CHANGE MANAGEMENT: WHAT'S A PROJECT LEADER FOR?

BY

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Change management is a "certified" organizational function that has spawned departments, roles, and jobs. Its rationale is rock solid. According to Prosci, failure to effectively deal with "the people side of change" is a leading cause of failure to realize project benefits.[1]

I think the change management discipline and approach are critical *in many circumstances*. But the key value intended and embodied by change management is, in fact, the job of the project leader. Clarity about this key role and orienting this leader toward change management discipline would be generally beneficial. This could, of course, affect some project managers.

Framing and Defining Change Management

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[1] This is based on personal experience with multiple clients. I leave open the possibility that this experience is outside the norm.

As leaders in the field, Prosci's definitions of change management should be unquestionable. They provide two distinct descriptions and contexts of change management as a foundation.

> On a Project Level — Change Management is the application of a **structured process and set of tools** for leading the people side of change to achieve a desired outcome.

> On an Organizational Level — A **leadership competency** for enabling change within an organization. A **strategic capability** designed to increase change capacity and responsiveness.[2] [Emphasis mine]

Where Change Management is Needed

Frankly, Prosci's implied limitation to projects should be narrowed. Change management is needed for projects that will result in material change being imposed upon (internal) people.

Of course, not all projects inflict the kind of change that needs change management. Even in enormous projects in real estate, defense contracting, and so forth, if everyone essentially carries on afterward as they were before, change management may be unwarranted. On the other hand, the smallest operational process or system change likely upends *something* for *someone*, which would benefit from change management.[3]

To summarize: *Change management disciplines and thinking are essential for projects that impose change on personnel in organizations. These types of projects are rapidly expanding everywhere.*

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[2]   Prosci Change Management Certificate Program workbook. pp. 10-11.

[3]   Large magnitude changes that qualify are often known as transformations. That the scale, scope, and velocity of such change is increasing universally is hard to dispute. Given the structural causes (e.g., climate change and decarbonization, digitization, economic shifts, deglobalization, a pandemic, massive generational demographic shifts, …), there's no cause to believe it will abate soon.

The Project

    Absent the rhetoric, a project's key characteristics are that it (i) is finite and (ii) exists to execute achievement of a specific goal. More to our point here, the changes brought forth by a project of the sort that concerns us are to persist beyond the project itself.

Change and Project Management

    Organizations that have pursued change management have focused on the building out the working (project) level as a predictable tool and process set. There is evident but largely impotent organizational level development. This is a good start, even though it inadvertently creates redundancy and confuses existing practitioners/processes/tools (e.g., training, communication).

    The project level achievements to designate and subsequently apply change management tools and techniques are low-hanging fruit. Particularly if "managed" under the project manager, it is the barest low-value, necessary-but-not-sufficient change management activity, of questionable additive value beyond pre-existing skilled communications and training support. In its essential nature and purpose, change management is not merely a set of tasks to be corralled and squeezed into the critical path of timed dependencies, to be "executed" in a project plan.

    For projects that impose change on people—our scope, the high-value (Prosci's organizational level) aspects of change management are rightfully the project leader's.[4] Those higher-value elements are above and go well beyond procedural application of tools and techniques (i.e., those that mostly existed previously as Communications, Training,

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[4] Personally *Responsible* and *Accountable* if RACI makes you more comfortable.

Engagement, and so forth). No project team member could nor should be expected to deliver on them. The project leader, on the other hand, embodies these needs and qualities of change management *at least* as follows.

- Most senior person on the project with the broadest authority and responsibility.
- Most capable to wrangle impacted senior executives above and peer executives across the organization.
- Best suited for the practical inside selling job of changes that may be ambiguous, broad, undecomposable to specialties, sustained, and most requiring cross-organizational integration.

By implication, if the project leader performs the high-value aspects of change management, the project team's designated change manager merely oversees execution of standard processes that are actually the dominion of specialty participants (i.e., training, communications, performance management…). It begs the question: If a project manager could effectively manage communications and training, could those experts not do the job properly without a middleman?

