainty embedded in any change process.[21] An overconfident team will:

  - Fail to include contingencies in a change design.
  - Underestimate the time needed to execute a change.
  - Ignore data that suggest the change will not succeed.

  In one company, the change team members recognized that they did not have the answers needed to drive a cultural change, so they designed the change to emerge from conversations with other members of the firm. They resisted the temptation to assume the team had all the knowledge necessary to make the change work.

- **Lack of quality data.** Design teams can be so eager to work on the details of a change that they gloss over holes in their understanding of the current state of affairs. Without good data,

Case Study 1
Elegant Design Is Not Enough

The training and development group of a global technology company took on the task of redesigning leadership development programs to create an industry-leading executive bench. The design team started by running a scenario-planning workshop to identify the work roles essential for success in the future. This process engaged stakeholders from across the organization and a select group of external industry experts. The workshop identified seven job categories that would be the focus of the transformation effort and also future-focused skills to target for development. Finally, the team conducted a rigorous benchmarking study to find current weaknesses in leadership development. It framed the change initiative as a way of fixing those weaknesses.

By engaging a wide range of stakeholders in the planning process, the training and development group was able to identify some natural *change champions* across the organization. Engaging these individuals turned out to be crucial, especially as the training and development leader worked to secure funding for the change initiative. Including industry experts made sure the team was not limiting its assumptions about available skills within the organization.

Several months into the rollout of this initiative, shifts within the industry and strategic changes in the organization led to the realization that one job category was no longer mandatory for future success. The steering committee decided to shut down the design plans around this job category, to shift resources and to add more emphasis to a job category that was increasing in importance for the organization.

Pilot programs and subsequent impacts on targeted employees saw mixed success. Several initiatives thrived, and several struggled to get started or were not well received by stakeholders. For job categories in which the change was successful, there is now evidence that new skills are taking hold.

The largest barrier to sustained success in this project seems to be the tension between a large-scale transformation of jobs and short-term pressure to manage costs. Even though the project has a five-year time horizon, project leaders must defend its value on a quarterly basis. Identifying an active senior-level change champion and continuing work with stakeholders are the primary activities that are sustaining at least part of this initiative. Still, company leaders continue to question the need for this change initiative.

the team may treat assumptions and hunches about employee perceptions, structural issues or competency gaps as if they were facts.

A change team should begin the design initiative with in-depth data collection, not with an offsite meeting of executives. Asking whether data exist that would prove the team wrong is a good way to assess the quality of data being used. Data should be collected from multiple sources, especially when assessing gaps in competencies.

■ **Limited stakeholder outreach.** Limited mindsets, overconfidence and lack of quality data can all contribute to lack of engagement with key stakeholders during the change design process. If the design team thinks it already knows what it needs to know, lacks data or is not aware of its own biases on an issue, the team is unlikely to seek the perspective of a diverse group of stakeholders. It may use common rationalizations to justify a lack of stakeholder engagement, including a need for secrecy, a belief that speed is of the essence or a desire to avoid burdening people.[22]

Techniques for designing change
The HR professional is well situated to offer organizationwide data and expertise in facilitating the process of designing change, particularly in small and midsize organizations.

■ **Employee surveys and outreach efforts** can help gather the data needed for a strong assessment of the current state of affairs in a firm.

■ **Facilitation techniques** designed to uncover assumptions

and limitations in frames of reference can help ensure that a change is both actionable and realistic.

■ **Outside-in planning techniques,** including scenario planning and uncertainty analysis, can help a team address planning for the future rather than for the present.[23]

Guidelines for designing change
Phase 1 includes three guidelines for good practice (see Table 3):

■ **Conduct a current state assessment.** The role of the HR department is to ensure that members of a change design team are operating with an accurate understanding of organizational capabilities. Just as it is impossible to set driving directions in a GPS without knowing one's current location, the change design team cannot create a map for organizational change without a clear understanding of the starting point.

