



Rise of the change manager

Catherine Smithson outlines the history of change management, including the rise of the change manager

The increased volume, pace and complexity of change has produced a new profession: the Change Manager. This new role is a variable mixture of HR professional, L&D and Communications specialist, combined with a dash of Facilitator and Executive Coach – sometimes with Project Manager added in.

We've also seen the emergence of new professional bodies like the Change Management Institute (founded in Australia and now established internationally), the Association of Change Management Professionals, accreditation programs, international and local conferences, as well as university degrees and diplomas.

Despite the fact that the change management function and roles are becoming well accepted in organisations, there's still a lot of confusion about what change managers do and don't do, how they interact with other teams like HR and project management and where to locate them.

If you've tried to hire a change manager lately, you've probably also noticed that recruiters and candidates are also perplexed about the capabilities and experience required to be an effective change manager, which can create roadblocks to recruiting the right people in a hot skills area.

So let's start at the beginning: what is change management and what does a change manager do?

Where did change management come from?

'Change management' itself was originally an IT term, which meant change control or the process involved in moving from one IT system to another. It still has this meaning in IT-land, so take note: you may be at cross-purposes when you're talking to IT professionals!

In the 1990s, change management meant 'communications and training'. These two activities were included as deliverables in project management methodologies like PRINCE2, and still are.

'Warm and fuzzy', 'soft stuff' and 'group hugs' were also some of the terms used for change management. These labels were often used in fun of course, but they indicated a lack of understanding by business leaders and project managers of how the people-side of change contributes to successful change and benefit realisation.

Most of the time, change management was used as 'firefighting' when resistance to change became a burning issue and so it was reactive and ad hoc. Every change manager, it seemed, used different models, tools and tactics. Finally, change management wasn't something an organisation could build capability in – it had to be brought in each time with consultants. Or an internal OD or HR professional handled change management.

In 2011, change management has expanded beyond communications and training. These tactics are still important and will always be part of change management, but in today's complex environment, they are simply not enough to drive successful change.

Prosci, the world's leading change management research and publishing company, gives this definition of change management: "The processes, tools and techniques to manage the people-side of change to achieve the required business outcome."

This definition is a useful one, firstly because it focuses change management on the people-side of change – getting people ready, willing and able to work successfully in the future state. By contrast, project management and business process improvement concentrate on the solution or the technical side of the change.

It's true that many project managers and BPI specialists, including Lean Six Sigma practitioners, view change management as part of their role. But I think it is fair to say change management usually doesn't get the resourcing or focus required when it's one of many deliverables from a busy project manager.

The other key part of this definition is the emphasis on achieving the required business outcomes. It isn't enough to create a great communications plan, or to engage people or enthuse them – change management needs to play its role in achieving the goals of the change. Change managers, like HR professionals, need to have business acumen and an outcome; not activity, but focus.

Beyond comms and training

Modern change management uses a range of tactics to create change-ready people. Communications and training are useful tools, but they can't address all the people challenges of a change. In the Prosci methodology, for example, there are five change management plans, blended into an overall change management plan, which is integrated with the project plan. Each of the five plans is targeted at a different people challenge:

- Communications – to build awareness of change
- Sponsor roadmap – to build effective leadership among the sponsor and key executives
- Coaching plan – to develop managers' capability in leading change with their teams
- Resistance management plan – to anticipate and pro-actively address resistance
- Training plan – to develop the knowledge and skills to work in the future state

What does a change manager do?

I often say that the last person you should ask to manage change is the change manager! In the same way, we wouldn't expect the HR manager to manage all the people in the organisation. In the work we do, we promote the idea that the change manager is a 'back stage' person – developing the change management strategy and plans, and coaching the key players to fulfil their role. Those key players are the change leaders of the organisation – the sponsor/CEO, senior executives, middle managers and team leaders, who make the change a reality in their teams.

The approach my company takes is very different to what some change managers have become used to. Change managers are planners, facilitators, coaches, enablers – but I don't believe they are effective as the 'face and voice' of the change. Decades of research, by Prosci, TJ and Sandar Larkin and many others, tell us that employees prefer to hear about change from their direct manager and from senior executives. Leadership is the number one success factor for change, according to Prosci's most recent *Best Practices in Change Management Benchmarking Report*, as well as studies by IBM and many others.

Finding a home for change management

Five years ago I predicted that HR would be the most natural home for change management. I thought that the skillset of the change manager – internal consulting, facilitating, coaching leaders, using HR systems to align goals and behaviours – made HR an obvious choice. I was proved spectacularly wrong! According to Prosci's most recent *Best Practices in Change Management Benchmarking Report*, 62% of survey participants have located their change managers in the project teams. The reason? Projects have the funding – and the urgent need – for change management. Project managers have been quick to realise the benefits of a dedicated resource and structured approach to the people-side of change.

I still believe HR has a key role to play in change management and in building change-capable organisations. HR owns the leadership development curriculum and the performance management system, both of which are key levers in driving successful change. Plus HR owns the data on employee engagement and culture, which are critical in making the business case for change management and for equipping change managers with an understanding of the organisation, its history, values and people. **HC**



About the author
Catherine Smithson is managing director, Being Human, a specialist change management training and consulting firm founded in 1993. Visit www.beinghuman.com.au