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# Models of Change Agency: a Fourfold Classification

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**Change agents often play significant roles in initiating, managing or implementing change in organizations. Yet these roles are invariably exaggerated or misrepresented by one-dimensional models that ignore the full complexity and scope of change agent roles. Following a review and theoretical clarification of some of the literature and empirical research on change agency, a new fourfold classification of change agents is proposed, covering *leadership, management, consultancy*, and *team models*. The four models reaffirm the significance of the multifaceted and complex roles change agents perform in organizational change, while underlining the importance of conceiving change interventions within organizations as processes that need to be coordinated and effectively managed.**

## Introduction

The role and significance of 'change agents' in organizations has become a subject of enormous interest over the last two decades. During the 1980s, the 'change master' and 'transformational leadership' literature eulogized change agents as charismatic heroes of radical corporate transformation that sought to destroy rigid and inflexible structures (Bass, 1994; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Devanna and Tichy, 1986; Kanter, 1984). Various extraordinary qualities, traits or attributes were associated with these leaders and their exaggerated role as change champions (Kotter, 1996). However, as new flatter and more dynamic organizations emerged, traditional managers and more mundane functional specialists were also expected to embrace change-oriented attributes or behaviours that would allow them to cope with uncertainty and become innovators and risk takers (Betty and Lee, 1992; Kirton, 1980; Ulrich, 1997). Moreover, this devolvement of change agency was also dispersed via managerial interventions to employees. From a traditional position of instructing, directing and controlling work processes, managers were expected to encourage commitment and 'empower' employees to be receptive to change and technological innovation (Walton, 1985). The major vehicles for this dispersal of change agency were new self-managed teams, quality circles and task groups, which acted as change agents. Finally, adding yet another layer of complexity to this picture, the pace, scale and sheer complexity of organizational change necessitated the increasing use of internal and external management consultants as important 'catalysts' of change who could apply their change management expertise and project skills to deliver results on time and within budget (Miller, 1997).

In a context of increasingly radical or continuous change, these visionary, managerial, instrumental and team-centred images of change agents contrasted with an earlier tradition of organizational development research that emphasized the primary role of the 'change agent' as an external 'facilitator' of planned processes of evolutionary change (Beckhard, 1997; Tichy, 1974). Yet despite the emerging complexity of new and opposing models of change agency, there were very few attempts to clearly delineate these models and the variety of types of change agent

roles that they might disclose (Buchanan and Storey, 1997). Instead, there has been a persistent tendency to conflate change agency with a single model and to identify the attributes or 'competencies' of a generic type of change agent with an all-inclusive recipe for success (Hartley, Bennington and Binns, 1997, p. 68). Each new image of the change agent as leader, manager, consultant or team became its own self-referential stereotype of change agency.

The research presented here offers a selective, critical and synthetic review of some of the literature and empirical research on change agency, beginning with the classic discussion of the 'organizational development' consultant as 'change agent'. The review is deliberately interdisciplinary while also encouraging an interchange between quantitative and prescriptive approaches to change agency. Based on this review and ongoing empirical research on change agents, a new fourfold classification of change agency models is proposed: *leadership*, *management*, *consultancy* and *team models* (See Figure 1 below). The four models provide a useful theoretical and empirical starting point for clarifying the nature of the differences and similarities between change agents. This is an important task. It opens up the variety of change agent roles to detailed empirical scrutiny and it underscores the significance of treating change agency as a complex and potentially integral process that increasingly needs to be effectively managed within organizations (Caldwell, 2001). Finally, the classification may also serve a useful didactic purpose in discussions of change agency.