Is the project manager the project leader?

In the absence of a designated, effective project leader, many project managers abrogate the role to themselves. In some circumstances this may not be a problem. Where material change is a result, it usually is. Higher value change management should *not* report to the project manager. (i.e., Project *leaders* don't generally report to project *managers*.) High value change management action is the hands-on domain of the project leader and project managers do not, should not, and cannot constrain the true needs of leadership. The role is not delegable.

Many times, absence of a/the named, active (and able) project leader is the issue. Other times, maybe the project manager's self-conception is to blame. In any case, in my experience it is not uncommon for project managers to presume upon themselves project leadership. If my experience is the norm and if we accept that the higher-level, higher-value aspects of change management discipline are—or should be—the purview of the project leader, at least three things ought to be concerning when it comes to change-creating projects.

1. If there is a distinct project leader, can and is this person personally executing the valuable parts of change management?
2. If there is no distinct project leader, is the project manager acting as the leader?
3. If the project manager is effectively the leader, can and is (s)he *personally* performing the high-value change management activities of the leader while "project managing" the lower value change management task execution? Effectively?

Project leadership and competence

My position is that project managers are unsuited and typically unprepared to manage, let alone perform higher-value change management. Why?

The least appreciated area of change management is sponsor management. It is also probably the most important and under-utilized aspect of change management. Obviously, only (senior) executive sponsors can decree, direct, and deliver organizational-level change management. More practically, only a supportive senior executive can trump a resistant senior executive and his/her organization. Rank is required.

Sponsor management is an especially challenging form of "managing up" requiring the project leader to often forcefully prod a senior executive. For this and even for actions not

requiring the senior sponsor, the circumstances point to capacities not generally associated with project managers.[5]

A change situation requires a leader to identify and implement actions in conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty. The average project manager is not positioned or ready for this because most skilled and high-performing project managers have learned by training, certification, and experience to *manage execution* and *provide status*. In technocratic projects ambiguity and uncertainty are minimal and issues tend to be irritants overcome with time or money. So time and budget can be the overriding concern.

In change situations, however, there is and will be fundamental pushback—and not just to performing the work—that demands dynamic flexibility (i.e. ability to make fundamental decisions) and cross-organizational influencing. Fundamental decisions tend to be the least time-boxable of any on the project (How long *will* it take to overcome resistance or to persuade the reluctant?) and most interdependent with every other aspect of the project. First, it puts the project manager into an obviously internally conflicting position: Schedule or not? Second, it usually implies successful engagement/negotiation with (senior) executives. A project manager, typically not among the executive cadre, does not often have the personal or rank authority for that.

Concluding thoughts

Change management, where it is valuable and needed, treads the waters of uncertainty and ambiguity, its impact felt by and dependent on the responsiveness of people. This domain of the project leader requires active, hands-on leadership.

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[5]   The qualities typical of people that can do this are, once past rank, personal and beyond this exploration.

A project leader, skilled at change management work, is essential for success. Yet many organizations that have pursued "change management" have focused on creating and applying structured processes and tools for change management at the project level. When the people who *do* change management are relegated to executing (or worse, monitoring execution of) the processes and tools under the project manager, the absence and deficiency of the (project) leadership is vividly evident.

The dynamism of change-impacting projects is not about executing and checking boxes, it's about understanding what, why, and how (individual) people change. Applying change management processes and tools to a complex environment such as we're concerned with may help to some extent, but *lack of understanding* and *missing leadership* are rarely resolved at that level.

To address that gap, start by inverting the thought process. Change management is not a project task to be *managed* by the project manager; the project manager manages the project in response to the progress of change instituted by the project leader. Other specific inferences and conclusions to consider might include:

- Focus change management on Prosci's two non-tool/process-based definitions, both of which speak to the competence and commitment of the organization. (To be clear, when I say "the organization," I mean senior leadership.) This is an essential precursor to…
- Rethink and/or reinflate the need, value, role, and relevance of the discrete, capable, and strong project leader.

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