Before conducting any detailed discussion of a change, the design team should have a clear, comprehensive and accurate snapshot of the current state of the organization. The assessment can include capabilities, resources, committed strategies, competitive assessments and gaps. An HR professional is often best situated to provide these data. Organizational history and standard timing cycles for action within the firm are also

necessary considerations.[24] Many change managers advocate that the change team continually assess the macro environment and adjust the assessment throughout the change process.

■ **Design change for the future, not for the present.** A well-designed change does not assume that the external world is static. The external environment will likely have already changed between the design and implementation phases of the change. Factoring in high-impact uncertainties during the design process will make it easier to implement the change if those uncertainties occur. In addition, the design team should use a future-oriented framework when discussing what capabilities are needed and potential gaps to be addressed. In Case Study 1, for example, the design team examined scenarios to identify future needs, not just current ones.

■ **Create prioritized, actionable and realistic goals.** Returning to the GPS analogy, anyone setting off on a journey needs a destination. Creating a clear description of where the design team wants the change to take the organization makes change execution easier. Describing what the organization will look like once the change has been successfully implemented sets the destination in participants' minds and allows the team to generate actionable goals. In visions of the future, change teams should pay attention to language,

Table 3: Designing Change Guidelines
1. Conduct a current state assessment.
2. Design change for the future, not for the present.
3. Create prioritized, actionable and realistic goals.

organizational timing and practical limits. Examining capability gaps will help ensure that goals are realistic and actionable.

Some aspects of the future state of the organization will always be unknown, so building in flexibility is crucial. The change team should prioritize and keep the primary aims of the change front and center.

Phase 2: Enacting Change

Many books and articles about change management focus almost exclusively on the enacting change phase. Organizations often transfer responsibility for a change process from a design team to an implementation team at the beginning of this phase because the skills and time commitment required for enacting change are significantly different than those required to design a change. Enacting a change often demands a long-term commitment from a dedicated team. During some large systems changes, such as the implementation of a new HRIS, the number of full-time people engaged in the change initiative can surpass the size of entire departments. In such initiatives, the change leader must have team leadership, motivation and budgeting skills, in addition to change management skills.

Barriers to enacting change

Enacting change requires vigilance to make sure the change team is properly prepared and that the organization's employees are receptive. HR professionals can help avoid some of the most common pitfalls:

- **Missing expertise.** The composition of a change team is a crucial consideration. Teams with the correct skills and knowledge will be best equipped

Case Study 2
Recovering from a Change Disaster: Flexible Plans and Deep Sponsorship

The HRIS initiative was perhaps the largest change project the construction materials company had attempted in the past five years. With operations in 16 countries and more than 100,000 employees, leaders knew that bringing in a new system would not be easy. Installing the HRIS was only part of the change. Country managers needed training to use it, recruiting had to be aligned to take advantage of new features, and employees had to adjust to a new way of accessing information.

The process started with a robust project plan. For a full year, the team set goals and priorities, invited stakeholders to troubleshoot design issues, and debated potential future uses of the system. An outside vendor helped manage the process, and a valuable executive champion drove it forward. When it was time for the rollout, the initial pilot went as smoothly as planned. But six months into the rollout the entire project was on the edge of failure.

The industry was experiencing one of the deepest downturns in memory, and the company struggled to keep its costs under control. The HRIS was creating sustainable efficiencies, but was also the most expensive short-term initiative in the works. Pressure to delay or suspend the rollout built, and at a critical moment, the change champion left the company for another opportunity. Leaders suddenly realized that the

"sponsorship spine"—the collection of people who enthusiastically backed the project—was weak. Without strong internal champions, the project was adrift.

The senior VP of HR, who was relatively new to the company and not part of the initial decision-making group, stepped in to convene the full executive team and other key internal stakeholders. During a two-day meeting the group deconstructed the projects, assessing initial goals, examining costs, exploring alternatives, debating opportunity costs of action and inaction, and discussing relationships with external stakeholders. In the end, they reset the plan. Three senior leaders committed to championing project. The overall goals shifted slightly from efficiency and consistency to preparation for improved global competition after the industry downturn.