## The change agent as organizational development consultant

The idea of the 'change agent' as an internal or external consultant has its origins in the pioneering work of Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) and the various traditions of organizational development (OD) research and practice. Building on the work of Lewin (1947, 1951) and others, most models of organizational development focus on the implementation of 'planned change' as an incremental or long-term process designed to improve organizational 'health' or 'effectiveness'. The role of the external and internal 'change agent' in this process is to provide 'technical, specialist or consulting assistance in the management of a change effort' (Beckhard, 1969, p. 101). This assistance may take a variety of forms. Some situations call for an 'advisor' role, while others may emphasize the role of the consultant as 'educator', 'counsellor' or 'analyst' (De Board, 1978; Feltham, 1999). The paradigmatic OD consultancy role is, however, that of the 'process consultant' as defined by Schein: 'The process consultant seeks to give the client insight into what is going on around him, within him and between him and other people' (1988, p. 11). In this role the consultant seeks to act as an 'unbiased' facilitator positively involved in consultative or consensus-seeking interventions based on open dialogue, feedback and group ownership (Tichy, 1974, p. 169). This requires change agent attributes that are broadly synonymous with 'process consultation': listening, providing feedback, counselling, coaching and inter-group dynamics. (Schein, 1988, p. 11). However, given that this is partly an expert-consultancy role, the organizational development practitioner must also be able to demonstrate general consultancy skills and an instrumental knowledge of OD tools and techniques (Cummings and Worley, 1997; Lacey, 1995).

Despite the centrality of the change agent role, organizational development practice is characterized by important limitations that relate to the broader theoretical or empirical weakness of its model of change agency (Porras and Robertson, 1992). It is worth noting at least six of these weaknesses:

1) The change agent role envisaged by OD appears more suited to *planned change* within relatively stable organizations that have the resources and time to implement incremental change (Dunphy and Stace, 1993).
2) It is assumed within most OD models that change can be planned in a 'rational' or linear manner and that the change agent can facilitate this group process, although there is little evidence to support the illusions of 'manageability' (Lindblom, 1959; Pettigrew and Whipp, 1993; Quinn, 1980, 1985).
3) The normative assumption that the change agent can facilitate consensus or agreement on

change and that this participative mode of change is 'best', tends to underplay a number of factors: a) the rhetoric and vested interests that underpin consultancy interventions, b) the manipulative and 'unconscious' dynamics at work in group processes (De Board, 1978) and c) the broader coercive and political aspect of power relations in processes of organizational change (Dunphy and Stace, 1993).

4) The role of the OD practitioner as change agent appears focused on implementation challenges once senior management has set the strategic direction for change, and it is therefore limited to discrete initiatives designed to normalize, institutionalize and stabilize change.
5) OD practice is often unclear about the scope, mechanism and outcomes of its interventions, and so the change agent role is rarely subject to measures of 'effectiveness'.
6) The emphasis on the change agent as process consultant or external expert tends to downplay the increasing dispersal of change roles and orientations among employees at all levels in organizations facing constant change (Senge, 1999).

Organizational development theorists have sought to partly address some of these issues by broadening the scope of OD practice to embrace larger issues of organization culture, 'organizational learning', strategic change and performance (Robertson, Roberts and Porras, 1992). However, this has led to growing ambiguities in maintaining the 'unbiased' nature and intrinsic 'marginality' of the change agent role. As originally conceived, the role mixed rhetoric and reality. It was an expression of the core democratic mission of the OD movement to further equality, empowerment and consensus building within the workplace, as well as offer a practical mechanism for successfully implementing change. (Tichy, 1974, p. 179). Unfortunately, the increasing shift of OD practitioners towards management-driven interventions that can deliver 'value' or 'performance' has led to a greater emphasis on more instrumental, mechanistic and product models of consultancy that place the change agent in the role of expert selling change tools or solutions (Senge, 1999). In these circumstances, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate the 'facilitator' or collaborative consultancy role from other managerial models of change agency. As discussed later, this blurring of boundaries is a critical issue in conceiving the nature of the differences between OD and management consultant roles.

## In search of change leaders

Although the OD tradition influenced the early debates on change agency, the real resurgence of interest began in the early 1980s when many large American corporations faced severe challenges in managing innovation and culture change. New types of entrepreneurial 'change leaders' were required to create flatter, faster and more flexible organizations guided by a shared sense of strategic mission and values (Kanter, 1984, 1999). The 'change master' literature highlighted the importance of strong corporate leaders in transforming their moribund organizations through a shared sense of mission and values. Similarly, research on 'charismatic' and 'transformational leadership' focused on how visionary figures can articulate a new strategic vision that would inspire employees to embrace innovation and change (Behling and McFillen, 1996). Various traits and 'magic' qualities were associated with these people and their impact on employees: self-identification as a change agent, courage and outspokenness, belief in people, openness to lifelong learning, ability to deal with complexity and uncertainty and their powerful strategic vision. In a number of cases, successful large-scale organizational change programmes appeared to be guided by leaders who displayed these characteristics and who were able to act as catalysts for change (Howell and Higgins, 1990; Ulrich, 1997).

