

CHANGE AGILITY

EXTRACT: CHAPTER 34

MASTER EXPERT

HOW TO USE **EXPERTSHIP TO
ACHIEVE PEAK PERFORMANCE,
SENIORITY AND INFLUENCE IN
A TECHNICAL ROLE**

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**The Master Expert acts as a
change catalyst and leads change
initiatives effectively.**

CHAPTER | 34 |

Change Agility

One of the key measures of being a Master Expert is the ability to consistently drive innovation and change. How well do we rate in change agility?

IN THIS CHAPTER, WE WILL EXPLORE:

- Why is change so difficult for most organizations?
- What does modern best practice in change agility look like?
- Are we born with a change mindset, or can it be developed?
- What is enlightened change management, and what role do experts play in its execution?

KIRSTEN WORKS AS A specialist assessor in the claims department of a major global insurance broker. She deals with highly complex claims, often involving hundreds of thousands of dollars. It's a challenging role that requires intricate negotiations between the broker's clients and the insurer.

Kirsten has just learned that she and other members of the claims team will no longer have assigned desks and offices. Going forward, they will be hot-desking. An automated booking system will allocate a different desk to them every time they visit the office.

She is told this is part of the organization’s global strategy of shifting to an agile work environment. It’s being promoted as a way to better enable collaboration and knowledge sharing.

While Kirsten can see that this might have advantages for some roles, she doesn’t see how it works in her situation. She mostly works alone, needs greater privacy given the nature of her work, and requires easy access to the central filing system.

She doesn’t believe that her needs have been adequately understood or considered by the people making this change.

“Typical,” she thinks. “No one thinks of our team.” Kirsten goes on to bemoan the decision repeatedly—even in the presence of other members of the claims team.

She fires off an angry email to the facilities management manager, challenging the decision and complaining about not being involved or consulted. Kirsten states for the record that this is yet another example of no one understanding the importance of her work, how much money she routinely saves the organization every week, and how her special needs as an expert are yet again being overridden to meet the needs of the wider organization.

“It can also be argued that Kirsten’s response to the change leader may be counter-productive.”

Rhonda, the facilities manager in question, receives the email with disdain. Kirsten’s email is one of many Rhonda has received from technical specialists claiming their needs are unique. It has the same “you don’t know what you are doing” message that is typical of the way the organization’s specialists communicate. There is no attempt at a conversation or an exploration of the issues—just a straight-out refusal to accept the change. *Typical of experts*, Rhonda thinks.

Consulting On Change

ON THE FACE OF it, Kirsten’s organization has made one of the most basic errors when it comes to effective change leadership. It has overlooked how disruptive change can be. It does not appear to have taken into account that in any change process, people need to go through an adjustment period. The majority of people automatically resist change unless someone has made a compelling case for why the change is a good thing.

If organizations—or experts—do not give enough thought to how employees and other stakeholders will be impacted by a particular change,

they can expect to encounter resistance. (We note that some organizations and people very quickly embrace change, but these are, in our experience, very much in the minority.) Because no consideration has been given to the impact of a change on specific individuals or groups, organizations typically do not customize their communication of this change for different groups and employees in different roles or circumstances. In this case, it appears that there has been a lack of consultation, and perhaps those implementing the change (the introduction of hot-desking) have not really considered how different categories of employees might react.

However, it could also be argued that Kirsten's response to the change leader—Rhonda, in this case—may be counter-productive. The style with which Kirsten's message is delivered and the content—outright condemnation of the change and the way it has been communicated—cause her message to be discarded. Kirsten has not created an environment in which her concerns are going to be properly considered. Therefore, the email is a waste of effort and a missed opportunity to influence the outcome.

Those leading change initiatives in organizations often forget that people need a period of time to adjust and that they often need to voice their concerns. Investing time in such a process frequently accelerates the engagement of hearts and minds in the new direction. People will begin to work through their emotions about the change more swiftly and constructively. This reduces resistance and positively engages people in supporting the change. The change itself gets done faster.

“The irony is that change aggressively imposed will almost guarantee fierce resistance.”

But many involved in sponsoring or implementing the change argue that there's no time for consultation. The typical excuse made is that “We need to make the change now, or else...” The irony is that change aggressively imposed will almost guarantee fierce resistance, which ends up taking much longer to address. By not taking the time to consult with the affected individuals and groups upfront, organizations tie up resources and make the implementation of change much more time-consuming.

This lack of consulting by senior management is extremely common in the West. There is almost a parent-child relationship at play. The failure to treat employees like adults by asking them to also think about the problems faced by the organization and help shape solutions speaks to a leadership attitude that believes employees won't understand, or they will resist anyway, so there's no choice but to impose solutions on them—or worse, an attitude of “we know best.”

Another common mistake is that the benefits of a particular change are often expressed by senior leaders and change managers purely in terms of various organizational outcomes, rather than how the change will affect employees. Individuals—quite naturally and understandably—tend to be concerned with what the changes will mean for them. In situations like this, the organization needs a well-argued communications plan with alternative strategies for different stakeholder groups. This might include an upfront consultation about people’s needs and concerns.