Today the new HRIS has been rolled out in 12 countries, and the project leader expects to complete the final four rollouts by the end of this year. Each rollout started with a local assessment of the current state of affairs and modifications of the plan to fit the needs of each country. The senior VP of HR says the project was "close to death" at the time of the senior team meeting. She believes that lack of flexibility in the initial plan and limited sponsorship almost doomed the change.

to lead complex projects.[25] Time spent at the beginning of the project thinking about what capabilities will be most valuable can speed the process and mitigate risk.

Often members of the change team do not even recognize that they are missing an essential bit of expertise. Asking the team to create an expertise inventory early in the process will help members use all available expertise and identify missing pieces.

- **Lack of readiness.** Employees may not be properly prepared for a change, which can lead to ambivalence or disinterest. Ambivalence is quite often interpreted as resistance to change,[26] and expectations that there will be resistance may create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which simple disinterest is misinterpreted as active resistance.[27] Conducting a detailed assessment of the current state of the organization during the design phase can help avoid this barrier. One assumption for the team to keep in mind is that what initially looks like resistance to the change may actually be a lack of interest or confusion.

- **Organizational routines.** Habits can be harnessed to reinforce a change.[28] Often, employees are oblivious to the routines that drive their daily interactions. Hidden routines can slow or prevent implementation of a change.[29] Understanding why routines exist and how they relate to a change initiative can help participants focus on changing relevant behaviors, but not become distracted by trying to change behaviors that are peripheral to the initiative.

- **Lack of inducements and employees' belief in themselves.** Employees' confidence in their own ability to succeed interacts with organizational inducements in complex ways. Reward systems and employee confidence both play a role in motivating employees to shift behaviors and adopt a change.[30] Rewards can be used to encourage employees to make the initial behavioral changes required as part of an initiative. However, once the initial behavioral change is complete, the individual's confidence in his or her ability to succeed becomes more important than an external reward. If employees make the behavioral changes but do not believe that they are developing competency in the new behaviors, they are likely to revert to their old behaviors or reduce their efforts.[31] Efforts should address both reward systems and employees' belief in themselves.

- **Initiative fatigue.** A culture of inaction or a track record of failed initiatives can create strong headwinds and slow adoption of a change in any organization. Just as past successes can lead to overconfidence, past failures can lead participants to expect failure. Employee withdrawal from the change initiative is a frequent challenge. In addition, a perception that change initiatives are too frequent and that they distract employees from completing their jobs can slow implementation of change and contribute to ambivalence.

Knowledge of organizational history related to large-scale

changes is invaluable for a change team. For example, an organization that is recovering from a painful period of downsizing will react differently to a new team-based structure than will an organization with a history of growth and collaboration. In Case Study 2, the new HR leader started to see the beginning of fatigue and called the senior team together to address the problem head-on.

Techniques for enacting change

Techniques for enacting change focus on maintaining momentum and ensuring an easy flow of communication.

- **Expertise assessments** can help identify needed skills when assembling a change team.

- **Stakeholder mapping** sets the stage for the communication plan and helps identify individuals who should be part of the team. Stakeholder mapping can also help the change team identify potential champions for the initiative.

- **Project management** expertise is a skill that is needed regardless of the content of the change.

- **Communication planning** is often built into the project management plan and links stakeholder mapping to project management work.

- **Environmental monitoring** can be connected to some of the uncertainties identified during the design phase. The change team should periodically check in with the change sponsor to share new information gathered about the external environment as it relates to the initiative.

Guidelines for enacting change

There are five guidelines for practice in the enacting change phase (see Table 4):

Table 4: Enacting Change Guidelines
1. Prioritize expertise over availability when selecting members of the change team.
2. Secure a senior-level change champion.
3. Identify and engage key stakeholders.
4. Use project management best practices.
5. Monitor the environment for changes and align with other initiatives.

1. **Prioritize expertise, not availability, when selecting members of the change team.** Selecting members of a change team based on criteria such as who has time, who needs extra development opportunities and who is between projects is tempting. But before considering whom to select, leaders should identify the expertise that will be needed on the team. The choice of team leader should be driven by a discussion of expertise, too. The process can be simple: 1) define the task, 2) identify needed expertise and capabilities, and 3) choose the individuals who have the needed expertise and capabilities.