Never strictly an extension of 'leadership theory', but rather its reinvention, these ideas blended a conventional focus on leadership characteristics and behaviour with a renewed emphasis on leader follower dynamics. 'Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen' (Kotter, 1996, p. 35). Leadership was essential to trigger or sponsor strategic change, but without the ability to create and sustain an inspiring vision, change would simply fail. In this sense, leadership and 'empower-

ment' were mutually reinforcing components of the change process.

If the reinvention of leadership theories was often presented in highly prescriptive formulations, it also extended the traditions of empirically focused research on leadership characteristics. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) captured the renewed interest in many of the conventional 'traits' of effective leaders (e.g. personal drive, the desire to lead, honesty and integrity, cognitive ability, self-confidence and knowledge of the business), but they also highlighted a characteristic more often associated with change leaders: 'flexibility'. A similar list of personal characteristics has also been identified by Dulewicz and Herbert (2000), with the important addition of 'risk-taking' as a characteristic of high-flyers who can cope with change and uncertainty while promoting innovation. Their research also suggested that a relatively small number of competencies and personality factors might account for career progression among senior managers.

Another important strand of research on change leadership emerged from the 'contingency' perspective (Manz *et al.,* 1989). In general, contingency perspectives reinforced the need for managers to adjust to the 'emergent' processes of managing organizational change by reviewing and adapting their leadership and decision styles. Dunphy and Stace (1993) have provided a useful theoretical and empirical application of the contingency approach to change leadership. They have argued that change leadership styles are dependent on such factors as the strategic environment in which the organization operates and the values and attitudes of employees towards change or innovation. Organizations operating in a threatening competitive environment and with a change resistant workforce are likely to adopt a top-down authoritarian mode of transformational leadership, rather than a participative leadership style. These findings underline the central premise of contingency approach to change leadership: that there is no one best way to cope with the contextual complexities of change.

Despite the empirical sophistication of some of the new approaches to change leadership, they tended to reproduce many of the familiar weaknesses of traditional leadership theories. These included:

1) The conflation of leadership with change: 'Leadership produces change. That is its primary function' (Kotter, 1990, p. 26).
2) An over-emphasis on the extent to which leaders can actually transform an organization.
3) A tendency to conceive the qualities of leadership as extraordinary, and to therefore accord a mythic or heroic status to change leaders in organizational transformation and strategic change (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 31).
4) A failure to clarify the apparent differences between leaders and managers in the change process; instead managers were presented as the negative counter-image of 'change leaders' (Bennis, 1993).
5) A naive overemphasis on the effectiveness of 'power tools and power techniques' to implement top-down change, especially in contexts where hierarchical power and control was becoming more problematic.
6) A persistent under-estimation of the significance of leadership at all levels in organizations facing major change.

All of these issues are important in understanding the role of managers as change agents.

## Managers as change agents

The new emphasis on change leadership was gradually complemented by a growing focus on the role of managers, especially middle managers, in implementing change. Traditionally, a manager is thought of as a person with the legitimate authority or power to direct the work-related activities of one or more subordinates: the manager was essentially a supervisor. This fits the classical model of management, which suggests that managers plan, organize, direct, control and review performance. The model is rational, functional, mechanistic and ultimately prescriptive: it tells managers what they should do (Mintzberg, 1975). In a world of constant organizational change, however, this traditional model of managerial work now looks increasingly outmoded. The enormous processing and levelling power of information technology and the competitive imperatives of market forces and customer demands have led to the

emergence of less hierarchical and more flexible organizations that have significantly changed managers' roles.

