

# Leaders of the Revolution

A guide to building effective change leadership in your organisation

## summary

This white paper gives consideration to a question that consistently is ranked as the key risk to successfully delivering change within your organisation - how do you build change leadership capability in your organisation?

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**While a number of surveys and expert reports have shown that a lack of effective leadership is the biggest obstacle to successful change management initiatives, it's not sufficient to simply point the finger of blame at the top ranks of organisations. Senior managers may be suffering their own change challenges, struggling with their personal resilience to change and to cajole their team into embracing it.**

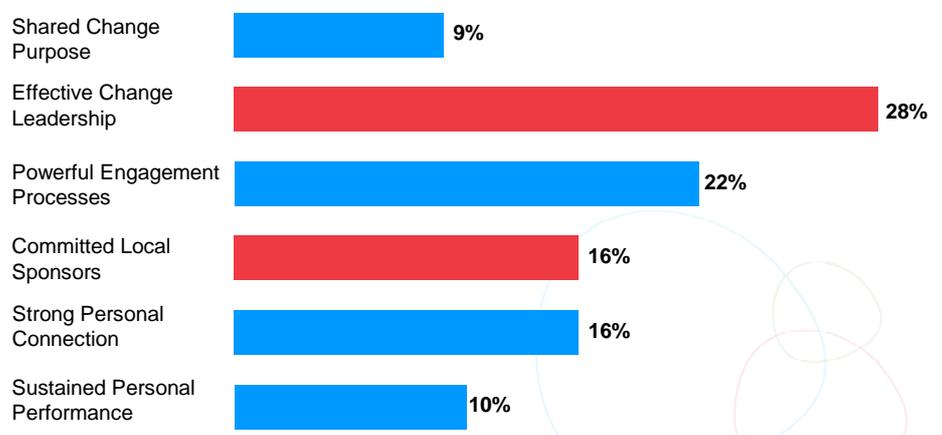
Yet change is learnt by example, and filters down through different tiers of the organisation. And in order for it to be successfully sustained, it requires widescale adoption, and the introduction of new tools and techniques, measurements and management behaviours.

So what is really needed to give change leaders across the organisation the tools and techniques that enable them to lead and support effective change? This paper outlines the issues and provides a glimpse of what effective people-centered change leadership really looks like. Perhaps more importantly, however, it focuses on the practical steps that organisations can put in place to build change leadership capability.

These include:

- The process of building change leadership capability
- The tools and techniques that can help change leaders
- The measures of success and benefits of strong leadership

Currently, the biggest risk to change being successful is the lack of:



Source: Changefirst's Change in a Downturn Survey 2009

That leadership should be a decisive factor stands to reason. Change leaders are needed to propel the organisation into new ways of working; without it, it's only human nature to resist any putative change. But the sheer scale of the leadership challenge is always surprising.

Time and again our research shows that ineffective change leadership is the single biggest obstacle to successfully implementing change.

Our 2009 Snapshot Survey on [Change in a Downturn](#), which was sent to 2,500 change practitioners, saw 28% citing this as the key factor markedly ahead of other factors which might have been thought significant such as shared change purpose (only 9%), committed local sponsors and personal connection (16%). The next biggest risk factor was powerful engagement processes, cited by 22%.

At the same time, 45% of our survey expected change challenges to increase in the next 12 months and a further 37% expect them to increase substantially. So clearly the issue is going to be exacerbated.

These are findings that continue to be reported in our work with clients on a daily basis regardless of the particular client in question and whether we are running workshops, research or other activities.

They are also echoed in IBM's Global [Making Change Work](#) study of 1500 practitioners around the world. It coined the term the "change gap" to describe the growing chasm between the proportion of companies expecting substantial change and those with a history of managing it successfully.

IBM's survey again highlighted leadership as the standout factor in successful change, with 92% of its more than 1,500 practitioners worldwide citing top management sponsorship as the thing that makes change successful - again ahead of employee engagement on 72%.