   One executive interviewed for this report noted that carefully selecting the members of the team based on expertise sends a message to the rest of the organization about priorities. If the team is simply a collection of available people, others will assume the change is not important.

2. **Secure a senior-level change champion.** A change process that does not have a senior executive championing it will struggle from the start and is unlikely to gain momentum. Being a change champion is not the same thing as being a change sponsor. A change sponsor has formal responsibility for overseeing the change. A change champion is someone who believes strongly that the change is needed and is willing to advocate for it based on that belief. HR professionals can play a central role in identifying the best change champions. HR can connect executive personal development goals and organizational needs so that the identified sponsor has the potential to be a passionate change champion as well. Case Study 3 highlights the risk of having just one change champion. Multiple champions are always preferred.

3. **Identify and engage key stakeholders.** Stakeholder management is a vital task for enacting organizational change. Conducting a stakeholder mapping exercise early in the process will pay dividends later. HR should carefully identify individuals and groups that are interested and influential. These people may offer valuable expertise, design engagement plans or even map out the most effective path for shepherding the change through the organization. Cohorts of employees or customers can be stakeholders during rollouts of large-scale changes. Each cohort is a different stakeholder group with different interests.

4. **Use project management best practices.** The field of project management has developed a robust toolkit designed specifically for moving forward with complex projects.[33] A change team should have an experienced project manager and should give that manager the power to keep the change on track.

   It is important to balance the pressure to meet deadlines with the commitment to ensure the change will accomplish its objectives. Completing the change as if it were just a checklist helps no one. For this reason, most change teams separate the role of project manager from the role of overall team leader. The demands of those two roles can create tensions that lead to better implementation plans if managed constructively. If the project manager is also the change leader, underlying tensions may be harder to discuss and manage. Successful project management, while often overlooked in prescriptive change models, can continually resurrect focus and energy around the change.

5. **Monitor the environment for changes and align with other initiatives.** The external

environment will have shifted between the time the change is designed and the time it is enacted. The change team should put processes in place to monitor the external environment and make adjustments as needed to account for these shifts. Environmental monitoring should be an explicit, systematic task, not one done casually. Monitoring is easier if the change is originally designed with an eye toward future environmental shifts.

Monitoring and aligning with other organization initiatives is a specific aspect of monitoring the environment that should not be overlooked. Useful overlaps between initiatives, and some potential conflicts, will be discovered.

Phase 3: Sustaining Change

Sustaining a change is more complex than simply maintaining a steady state. Over time the environment, within and outside the organization, shifts. The initiative must adapt. The change project will require modifications as it is extended into new parts of the organization or expanded to link with adjacent projects. Often the change team is disbanded, and the change champions shift to other tasks when implementation is considered complete. The HR professional may be left alone to ensure systems are still aligned and the original aims of the change initiative are met.

If a change is long term, such as a culture change, HR focuses on maintaining momentum. If the change is a discrete one, such

as a technology shift, with a clear endpoint, the focus turns to data collection and monitoring outcomes. If the change is being replicated or expanded to new parts of the organization, the focus usually turns to assessing the new settings and looking for evidence that the initiative needs to be modified to fit the new context.

Barriers to sustaining change

Sustaining a change requires careful monitoring, mindful processing of the situation and attention to data. Several common barriers can get in the way of sustaining a change in the long run:

- **Lack of data collection to assess momentum and change.** Successful initial change pilots can hinder the ability to replicate the change by creating the assumption that the initiative will work everywhere. Managers may decide not to track success beyond the initial pilots. Expectations that things will work well, just like "last time" can set up "confirmation bias," in which change leaders overemphasize evidence that change is working and undervalue evidence of struggles related to the change.[34] Confirmation bias can be a greater risk if initial successes exceeded expectations, causing the change team to reset its baseline for success. In Case Study 3, managers avoided confirmation bias by actively seeking market-level data before settling on a plan for centralizing some functions in Europe.

- **Short-term pressure, lack of flexibility.** Trade-offs between short-term targets and long-term initiatives can hobble change.