This transformation is associated with a paradigm shift from the traditional 'command and control' style of management based on top-down directives and sanctions to a new 'involvement and commitment' style in which managers devolve power while enabling or 'empowering' individual employees and self-managed teams to take responsibility for front-line decision-making, customer care, quality standards and performance targets. (Walton, 1985; Lawler, 1986). With the reduction in the scope of formal modes of hierarchical control, shared goals and values, teamwork and employee commitment become powerful cultural and motivational forces that hold the organization together, while market forces provide new and perhaps more powerful means of external control. In this paradigm shift, the 'soft' issues of culture change and commitment are underpinned by the harsh realities of competitive success or failure.

The impact of these changes on the role of middle managers is often very significant, because they are both the 'object' and agency of change (Storey, 1992, p. 214). They must accept an overall decline in their traditional supervisory role, while at the same time expanding their new enabling and empowering role. (Goffee and Scase, 1992; Kanter, 1986; Newel and Dopson, 1996). As hierarchy is weakened and authority devolved, managers are increasingly expected to overcome organizational boundaries and bring teams and groups together to manage change. Usually this requires the development of a new set of soft, interpersonal skills: listening, communicating, team-building, facilitating, negotiating and conflict resolution that many managers may find difficult to accept. From a traditional position of instructing, directing and controlling work processes they are expected to encourage commitment and empower employees to be receptive to change and technological innovation. In this way, responsibility for managing change is devolved to the local level and becomes an intrinsic requirement for all employees. Moreover, managers are increasingly expected to display a positive or exemplary 'change orientation' as demonstrated by personal flexibility, the competence to deal with uncertainty or ambiguity and the ability to take risks.

Unfortunately most attempts to come to terms with the new change-oriented attributes or 'competencies' of managerial roles have been disappointing (Hays, Rose-Quisie and Allinson 1998). In principle, the concept of competency offered the hope of creating an integrative framework for selecting, appraising, training and developing managers. However, there is considerable controversy and confusion surrounding the very idea of competencies. Are they personal characteristics, traits, motives, self-images, aspirations or empirical measures of job-related performance (Boyatzis, 1982)?

Compounding these definitional disputes are more fundamental issues of the validity of competency approaches, especially when applied to change agency (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992). There is, for example, little empirical evidence to suggest that the identification and listing of competencies has any *universal* application. Indeed, the more rigorously and consistently competencies are defined the less likely they are to match the empirical realities and shifting agendas of management practice (Burgoyne, 1990). Certainly, the mere possession of a set of competencies does not ensure effective or consistent performance of a role or task. Even two managers who appear to possess the same level of competency may use it differently in practice; especially in a context were their role may change. Moreover, the competencies associated with change agents are often meta-competencies. Burgoyne points to the overarching competencies associated with 'learning, changing, adapting, forecasting, anticipating and creating change' (1990, p. 23). Similarly, Senge suggests that the attributes of change leadership within 'learning organizations' are concerned with 'the capacity to sustain change that brings forth new realities' (2001, p. 2). Clearly, these sorts of learning processes are not easy to define, develop or integrate into conventional models of management development (Guinn, 1999).

Buchanan and Boddy's study, *The Expertise of the Change Agent* (1992) was a sustained attempt to apply the managerial concept of competency to change agency. They produced a systematic review of the 15 'attributes' required of change agents, organized into five 'competency clusters' (1992, pp. 92–93). These tended to be 'straightforward and unremarkable' competencies associated with the change agent as a 'competent

manager', although their research appeared to offer a broader view of the 'expertise' of change agents. Possession of the necessary competencies did not therefore confer sufficient expertise to be an effective change agent (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992, p. 123).

Expertise, Buchanan and Boddy argued, that is dependent on broader judgmental capabilities and the contextual mastery of three unfolding logics of change: 'problem solving', 'ownership' and 'legitimacy'. Complementing, and partly underpinning these three areas of expertise, the change agent must also be effective in managing the following three change agendas: 1) 'content' – competencies with respect to the substance of change; 2) 'Control' – competencies in project planning, monitoring and delivering to deadlines; 3) 'Process' – competencies in communication, team-building, negotiation and influencing others. In addition, the overt public performance of change management in an apparently rational-linear process has to be bolstered by the covert 'backstage activities' of political wheeler dealing, fixing and trade-offs which ultimately make the changes possible (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992, p. 27).