## Part 1. Where are tomorrow's change leaders?

So where are the change leaders who are going to carry the ever increasing change burden expected by organisations? One of the recurring myths in change management projects is that change leaders are a rare breed, imbued with an innate gift that's difficult to learn and even harder to put into practice.

The fact is there are successful change leaders out there – and they exist across the organisation in the three major change roles of sponsor, influencer and change agent. But equally importantly, there are proven methods for creating these change leaders of tomorrow.

## Part 2: What does good change leadership really look like?

While there are many case studies of successful change management projects, the behaviours of the individuals leading these projects are less often the point of focus.

And these leaders of change need to be trained, developed and nurtured. Contrary to what some believe, this is a capability that can be measured in an organisation and improved over time.

We define good change leadership as:

*"Effective change leadership happens when the leaders of change provide direction, guidance and support to the people who are implementing change as well as those affected by and working with the change on a daily basis."*

With that goal in mind, this section examines how the individual actions of good change leaders help achieve it and on the flip side of the coin, how poor change leadership can jeopardise it. Harking back to **Kurt Lewin's** original **change model** of unfreeze, change, refreeze, we can examine change leadership in the current situation, the transition and the future state.

## Challenging the status quo

Successful change leaders communicate their dissatisfaction with the status quo, embracing change and stressing the consequences of not changing. They declare their dissatisfaction publicly, in one-to-one meetings and informally, and look for symbols that signify their acceptance that things have to change.

Equally importantly, they back up their fine words with actions, leading by example with highly symbolic gestures. For senior management this may mean ditching the executive jet, and spending more time on the shop floor.

This is in stark contrast to novice change leaders, who are often in denial about change and shy away from expressing their dissatisfaction at the current situation. They don't want to rock the boat, or worry already overburdened employees with the prospect of transformational change.

Understanding that changes in the way people work are critical for success means delving into key constituents' behaviours, skills and attitudes. It also means being very clear on the scope of prospective change, so any groups affected by it are involved in discussions from an early stage (rather than finding out about it after the fact) and any concerns they have are escalated to sponsors.

Rather than reducing the change to a series of technical tasks that no one could object to or fail to learn, strong change leadership is clear that change

will challenge people and the way they work.

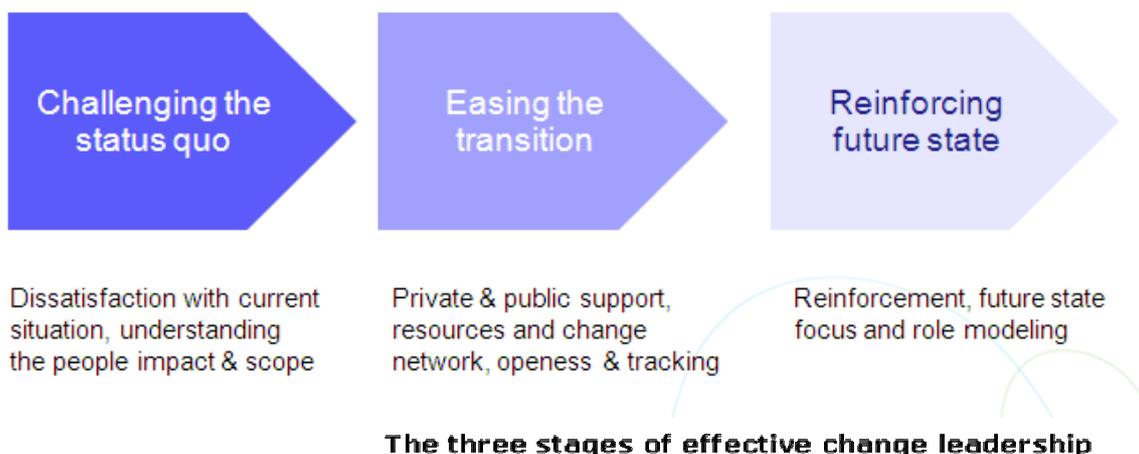
## Easing the transition

Good change leaders in senior management ensure that the resources and support are in place to make change happen. They empower change agents with the support and commitment they need to push the change through.