Leaders will feel pressure to remove some of the resources allocated to a change as it progresses. The organization may even have a new set of leaders who were not part of the initial change design process. These leaders may not only be less passionate about the change, but they may also come with new ideas to implement, which will compete with the current initiative for leadership attention and organizational resources. As a change becomes part of the status quo, change leaders will experience pressure to reduce implementation costs so resources can be shifted to other newer initiatives. This result can limit the ability of the change leader to make necessary adjustments to the initiative when applying it in new settings. It is possible to maintain flexible organizational routines and use the strength of those routines to the change team's advantage.[35]

- **Conflicting cultures.** Every organization has multiple subcultures.[36] Eventually, an initiative that is introduced from outside one of these subcultures will conflict with local work norms. Efforts to translate a change into local work behaviors and routines can limit this barrier. Unfortunately, time constraints and simple frustration can pressure change leaders to force a change without making an effort to link it to local work routines. Lack of flexibility can trigger a negative dynamic of blame and counter-blame among members of an "outside" change team and employees experienced in the local context. In Case Study 3, the apparel company team was able to

Case Study 3
Design the Structure, Evolve the Culture: Sustaining a Change by Setting It Free

A privately held Italian apparel company had a great problem: It could not keep up with global demand. The company had long enjoyed a strong U.S. market, and in recent years had become successful in Japan, Korea and parts of Southeast Asia. Now the company found unexpected new demand in South America and India, too.

The executive team, guided by the first CEO hired from outside the company, decided to centralize operations in Europe and reinforce a culture of quality and employee pride. Historically, the company had let each country run its own marketing campaigns and design products to fit its culture. Although this approach had contributed to company growth, the executive team was concerned that it was hurting brand quality and risked turning the company's products into high-volume, low-margin commodities. The centralization initiative was partially designed to shift to a lower-volume, higher-quality product business model.

The initiative started with two work streams. The first stream began assessing the organization's current structure and identifying ways to align work and to gradually move toward more centralized marketing and design. This change team had permission to design a process sensitive to individual country differences and flexible in speed of implementation, but also consistent with the message that the company was committed to centralizing marketing and design decisions in Europe. The second work stream began exploring options for building a stronger corporate culture around quality and pride. This change team initially focused on internal stakeholder workshops in each country to help identify the core company culture in each.

The change was implemented based on data collected in the first phase. As the change teams collected information, they also discovered individuals with innovative ideas working in other countries. In several cases, these individuals were added to the

change teams as local initiative translators or full-time members temporarily relocated to Europe. The teams soon realized that the restructuring initiative could be managed as a centrally driven change initiative, but that the culture change would have to be more organic and motivated by champions at the local level.

HR managers involved in this change overwhelmingly believe it is sustainable and progressing better than they had hoped at the beginning. They attribute the success of both parts, structural and cultural, to consistent communication, alignment of the parts and local ownership of the cultural messages. Change champions in each country often talk with each other and share stories they tell to reinforce the shift from the past to the future. Country-level HR managers acknowledge that the cultural shift will move more slowly in certain countries. Speed is not a primary measure of success in this case, as long as there is evidence of progress.

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limit this type of backlash by engaging country-level managers and employees.

Sustaining change techniques
Techniques for sustaining change focus attention on creating a clear understanding of new contexts, collecting useful data for monitoring momentum and assessing the need to adjust the initiative.

- **Scheduled situational snapshots** with each local area affected by the initiative will help the change team keep the focus on local issues.

- **Leveraging current HRIS and employee surveys** can provide timely data about the momentum and impact of the initiative.

- **Periodic project pre-mortems** will help the change

team anticipate some of the places the initiative mway face barriers as it ages and expands. A pre-mortem is an exercise in which a team envisions failure of a project as a way to identify potential barriers and proactively address them before they derail the project. Techniques that focus attention on the specific context can help the change team look for contextual

differences and shifts in the environment that may slow momentum of the change.