This is clearly a complex, multilayered and context-dependent model of change agency, which places considerable emphasis on the 'emergent' dynamics and political nature of the change process (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1993). The model therefore represents a challenge to organizational development or 'planned' approaches to change that conceive 'the change agent role as being mainly an up-front activity . . . with a transparent agenda' (Burnes, 2000, p. 298). One of the criticisms of the 'emergent' approach is that it presents a complex, 'over-socialized' model of change that places too much emphasis on political processes or 'backstaging' (Hendry, 1996, p. 621). A more serious criticism, however, is that Buchanan's and Boddy's broader attempt to define the general expertise of the change agent was limited by its overriding focus on the competencies required of the internal project manager in the change implementation process (1992, p. 125). To some extent, this outcome was to be expected. The research was based on the 'audio diaries' of eight internal project managers and a questionnaire on the competencies required for project success. It is perhaps no surprise then that of the 15 attributes identified, nearly all of them relate to the practical 'content' and 'control' oriented agendas associated with the 'problem solving logic' of internal project management. Consequently, what had been identified, as the parallel logics of 'ownership' and 'legitimacy' tended to recede into the background.

The limitation of the model as an overview of change agency is reinforced by its theoretical failure to differentiate *models* of change agency. Buchanan and Boddy present a matrix of organizational change defined by *radical* versus *incremental* change and *core* versus *peripheral* change, which classifies change in terms of four *modes of implementation*; ranging from 'low hassle – low vulnerability' to 'high hassle – high vulnerability' (1992, p. 41). Underlying this model is the assumption that a distinction between 'leading' and 'managing' change, or between strategic and non-strategic change, is unworkable and that all strategic change tends to be incremental (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992, p. 41). This explains why there is little room in the model for the potential role of 'change leadership' in formulating the vision, values and strategic goals of change. In addition, the categorization 'core' versus 'peripheral' change is essentially a project-oriented dichotomy that only appears to conceive change in relation to project size (Burnes, 2000, p. 307). Given this focus, the overall model does not offer a clear distinction between 'project management' and 'programme management'. This distinction is central to management consultancy interventions, precisely because large-scale change interventions involve a broader strategic overview of change processes. Certainly, managing large-scale 'programmatic' or transformational change is invariably a complex and high-risk process that requires skills that go beyond those of a project manager (Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990; Howell and Higgins, 1990; Ulrich, 1997).

Compounding these theoretical issues, Buchanan and Boddy do not offer an adequate examination of the potential differences between *internal* versus *external* change agents (Ginsberg and Abrahamson, 1991, p. 174). Moreover, their overriding focus on the 'content' and 'control' agendas of internal project managers means there is little emphasis on the *process* skills of 'facilitating' change associated with internal or external change agents acting in an OD consultative role (Hartley, Bennington and Binns 1997, p. 61).

In sum, despite the apparent complexity and multiple levels of their model of 'expertise', Buchanan and Boddy focus primarily on the change agent as an internal project manager involved in implementation processes.

## Management consultants as change agents

The rise of management consultants as change agents over the last two decades has been dramatic. Their influence has added a new layer of complexity to change agency, although most academic research has ignored the emergence of this potentially powerful new constituency within organizations (Fincham, 2001; Ginsberg and Abrahamson, 1991; O'Shea and Madigan, 1997). There are now a plethora of both large and small consultancies that specialize in change management. It is almost unthinkable for an organization to embark on a significant change initiative without seeking some sort of preliminary advice or expertise from consultants.

Although management consultants can play a variety of change roles as advisors, experts or solution providers, one of their most pervasive roles is in project-managing change (Sadler, 2001). This is not surprising. Managing change and managing projects are often synonymous. Both require a schedule of activities defined by objectives, time-scales, key events, cost constraints and deliverables (Reiss, 1998, p. 14). This has been recognized by many change management consultancies that train their consultants in 'the management of the change process as a project' (PA Consulting, 1998, p. 6). Similarly, even though organizational development interventions are rarely designed around a consulting-dominated or expert model of change agency, they tend to be underpinned by a rigorous project management methodology for collecting, analysing and feeding back diagnostic data. In this respect, the skills of an effective change agent and a project manager are often identical, irrespective of whether the changes are technical or people-oriented in nature (Beatty and Lee, 1992). Given this convergence, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate the apparently softer interventions of OD consultants from the more instrumental agendas of change management consultants.