On the flip side, when change fails, it is because these leaders have paid only lip service to it. Or handed off responsibility to a change agent without the necessary backing, resources and perhaps skills to make it happen.

Change agents also rarely wield the power or authority to drive through changes on their own. That's why they need the support of sponsors and influencers at every level and throughout the transition. This comes in various forms, including:

- a drumbeat of joint communications throughout the change reinforcing the change messages
- Attendance at group and one-to-one meetings where staff can openly express feelings of reservation or enthusiasm about change. In fact, good change leaders will often be the ones playing devil's advocate and saying what others are afraid to say
- Joint strategies for overcoming blockages in the change process



Resources may be stretched in today's economic climate, but good change leaders ensure that projects are appropriately resourced, which means allocating the time and resources commensurate with the scale of the change. That might mean being pragmatic and scaling down overambitious change, but it also means ensuring that everyone involved in the initiative has the appropriate resources.

In surveys, employees involved in change programmes are telling us they feel overwhelmed by the tidal wave of change engulfing them and that they are frustrated that the people leading the change don't appear to have the necessary skills or ability to manage. We'll come back to this skill versus will issue in section four, below. But suffice to say that appropriate resourcing can bring its own returns in the long-run.

### Towards the future state

Effective change leaders keep a focus on the future state they are driving towards. People might be struggling to visualise what the change means to them, or how their role might change – and in this vacuum a conspiracy of silence can very often develop that leaves them in denial. Then when the reality hits them, they fight against a situation which they should have been fully expecting.

Workshops and feedback forums help maintain the focus on the future state, but change leaders should also constantly bring the conversation back to the change vision and objectives. While it's easier to visualize it as such, change management is not always a linear programme – from where we are today, to where we want to be. You may sometimes need to take a step back to move two steps forward.

### Part 3: The process - how to build change leadership capability

In any change management programme, there's a clear process with a number of steps that organisations can go through to develop change leadership capability. These include:

#### (i) Map out a change network

When people talk about change leadership, they are often only thinking about senior executives, when in fact change leadership exists at multiple levels throughout the organisation. The initial drive might come from the top, but in order to sustain change, you need the impact of a whole network of individuals throughout the organisation, including local managers.

In fact, when change projects fail to sustain, it's often local managers who are the sticking point. In some respects the need to map out a change network goes back to John Kotter's "guiding coalition."

*"The Guiding Coalition should be comprised of both managers and leaders who work together as a team. The managers keep the process under control while the leaders drive the change."*

When he wrote this, Kotter was however envisioning a more traditional structure like a project board or steering committee.

Where the change network goes beyond this is in embracing the informal sources of political power and influence, and the loosely coupled nature of many organisational structures.

Looking at a standard organizational chart won't tell you what this change network looks like. Mapping the change network is a formal process of identifying key players in a change initiative, the relationships between them and assigning them roles such as sponsor, influencer and change agent.

Mapping the change network is particularly beneficial at times of major political upheaval in an organisation; it also serves to identify gaps in the network and key relationships.

By going through the exercise and mapping the impact of the change itself on the network, you can also see what impact the future state will have on the structure – taking roles out of the organisation, for example, can cause breakdowns in communication, which can be damaging to the change initiative in the future.