Guidelines for sustaining change

In Phase 3, there are four important guidelines to keep in mind (see Table 5):

1. **Track the impact of the change and engagement of stakeholders.** At some point a change initiative becomes part of the status quo, but it is important to keep monitoring perceptions and behavioral shifts. If the organization administers an annual employee survey, it can be used to assess the impact of the change. HR professionals can reach out to stakeholders with surveys and interviews scheduled as part of the project management plan. Without these assessments, managers may lose sight of the change objectives or prematurely assume success or failure.

2. **Find opportunities to tell the pre-change story.** As new employees enter the firm and others shift to new positions, organizational memory changes. Fewer people will remember the situation before the change took place, and this can lead to a slowdown in momentum. HR professionals should remind people of the problems the change helped resolve. This will keep the objectives of the initiative front and center and give participants a sense of momentum and accomplishment. For example, in Case Study 2, the "crisis" senior team meeting

Table 5: Sustaining Change Guidelines
1. Track the impact of the change and engagement of stakeholders.
2. Find opportunities to tell the pre-change story.
3. Look for evidence that the initiative does not fit the situation.
4. Keep working to translate the overall design goal into local behaviors.

became an opportunity to tell the pre-change story and get the initiative back on track.

3. **When expanding to new settings, look for evidence that the initiative does not fit the setting.** When leading an initiative, everyone tends to look for evidence that things are going well and to downplay evidence that plans are off track. This is known as the confirmation bias. The change team should always ask how the initiative does not fit any new situation to counteract the confirmation bias and identify challenges before they become serious problems.

4. **Keep working to translate the general design goal into local behaviors.** Each part of an organization establishes unique work routines. The change manager should understand differences among various departments and work to translate change goals into behaviors that will fit each day-to-day routine. Only relevant routines will be changed, thus lessening the impact on participants and making change less threatening. For example, in Case Study 3, managers built enthusiasm by shifting culture change work to the country level.

Implications for Talent Management

Developing talented change leaders is crucial for virtually any organization. Successful change requires midlevel managers to have relevant team leadership, change process, communication and project management skills. And senior leaders must understand the complexity, time commitment, and need for active and visible sponsorship during change initiatives.

If change is a significant reality within an organization, the topic should be integrated into leadership development programs. Change initiatives are valuable learning opportunities for rising leaders. The ability to effectively lead change should also be a factor in recruiting executive talent and promoting employees.

Finally, leadership transitions may influence the success or failure of change projects. Turnover can slow change initiatives while the new leaders are brought up to speed. In some cases, the original change champion disappears from the scene. For long-term change initiatives, it is wise to build in a leadership succession plan.

Understanding the motors that drive change can help HR professionals and their organizations anticipate and react to unplanned changes.

CONCLUSION

Change happens—whether planned or as a result of unplanned external events. Most organizations today are managing multiple change initiatives, so leading change is now a prerequisite for HR professionals. Figure 7 reviews basic steps to follow to establish a reputation as an effective change leader.

Understanding the motors that drive change can help HR professionals and their organizations anticipate and react to unplanned changes. Understanding general principles of change can help HR focus and prioritize during a change initiative.

The bottom line is that organizational change is complex and requires constant vigilance to manage. The guidelines in this report outline specific actions that HR teams can advocate as part of any change process. By playing an active role in an organizational change, the HR professional can ensure that all systems are aligned to make the change initiative successful and to keep it connected to the long-term organizational strategy.

Figure 7: Pathway for Developing Change Leadership Capabilities

1	**Understand** how individuals respond to organizational change.
2	**Study** prescriptive change models to develop personal change leadership principles.
3	**Follow** guidelines for practice, or make a mindful choice to stray from guidelines.
4	**Research** techniques for implementing the guidelines.

With disciplined thinking and flexible implementation, change leaders can clarify and focus complex organizational change. A skillful HR team can increase perceptions of fairness, early employee engagement and trust—all of which will improve employees' responses to change.

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Embracing change as an opportunity rather than a burden can help organizations grow and thrive.

SUGGESTED READINGS

The following books, arranged by topic, offer practical techniques and useful illustrations to guide the change process. They are written for practicing managers, although not specifically for HR managers.