Another key role for change management consultants is in strategically coordinating and integrating complex, large-scale and multiple change projects that have a transformational impact on organizations. This 'programmatic' change role is very daunting, and it requires a set of skills that go beyond those of project management. It is important in this respect to highlight the broad differences between *project* management and *programme* management. The nature of the difference can be defined as follows: 'project management is concerned with critical path, method and timing . . . programme management is concerned with timing and resources' (Reiss, 1993, p. 13). This is partly a tactical versus strategic distinction. However, the scale of the change management task also defines the difference. Large projects often consist of a collection of smaller projects with different subobjectives and performance measures. 'These can start at different times and operate at different levels and in different areas of an organization. Some of these sub-projects will run concurrently, some consecutively and a few may even be largely free standing' (Burnes, 2000, p. 474). Where the change project consultant can concentrate on one project at a time, usually with a single deliverable, the consultant as change programme 'synergist' must simultaneously co-ordinate an array of change projects each with its own timeframe, resource constraints, costs and deliverables (Caldwell, 2001).

The role of management consultants in managing large-scale programmatic change that embraces new technology, IT process redesign, restructuring, culture change and market or product transformation is invariably a complex and high-risk process. (Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990; Howell and Higgins, 1990). The major dangers are fourfold:

1) Programmes of transformational change are often inspired by the strategic vision of a new leader, but it is often difficult to translate a top-down vision into practice.
2) The scale and magnitude of the strategic change programme is often under-estimated, especially during the laborious 'long marches' required to reshape the complex, embedded practices and values of the existing organization.
3) Large-scale programmes of change affect the whole operational fabric of an organization,

and, if they fail, the consequences can be disastrous (Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990; Hammer, 1990).
4) Once the programme of change has been embarked upon, multiple and conflicting priorities can arise that fracture the change process, undermining momentum and a clear sense of direction (Doyle, 2001, p. 326).

Given these intrinsic dangers, large-scale programmes of change can often fail; especially when they are delayed reactions to the competitive pressures of organizational survival (Kanter, 1999). Beer, Eisenstat and Spector (1990) have attacked 'the fallacy of programmatic culture change' precisely because it offers a 'quick fix' solution to the complexities of achieving successful long-term change. In the 1990s, TQM and BPR were subject to mounting criticism because their programmatic philosophies were unable to cope with the messy reality of organizations and the enormous challenges of large-scale change (Juran, 1993; Lawler and Mohrman, 1987). These failures have led to a growing disillusionment with large-scale programmatic change driven by outside consultants, and a renewed emphasis on 'enacted' or incremental change through groups, teams and 'communities of practice' that gradually cultivate and create a new mindset within an organization (Miller, 1997; Weick, 1984, 1995; Wenger, 1998).

## The emergence of change teams

The idea of change agency as a team process, rather than an individual task, has grown enormously over the last decade, although there is very little empirical research on the subject (Cummings and Worley, 1997; Lewin, 1947; Mayon-White, 1993; Meadows, 1980; Trist and Bamforth, 1951; West, 1990). There are a number of factors that partly explain this shift:

1) Change management interventions are often based on reducing central hierarchical control in organizations and this has resulted in a growing emphasis on self-managed teams as mechanisms to achieve greater horizontal coordination across organizational divisions, units and work processes.
2) Team coordination at various levels is also important because change in one area of an organization can often have an important impact on other areas.
3) Large-scale organizational changes are simply too complex and high-risk for any one individual to lead or direct them, even when there is a strong sense of vision and direction (Kotter, 1996).
4) There has been a growing disillusionment with the over-emphasis on charismatic or heroic leadership as the central foundation for strategic change processes.
5) The advantages of combining the inside knowledge and specialist expertise of internal and external consulting teams has been recognized as a way of improving the effectiveness of implementation (Lacey, 1995).
6) There is growing recognition that the 'dispersal' of change agency to teams as units of learning can institutionalize behavioural change more deeply while countering employee resistance (Cummings and Worley, 1997).