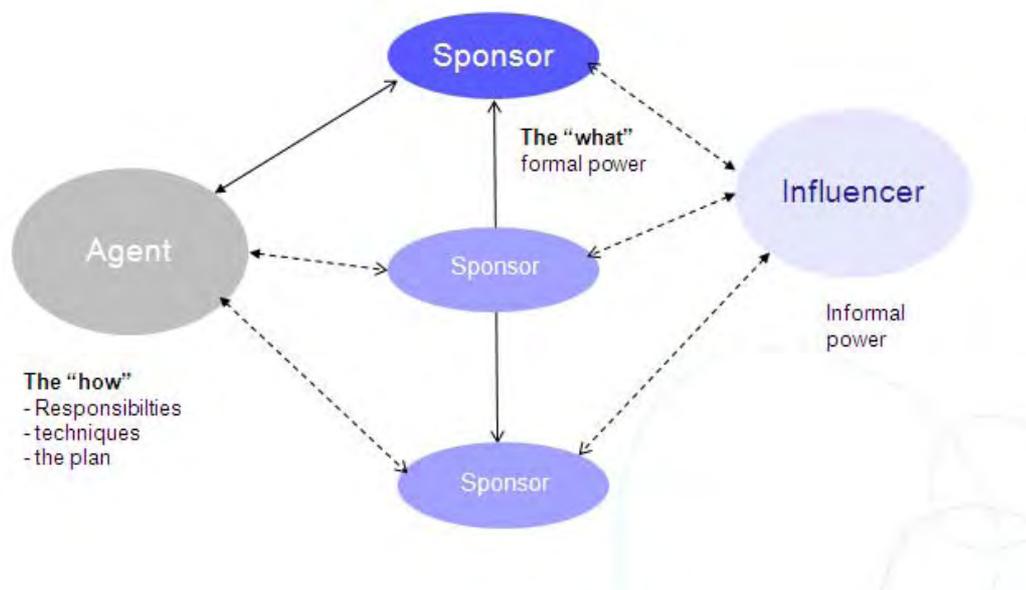
### (ii) Engage sponsors at every level

Received wisdom has taught us that enlisting the support of an executive project sponsor at a very senior level is key to the success of a major change. But while the executive sponsor is the single point of accountability and the person who makes the big decisions, in reality a change project will also have a number of local sponsors and their role should not be underestimated.

For example, if an employee has a concern about the way their role might change in an initiative, they are not likely to share their concerns with an executive sponsor – but they are more likely to talk to their line manager, or a head of operations. Equally, the local sponsor should sit alongside the project board and executive sponsor in the project roadshow to demonstrate they are fully behind the change – not hide away because they are still trying to work out the impact it will have on their own role.

In addition, sponsors fulfil a number of functions:

- **Accountability.** They are ultimately responsible for making a success of the project.
- **Authority.** They lend weight to the order to change – supporting people as they adapt to the change and managing any resistance.
- **Decision making.** They make the key decisions and support change agents over smaller decisions.
- **Support.** By lending their support, they legitimise the change initiative at every level of the organisation.



Engaging sponsors means ensuring the right people are on board with the correct seniority. That they are willing and able to fulfil the functions outlined above, and that they are fully prepared and aligned with the change initiative.

### Develop informal influencers

In an age of social networking and viral media, we are only too aware of the influence of informal communications. In fact, the subconscious nudge, as demonstrated in Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's book *Nudge*, can be more powerful and effective as an influencer than formal authorities telling people to change.

In an organizational context, it's important to ensure key people are supporting a change project, particularly at an early stage when executive support may not be as fully formed as you might like it to be. That's really a case of recognizing who the informal influencers are through the change network mapping exercise, then bringing them onside before they have had a chance to form an adverse opinion – and perhaps even bringing them into the formal change network by giving them a role in the initiative.

Informal influencers fall into four main categories:

- **Advocates**, who persuade other people that change is a good idea.
- **Connectors**, who can help connect to others who you may not have a relationship with.
- **Controllers**, who control access to information or people.
- **Experts**, with technical expertise.

### Arm change agents with the right skills for the job

Change agents are the day-to-day instigators of change and they support the sponsor's intentions. They fulfil a number of roles, from planning and executing project plans to helping overcome resistance and building momentum towards the desired future state.

There are two sides to the instruction of change agents. Firstly, organisations need to ensure they pick the best people for the job in hand. Change agents should be executives with credibility, whether already installed in the organisation, or outsiders with the track record to inspire change. They also need the seniority to be able to challenge sponsor decisions.