Prescriptive Change

Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading change.* **Boston: Harvard Business School Press.** Considered the textbook for leading change. Any change practitioner should have at least a cursory knowledge of Kotter's eight steps for leading change. Written for leaders, with examples that will resonate with executives.

Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2010). *Switch: How to change things when change is hard.* **New York: Broadway Books.** An engaging change leadership book grounded in solid research about decision-making, influence and organizational change. Includes ideas for how to direct, motivate and shape the way toward change.

Salerno, A., & Brock, L. (2008). *The change cycle: How people can survive and thrive in organizational change.* **San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.** A contemporary change model based on the recovery cycle. A practical guide for helping employees and stakeholders work through the change cycle.

Anderson, D., & Ackerman-Anderson, L. S. (2010). *Beyond change management: How to achieve breakthrough results through conscious change leadership.* **San Francisco: Pfeiffer.** Focuses attention on the leadership mindset, behavioral modeling, culture change and large systems implementation. Offers practical ways to work through the challenge of leaders who do not see roadblocks to change. A valuable resource for the HR manager who must guide a change from start to finish.

Conner, D. (1993). *Managing at the speed of change: How resilient managers succeed and prosper where others fail.* **New York: Villard Books.** A good choice for those faced with strong resistance to change. Shows readers how to bring people on board by moving them from pessimism and doubt to optimism and acceptance.

Designing Change

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow.* **New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.** Written by a Nobel Prize winner. Provides a detailed explanation of how individuals think and make sense of the world. A thorough overview of behavioral decision-making and a great resource for trainers in the field of critical thinking, decision-making and strategic planning.

Kim, W. C., & Mauborgne, R. (2005). *Blue ocean strategy: How to create uncontested market space and make the competition irrelevant.* **Boston: Harvard Business School Press. Frei, F., & Morriss, A. (2012).** *Uncommon service: How to win by putting customers at the core of your business.* **Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.** These books address the external environment. *Blue Ocean Strategy* provides tools to help a senior team redefine the competitive landscape. *Uncommon Service* offers a similar set of tools addressing service and customer expectations. Can be used to stimulate strategic thinking at the start of a design process.

Schoemaker, P. J. H., & Gunther, R. E. (2002). *Profiting from uncertainty: Strategies for succeeding no matter what the future brings.* **New York: Free Press.** Presents practical techniques using scenarios to chart potential futures. Designed to inspire decision-makers to build multiple, realistic potential futures and to set strategies that account for the uncertainties revealed. Helps move a design team toward a future focus.

Enacting Change

Schmidt, T. (2009). *Strategic project management made simple: Practical tools for leaders and teams.* **Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.** Brings the project management novice up to speed and helps a project manager ask the right questions to keep any project focused and on track.

Patterson, K. (2008). *Influencer: The power to change anything.* **New York: McGraw-Hill. Shell, G. R., & Moussa, M. (2007).** *The art of woo: Using strategic persuasion to sell your ideas.* **New York: Portfolio.** Both books provide systematic ways to think about persuasion and influence. Valuable for those who find themselves in boundary-spanning roles either as part of a change initiative or as a routine part of their jobs.

Bridges, W. (2003). *Managing transitions.* **London: Nicholas Brealey.** Provides a practical model to help ease transitions. Helpful when a change requires significant employee behavioral change.

Sustaining Change

Senge, P. M. (Ed.). (1994). *The fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization.* **New York: Random House.** This approach remains valuable for creating a culture of sustained learning. The elements of the learning organization can help with the attention to context needed to sustain a change initiative over time.

Spitzer, D. R. (2007). *Transforming performance measurement: Rethinking the way we measure and drive organizational success.* **New York: American Management Association.** Challenges the reader to think carefully about how performance is measured in an organization and gives practical advice for obtaining information that is relevant and useful.

Sutton, R. I., & Rao, H. (2014). *Scaling up excellence: Getting to more without settling for less.* **New York: Crown Business.** A thought-provoking assessment of the key decisions and options organizations confront when trying to scale. The book explores a number of approaches to make scaling more effective. Useful for HR practitioners embedded in an expanding organization who need an external perspective.

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