Together these factors have underlined the importance of change teams at both a strategic and operational level within organizational change processes. For example, large-scale transformational change is often led by a 'transitional management team' or 'guiding coalition', reporting to the chief executive (Kotter, 1996; Hambrick, Nadler and Tushman, 1998). These specialist teams are essential if major change is to be achieved while keeping the infrastructure of the organization operational during the transition phase. Where the chief executive and other senior managers do not perform this role internally, it can be taken on by outside consultants or 'interim managers' charged with coordinating a complete change programme, using teams of internal and external consultants (PA Consulting, 1998).

Similarly, at the operational or task-level change teams may perform a more mundane, but nonetheless important role. Here teamworking as a form of 'empowerment' and devolution of line management decision-making is essential in implementing improvements in customer care, quality standards and productivity (Holti, 2000). In this respect, bottom-up task oriented change is often viewed as a more effective mechanism for embedding change in organizations than the top-down programmatic

culture-change processes associated with change leaders (Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990; Doyle, 2001).

Undoubtedly the most influential model of a team approach to change agency is offered by the concept of the 'learning organization' (Senge, 1990). By conceiving organizations not as structures, but as processes of group or team 'enactment' and collective knowledge creation, primacy is given to change agency at all levels (Weick, 1995). Again, this is partly a recognition of the fact that central hierarchical control has declined in many organizations and that large-scale organizational change is simply too complex and high risk for any one group or individual to lead. It is therefore no surprise that at the heart of the learning organization is the *inclusive* ideal that everyone throughout the organization will work collaboratively to harness their knowledge, skills and insights to constantly renew and improve organizational success.

The ideal of learning as a collective process raises, of course, fundamental issues of how learning can be dispersed throughout an organization (Burgoyne, 1999). Who is involved in learning, where does it take place, what is being learnt? How does it accumulate, and how can it be applied? As the learning organization has grown in popularity, these questions have become even more pressing, and this has led to more intensified critiques of the very idea that organizations can learn (Reynolds and Ablett, 1998).

It is worth highlighting at least four of the critical issues that challenge the idea of organizational learning:

1) the structural changes that have created flatter and more flexible organizations have also fragmented the processes by which team learning, knowledge and risk are managed in organizations.
2) The concept of learning as an open dialogue within organizations obfuscates the harsh external realities of competitiveness that often determine organizational success or failure.
3) There is extraordinary naïvety about the role of politics, power and group conflict within organizations and this challenges the learning-centred ideal that knowledge, information or power can be widely shared within or between teams (Easterby-Smith, Crossan and Nicolini, 2000).
4) The enormous significance of 'tacit', or hidden, knowledge within organizations that cannot be easily shared or learnt has called into question the degree to which group and organizational learning can be codified.

All of these criticisms are relevant to the application of the concept of organizational learning to change agency. For example, by treating leadership as a 'distributed phenomenon' (Senge, 1999) and change as a group activity that occurs at all levels, there is no focus on change agent types or the specific attributes they may require to facilitate learning. Instead, 'learning' as a process or practice that facilitates change and innovation is treated as a future-oriented meta-competency. From this viewpoint, change agent 'competencies' are not founded on codified expertise, knowledge or techniques that can be instrumentally applied or learnt through conventional educational or training interventions (Bennett and Leduchowicz, 1983). Rather, they are *learning* processes involving experimentation and personal practices that translate explicit and tacit organizational knowledge into collective understanding of the need for change. Senge has therefore rejected the idea that organizations 'need ''change agents'' and leaders who can ''drive change''' (1999, p. 179). This empowering model of learning appears to challenge management development professionals who perpetuate the illusion of expertise, or the idea that change can be project managed. Unfortunately, it also diffuses any sense of the how change agency as a team learning process can be managed, controlled or developed in organizations.

## Four models of change agency

As this brief and often critical review of some of the literature on change agency suggests, classifying change agents is a complex theoretical and practical task. Nevertheless, classification is essential if one is to avoid the weaknesses of one-dimensional models.

