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Planning A Revolution

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Selecting the right agent of change is crucial to the success of a revamp.

In response to evolving conditions, you came to realise that your organisation must change. You are now move into action. As the leader of the organisation, one of your first and critical decisions is to appoint that will lead the project. Typically, the leadership consists of project sponsor, with overall responsibility seconded by project managers focusing on specific aspects. These people will be your change agents - the upon which success of your initiative will rely. What makes a good change leader then? When assessing candidates, you need to ask yourself three questions: Do they have the right attitude? Do they possess the appropriate knowledge? And have they mastered necessary skills? Let's look at each of these view points

The right attitude

A change agent cannot succeed without great persistence. Change is a complex and labour intensive process arouses feelings and emotions. Angry people, frustrated teammates, conflicting priorities, unforeseen problems behind-the-scenes resistance are typical daily challenges. A project leader or manager cannot lead her team through these without determination and stamina.

To avoid changes in leadership in the midst of change, the person must be fully committed to see the project through to completion. A good way to ensure that is to appoint an ambitious and enthusiastic individual presents potential for career advancement within the organisation. She will look at the challenges as a career development opportunity and will be highly motivated to succeed.

The change agent must act as a "voice of conscience". When any mid-course changes occur, it is the responsibility of the change agent to raise the issue with the sponsors; otherwise the project will end up failing. An effective change agent we worked with has this attitude: "My primary goal is to ensure this project succeeds, no matter what. My secondary objective is to preserve my personal relationship with all senior management." This sounds extreme, but the best change agents really are tactful and diplomatic. A change leader must make judgements and keep her own counsel; no one can do it for her.

The appropriate knowledge

The project sponsor should be a seasoned change agent with a general understanding of the business. Her project managers should be subject matter experts in their respective area of responsibility. Having some excellent project management skills is simply not enough. They will crash due to lack of detailed understanding of the subject area. Expertise also brings the credibility and respect much needed to succeed in their role. In particular, change agents need to understand how the business works. This entails understanding of how it comes from, where it goes, how it goes, and how to keep it. It also calls into play knowledge of marketing, products and product development, customers, sales, selling, buying, hiring, firing, and just about anything you might think of. In addition, a change agent should also be well connected throughout the

organisation. These active relationships are important in communicating effectively with stakeholders, coalitions, and designing a successful rollout.

The necessary skills

Change is not as easy as ABC, the pressure on the project leadership is always tremendous. In order to succeed, a change agent must possess the proven ability to remain highly effective under intense pressure. She needs outstanding analytical skills in addition to being very organised and disciplined, both in her thinking and execution. Guessing won't do, insight is nice, even useful, and sometimes shines with brilliance, but it is often difficult and almost impossible to defend. A rational, well-argued analysis can be ignored, but not successfully countered.

Change agents must learn to take part and reassemble operations and systems in novel ways, and then defend the financial and political impacts of what they have done. At the same time, a good change agent must be flexible enough to work around hurdles and handle evolving priorities. People skills such as team-building, interpersonal understanding and communication skills are mandatory requirements for a good change agent. The change agent has to build the project team and leverage on the team members' competencies. To succeed, she must have a strong sense of identity, purpose and joint-ownership, as well as have a high-performing mindset. In other words, she must engage the people using natural leadership style and influencing skills to get results.

To manage resistance - a natural part of the change process - the change agent must start by understanding and acknowledging it. She needs a lot of empathy, with good listening skills. Resistance is most damaging when it remains unnoticed. Whenever possible, influence the people by involving them in decisions.

Communication is the glue that keeps the organisation moving towards the desired state. The change agent has to be able to communicate effectively at all levels and across all functions.

Lastly, keep in mind that change is never easy and that the failure rate is high. To maximise your chances of success, we strongly recommend you take a hard look at your candidates. If none of them closely match the requirements, then consider alternative people. You will save yourself a lot of trouble down the road. Once you find the right individuals, make sure they can dedicate 50% to 100% of their time to the initiatives.

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