Secondly, change agents need the right skills for the job – and if there are gaps in their skills base, these should be plugged through training or coaching. Although they don't usually have the power to force through change themselves, change agents can make all the difference between success and failure, and therefore need to have a number of tools in their box to bring their influence to bear.

These include:

- A good understanding of change principles
- Skills in collecting and using data
- Knowledge of running meetings and workshops
- Good planning and project management skills
- Communications expertise
- The ability to manage resistance and deal with uncertainty

### Embrace change

Change programmes typically follow one of four approaches, each of which corresponds to a different leadership style. The first three approaches lead to problems, while embracing change, the fourth option is easy to say but less to do. These are:

- **Technical**: breaking the change down into a series of functional tasks and outcomes. Leaders tend to be autocratic, aggressively forcing through change while ignoring employee concerns. They build short-term gains, but their approach can lead to pitfalls and long-term resentment.

- **Emotional:** appealing to the hearts and minds of the workforce, without necessarily creating a proper structure to the initiative. Visionary leaders will pre-announce an initiative without consulting local managers who will be affected by the change and without necessarily thinking through the consequences. On the other side, sympathetic leaders pay too much attention to how people feel about the change, rather than leading them through it.
- **Bolt-on:** where change agents are expected to see through a change on top of their regular job. A recent survey by the [Society for Human Resource Management](#) found that while organisation experience on average 2.1 changes per year, 77% of HR departments did not have the resources to manage change. Leaders put financial incentives in place to reward adoption of the change, but don't have enough time to think through the consequences and fail to role model and get involved in change because they are too busy doing their regular jobs.

The fourth stance, **embracing change**, contains elements of each of the above – but sees leaders putting the change at the centre of their outlook. Embracing change presents a number of challenges for leaders themselves, and we'll look at some in more detail in the next section.

## Part 4: Tools and techniques for change leaders

When answering the question “why do change management initiatives fail?”, the blame is often laid at the door of senior executives tasked with delivering the change. But as we've seen, the truth is there's a far wider constituency of “leaders” that can have a major impact in bringing about effective change.

This gap in perception comes down to the difference between installation and implementation – leaders often kick off a change programme and tell the organisation it has to change, but they don't implement the change and engage with the wider community, so in reality, things stay the same. They install the change. They are then blamed for the change failing to take hold or “stick”, when in fact there are a whole host of stakeholders that have failed to take it on board.

In order to better embrace change, change leaders throughout the organisation may themselves need to learn some new tools and techniques, especially as it's becoming a core competence. It's often the hardest thing in the world for leaders to admit they need help, that they don't have the right skills to push through change even though they have the will to make it happen. But this sort of honesty is needed in a business change environment.

Alongside the traditional leadership competency clusters of vision and goal-setting; interpersonal skills; self-knowledge; and technical competence (regarding the specifics of the business in which the leader works), there are three major areas where training and the adoption of new tools and techniques for change management can help: communication; role-modelling and getting involved in shaping the change; and reward.

## (i) communicating the case for change

Managers need to be comfortable with the case for change, and to be able to communicate it to people in a way they can understand. Communications should be tailored for different audiences. This means explaining the “why?”, the “what?” and the “what does it mean for me?” of change.

- “*Why?*” explains why the organisation is changing in the first place – and it’s a vitally important starting point. People need to be left in doubt that maintaining the status quo is not an option. Strong leaders communicate this at every opportunity – and may even invoke the image of a “burning platform” to explain the need for change.
- “*What?*” outlines the change programme – but it does so in a way that’s relevant to the consumer. It might be that they don’t need to know all the details of what is happening; but change leaders should not leave staff with the impression that information is classified or not available. Openness encourages people to give feedback about their concerns.
- “*What does it mean for me?*” plays out the impact of the change on the individual and their ways of working. It’s important to explain the consequences of the change because what might be obvious at a high level isn’t always clear to specific individuals.

