

CHANGE MANAGEMENT: YES! CHANGE MANAGERS: ...?

BY

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Change management, mainly by certification, 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. So, effectively dealing with the people side of change is essential. Does that make a person with the title “change manager” essential?

I think that *in many circumstances* the change management discipline and approach are critical but a project role, subordinate to the project manager, is not.¹

Let me start by separating what change management *is* from how *it's implemented*, including where it's needed (and where it's not) based on objective, purpose, and value. Only then can we clearly distinguish the discipline of change management from what a project-level change manager does. This ought to have the happy effect of exposing common misperceptions about change management as well.

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

Framing and Defining Change Management

As leaders in the field, we can lean on Prosci's definitions of change management. They provide two descriptions and contexts for us to use as a base.

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

There may be an argument that change management is needed everywhere, all the time. I don't subscribe to it—though I don't dispute it. At least for now we should, however, go along with Prosci's limiting it to projects. And even that is too broad. More precisely: Change management is needed for projects that will result in material change being imposed upon (internal) people.³

Not all projects inflict the kind of change on people that needs change management. Even enormous projects in real estate, defense contracting, and so forth don't necessarily need change management. They may be large and complicated yet not qualify if afterward everyone essentially carries on doing the same old same old. On the other hand, projects that make even the smallest changes to operational processes or systems definitely upend *something for someone*.

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

³ Whether those people are employees, making it "organizational change management" (OCM), or external parties is actually immaterial. If only to keep it simple, let's restrict ourselves to internal.

To summarize: *Change management disciplines and thinking are essential for projects that impose change on personnel in organizations.* Concerning is that these types of projects, called transformations as magnitude increases, are rapidly expanding everywhere.⁴

The Project

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

Change Management in the Project

I contend it is those aspects of change management beyond procedural application of tools and techniques that mostly existed previously as Communications, Training, Engagement, and so forth that are higher-value and elemental to success. For projects that impose change on people (our scope), these high-value—organizational level by Prosci’s distinction—aspects of change management are rightfully the project leader’s.

Instead, change management gets built out at the working (“project”) level as a predictable tool and process set at the expense of higher-value needs, inadvertently creating redundancy and confusing existing practitioners/processes/tools (training, communications, etc.).

⁴ That the scale, scope, and tempo of such change is increasing universally is hard to dispute. Given that the causes are structural (e.g., climate change and decarbonization, digitization, economic shifts, deglobalization, a pandemic, massive generational demographic shifts, government financial duress, ...), there’s no cause to believe it will abate soon.

The designation and subsequent application of tools and techniques is, as always, a necessary but insufficient step toward success. To my mind, these project level achievements are low hanging fruit. Kudos to organizations that have implemented them, but they are limited expansions on existing capabilities.

Project level execution of change management structured processes and tools is barest of low-value, necessary-but-not-sufficient change management; of questionable additive value beyond skilled communications and training support. By 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 and “executed” in a project plan.

Where’s the project leader?

If the project leader owns and performs the high-value aspects of change management, that leaves the project team’s change manager to coordinate standard activities that are actually the dominion of specialty participants (i.e., training, communications, performance management...). Whether this is unnecessary overhead is not an idle question. If a project manager properly managed communication and training to serve the project leader’s change management activity, could those domain experts not do the job properly without another middleman?

This is not meant to diminish people who implement change management processes and tools. It is, instead, to set them to the side so we can focus solely on the leadership challenge at the centre of the higher-value change management needs.

An obvious crux of the matter is the distinction between the higher and lower-value aspects of change management. Again, it’s my contention that the high value change management action is the nondelegable domain of the project leader. The project leader *must* be hands-on. Let’s briefly consider why.

Project leadership and competence

The least appreciated area of change management is sponsor management. It is also probably its most important, highest-leverage, and underutilized aspect, especially for situations within our scope. This is because, most obviously, only (senior) executive sponsors can decree, direct, and deliver on 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” because the project leader may often need to forcefully prod a senior executive. Even work that does not require the senior sponsor does require broad leadership capacities not generally available to or associated with project-level change managers.

A change situation requires a leader to identify and implement actions—often in conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty. In change situations, there is and will be fundamental pushback from various levels of impacted organizations—not just to performing the work—demanding dynamic flexibility (i.e., ability to make fundamental decisions) along with cross-organizational influencing. These decisions are the most interdependent with every other aspect of the project.

All of which implies engagement/negotiation with (senior) executives. The average change manager is not positioned, trained, or ready for this. A change manager, typically not among the executive cadre, does not have the personal or rank authority and wherewithal to do that. (Change managers often do not even have the influence necessary to directly get the sponsor to do that work.)

Concluding thoughts

Change management, where it is valuable and needed, treads the waters of uncertainty and ambiguity. Its impact is felt by and depends on the responsiveness of the people. That requires active, hands-on leadership.

Many organizations that have pursued change management have focused on creating and applying structured processes and tools for change management at the project level. The people who *do* change management are, therefore, executing (or worse, monitoring execution of) these processes and tools. No matter how skilled at change management work, an execution-level, participant change manager is not the leader needed.

Applying change management processes and tools to such a complex environment such as we're concerned with may help to some extent, but *lack of understanding* is rarely resolved at that level. The dynamism of change-impacting projects requires much more than executing and checking boxes. It's about understanding what, why, and how (individual) people change.

I see change management rooted *within* projects. Organizations need to consider inverting the thought process: Change management is not a project task to be *managed* under the project manager; the project manager is to manage in response to the progress of the change. Instead of doubling-down and expecting greatness from execution-level people, support them from the top.

- 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 the senior leadership.) This is an essential precursor to...
- Seriously rethink and/or reinflate the need, value, role, and relevance of the discrete, capable, and strong project leader. Imbue that leader with the real responsibilities of and skills for change management.

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