For the purposes of classification a change agent is defined as an internal or external individual or team responsible for initiating, sponsoring, directing, managing or implementing

| Leadership models | Management models | Consultancy models | Team models |
|---|---|---|---|
| Innovator (Kirton, 1980)<br>Corporate entrepreneur (Kanter, 1984)<br>Transformational leader (Bass, 1990)<br>Strategic architect (Prahalad & Hamel,1990)<br>Charismatic leader (Conger, 1993)<br>Visionary (Bennis, 1993)<br>Sponsor (Connor, 1998)<br>Change leader (Kotter, 1996)<br>Change champion (Ulrich, 1997) | Adaptor (Kirton, 1980)<br>Empowerer (Lawler, 1986)<br>Developer (Pedler Burgoyne and Boydell 1990)<br>Changemaker (Storey,1992)<br>Pathfinder (Beatty and Lee, 1992)<br>Change manager (Caldwell, 2001) | Action researcher (Lewin,1951)<br>Facilitator (Tichy, 1974)<br>Analyst (De Board, 1978)<br>Process consultant (Schein, 1988)<br>Catalyst (Blake and Mouton, 1983)<br>Counsellor (Feltham, 1999)<br>Expert (Cummings and Worley, 1997) | T-Group (Lewin,1951)<br>Composite group (Trist and Bamforth,1951)<br>Organic group (Meadows,1980)<br>Quality circle (Juran,1985)<br>TCI (West, 1990)<br>Task group (Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990)<br>Guiding coalition (Kotter,1996)<br>Transition team (Kanter,1999)<br>Pilot group (Senge,1999) |

*Figure 1. Four models of change agency*

a specific change initiative, project or complete change programme. Using this definition four models can be specified that encompass most of the existing research on change agency (Figure 1):

*Leadership models:* Change agents are identified as leaders or senior executives at the very top of the organization who envision, initiate or sponsor strategic change of a far-reaching or transformational nature.

*Management models*: Change agents are conceived as middle level managers and functional specialists who adapt, carry forward or build support for strategic change within business units or key functions.

*Consultancy models*: Change agents are conceived as external or internal consultants who operate at a strategic, operational, task or process level within an organization, providing advice, expertise, project management, change programme coordination, or process skills in facilitating change.

*Team models:* Change agents are conceived as teams that may operate at a strategic, operational, task or process level within an organization and may include managers, functional specialists and employees at all levels, as well as internal and external consultants.

This brief description of the four models is primarily a heuristic research tool. It attempts to synthesise and re-conceptualize the nature of change agency, by emphasizing that there is no *universal* model of change agency, or a *single type* of change agent with a fixed set of competencies. Within each of the four models, a variety of change agent roles or types can be explored (Caldwell, 2001). The research challenge is to empirically clarify these multiple roles. As such, the classification may also serve a broader didactic purpose by steering discussions of change agency away from one-dimensional models or generic types.

## Conclusion

At the centre of many processes of organizational change is the key role of change agents: the individuals or teams that are going to initiate, lead, direct or take direct responsibility for making change happen. All too often, however, change agents' roles have been identified with one-dimensional models. This has had at least four major consequences for the understanding of the various practical roles of leaders, managers, consultants and teams in processes of organizational change. The focus on the unique attributes, traits or heroic qualities of change leaders has seriously underestimated the significance of managers and other change agents in the change process. The search for the 'competencies' of change managers has led to a futile quest for the Holy Grail of change agency: a universal recipe for success. The failure to seriously explore the blurring of boundaries between OD consultants as internal or external change agents who pursue a 'process' mode of consulting, and management consultants focused on mechanistic, project–driven and expert interventions defined by performance measures, has undermined the task of clarifying new multidimensional models of change consulting. The idea that change agency is essentially a team or organisational learning process has led to a radical 'dispersal' of change agency without offering a coherent sense of how learning and change can be managed or controlled. Together these one-dimensional interpretations of change agency have diverted atten-

tion from the increasingly vital task of understanding the empirical complexity of change agent roles within organizations and of finding new ways of managing change processes in an integrated and coherent manner to affect successful and lasting change.

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