## (ii) role modelling change and involvement

As we explained in part 2, role-modelling change through a series of workshops or one-to-one meetings is an important part of embracing change. It helps people see the difference between talking about it, and actually doing it. Persuading change leaders to commit to a number of actions that support the change further invokes this subtle but important distinction.

Managers who get involved in workshops can engage people in shaping the change, and gain their buy-in to making it more effective. Rather than imposing the change on people, they are seen as part of it, and are more likely to be enthusiastic adopters.

## (iii) Using reward to effectively incentivise behaviours

Reward – and just as importantly, the opposite, the withholding of reward - is a key part of the change leadership equation. Requiring people to change their behaviour needs some sort of incentive structure, otherwise people will just continue as they always have. However, rewards for positive change action will not normally be available within the traditional formal reward system, which is set annually and is very difficult to align with change initiatives.

This is no reason not to discount rewards though, and workshopping the types of rewards that are available can throw up some surprising results. In fact, there are a number of less formal rewards that can work well for change leaders. These include:

- 1) Small but timely awards such as letters from the CEO, gift tokens, team outings and gifts sent to spouses or partners when the working day has been elongated
- 2) Appropriate awards to the task carried out – such as a day off in lieu, or a dinner to celebrate a milestone reached
- 3) Personal awards that recognise individual contributions. Change reward is not about incentivising just high flyers – everyone on the team needs to be pulling in the right direction

## **The need for a change model**

Equally importantly, effective change leaders recognize the need for a change management methodology to help the organisation adapt.

## LEADERSHIP FOCUS: the critical importance of role modelling the change

In our experience one of the important actions a leader can take during change is to role model the behaviours that people will need to use post-implementation.

The term role model means any "person who serves as an example, whose behaviour is emulated by others." We know how important it is for us to compare ourselves with people who in some way occupy a role to which we aspire. Depending on the particular stage of our life, those role models could be parents, friends, popstars or leaders in the organisations that we work in.

The concept of role modelling is so important in major change for us, that if we perceive a gap between what leaders say and what they do, we will follow what they do rather than what they say.

Let's consider a couple of practical examples that hopefully illustrate the point in more detail.



### Example: poor role modelling

A poor example of role modelling was an organisation we were working with which was going through a heavy cost cutting programme across the organisation. This was an initiative being driven and sponsored from the top of the organisation by the CEO which was asking for the commitment of all staff at the time. However, at the same time the CEO ordered a fleet of new and upgraded company cars for the entire executive team. This rapidly turned into a viral message around the organisation that the leadership team were not serious about cutting costs.



### Example: good role modelling

Contrast this with an example we were given by a participant in a workshop. One of the participants reported: "We had a project that was experiencing difficulties and we had to work over the weekend because of errors and mistakes the system was making. On the Saturday the senior executive responsible for the project joined us at eight in the morning, sat down, picked up a pile of error reports and worked through the pile until five in the afternoon. He was there helping us, not on his BlackBerry demanding project updates." This case really motivated people to get behind the change.

### 4 tips for effective change role modelling in your organisation

So we see role modelling change as a crucial component of successful change within organisations. Here are four tips for leaders who want to role model change in their organisation

1. Identify what you will model – think how can I show people that this change is really important to me?
2. Work out how you will do it – our advice is focus on something symbolic, something that people will talk to their colleagues about.
3. Try it out on a small group and then listen to see if it had any impact – are people talking about it? If you hear nothing or it's negative then retreat for a week and try out something else.
4. If they do talk about it positively then find ways to repeat it - the more you do it the more people will believe you believe in it.

Research has shown that the adoption of a methodology for change can have a big impact on success.

Even with managers who are well versed in running projects, communicating business opportunities and tracking success, the adoption of an explicit plan for change can bear fruit, because it uses a step-by-step process. Managers signing up to a formal methodology are telling people that this is the way they will deal with the issues that change brings up, preventing conflicting approaches and creating a common language.

To a certain extent, the exact methodology you use is unimportant. But there are a number of caveats to bear in mind when selecting a methodology:

- Is the methodology easy to learn and understand, and can it be maintained internally? Without this, costs can mount as external consultants keep revisiting the project.
- Can it be customized for the organisation's unique environment and integrated in other working processes? What is the level of support from the provider?
- Does it have a set-by-step process that is easy to follow?

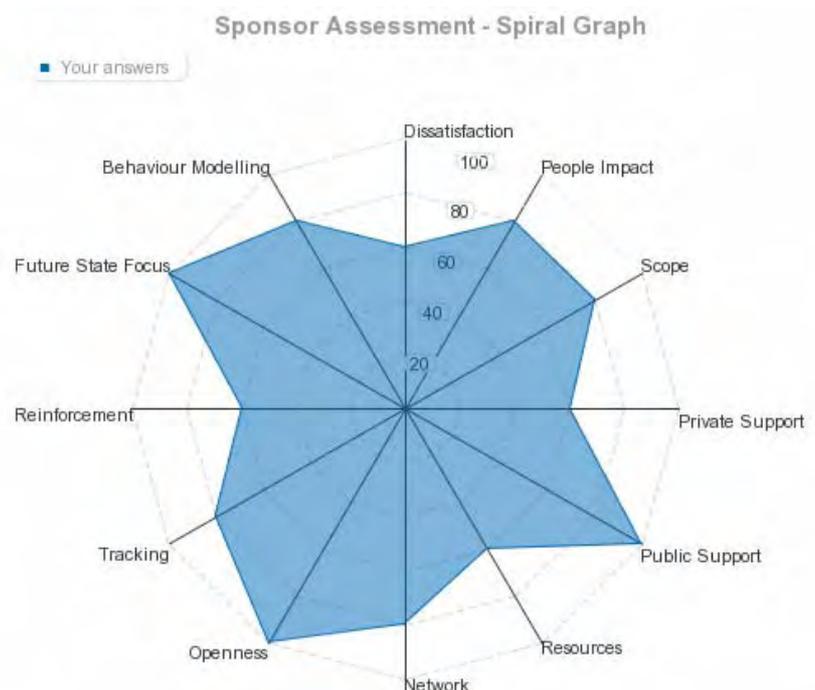
You can find more information on *How to select a change methodology* in our [paper here](#) in the [Changefirst Knowledge Centre](#).

## Part 5: Benefits and measures of success

Just as leaders are blamed when change projects go awry, so they should celebrate successes. But often personal development in this way is neglected – effective change leaders are sometimes victims of their own success and can find they have been moved on to the next project before they evaluate the success of the current one.

As leadership skills develop over time through practice, following role model and taking in feedback, so personal development can be tracked, using a model such as Changefirst's *Sponsor Assessment* tool.

See the example graph from the tool below.



Ultimately the benefits of effective change leadership filter down into the success of the project itself, so the benefits of change are allied to the benefits of the project, whatever they might be. Conversely, up to 80% of all projects fail when change issues are not addressed.

But more effective change leaders should also expect to see three specific change benefits

- Firstly, people should be more willing to embrace change. With leaders being more involved in the change process and helping to shape it, people throughout the organisation will feel committed to it and aligned to its goals.
- Secondly, changes will be more likely to “stick”. A recurring issue with change projects is that while an initial drive will bring some immediate improvements, after six to nine months people have often reverted to old ways of working. More effective change leadership helps sustain change momentum over time.

Finally, with better leadership, organisations should be better prepared for the next change project, whatever form that takes.

This paper is one of a series on a number of change related topics all of which are available from the [Knowledge Centre](#) on the Changefirst [website](#).

You can also follow our progress in the following ways:



This paper was developed by David Longworth for Changefirst. David is a journalist and analyst specialising in the implementation of technology in the private and public sector. He has written, researched and consulted on various aspects of technology and management for over 15 years. During that time, he has edited several magazines and been content director of a research, events and publishing group and now pursues a freelance career. Mr Longworth has written for a number of publications including CIO Magazine, Information Age, the Guardian Public magazine, Real Business and Growing Business.