In workshops with senior leadership teams on shaping change processes, when we discuss the benefits of prior consultation, leaders often ask us “... but what happens if employees come up with a plausible alternative strategy?” Then subtext is: How should we, as leaders, react? Employees coming up with a possible plausible alternative strategy is going to derail us further!

Questions like this one from senior leaders reveal two common beliefs: Firstly, that the consultation process is being done “because we have to be seen to be consulting” even though “we’ve already decided on the best action.” Secondly, the question implies that leaders do not believe it’s possible for employees to come up with a better option. Is this the ultimate statement of senior leadership arrogance? In our experience, conversely, employees are often those closest to the challenge or to customers, and they frequently make valuable contributions that improve change ideas. We’d also argue that you won’t find this poor senior leadership attitude in new, fast-growing corporations. They listen as closely to their employees as they do to their customers.

When employees like Kirsten are worried about the changes, they often display problematic behaviors in front of their colleagues, such as resistance, disillusionment, and antipathy toward the change. This in turn affects other people’s attitudes.

But Kirsten is also at fault. She did not take the time to try to understand the rationale behind the organization’s decision to make this change. She immediately assumed that her circumstances hadn’t been taken into account without checking in to see if others had been consulted.

“We have met many experts who are in denial about the rate of change.”

She didn’t need to turn it into a personal attack on the capability of a colleague. She should have focused on the issue. She made an assumption that additional collaboration between herself and others would add no value to the organization and its clients.

By imposing her opinion about these changes and automatically opposing them, Kirsten has made exactly the same mistake that she was accusing Rhonda and her team of making.

Change is the New Normal

OVER THE PAST FEW years, we have worked with hundreds of organizations all around the world. Change is happening in every one of them. Change is, as they say, the new normal.

There are a few organizations where change isn't happening, and these are the companies most at risk of being disrupted. They're the new Kodak, the new Novell, the new BlackBerry.

Some organizations are so overcome by the constant rate of change that they're suffering from change fatigue, or out-of-touch senior executives are simply unable to adapt their worldview and their market strategy quickly enough to survive.

Many of us, as experts, have the same problem. We get so wrapped up in our own way of doing things that we cannot see beyond it. We've met many experts who are in denial about the rate of change and how it'll impact them, even though we're clearly living in times when the ability to change and adapt to change has never been more important.

*“Positive conviction needs to be earned
—it cannot be demanded.”*

Given the importance and prevalence of change, we need to realize that it's something that experts cannot avoid. More than that, we need to embrace it, and even lead it, if we are to deliver value optimally. As experts, we're likely to be active players in the changes happening around us.

The Master Expert understands change and operates as a senior influencer in many ways. This chapter examines how experts at various levels view their own sense of responsibility for and sense of agency in engaging with change projects.

Enlightened Change Management

ENLIGHTENED CHANGE MANAGEMENT SHOULD begin before any decisions are made about how that change will be implemented. It involves identifying who to include in the decision process, who is likely to be impacted and how, and how they're likely to feel about the proposed change.

Unenlightened change management is a rearguard action aimed at damage control to lessen the effects of the emotional reactions that have been triggered by the failure to anticipate them and offset them with intelligent planning, communication, and engagement.

Shock and disbelief are the most commonly occurring initial reactions to learning of an unanticipated change, just as they're often the initial reactions to learning of the death of a loved one.

"No! That can't be! Why would the organization make such a ridiculous and unenlightened decision?" Denial is a common form of defensiveness. It's a form of non-acceptance, a form of self-protection. By denying it's happening, the mind tries to avoid any accompanying trauma.

When experiencing feelings like shock and denial, our rational brains are temporarily suspended, and we're rendered incapable of constructively thinking through what we need to do to progress through the change or even evaluating what it means objectively. Typically, such disabling feelings not only impair our attention and engagement but are the prelude to more resistant emotions, such as fear and anger.

Once it becomes clear that the change is actually happening—that it's undeniable—then antipathy toward it triggers stronger and stronger resistance. We instinctively feel that we should oppose this threat that has unsettled us. Enlightened change management practices recognize that these are natural human responses to the unfamiliar and to perceived threats. It allows for people's need to process such feelings for a period of time. It anticipates such responses and provides proactive support to aid them in processing such feelings in the most constructive and expedient manner possible.

Unenlightened change management, on the other hand, fails to envision or anticipate the natural and legitimate concerns that people will have. When these feelings are expressed, they not only remain unacknowledged but are often actively suppressed. "You shouldn't feel like that! Come on! Get with the program!"

When people feel that they can air their concerns and express their worries or outrage and that the decision-makers are hearing their concerns and taking them into account, then the intensity of such feelings typically subsides. That allows their rational brain to take over the controls again. They can start adjusting rationally to the proposed change. But if, when expressing their doubts and worries, people don't feel that they're being heard, then they often dig their heels in. They become even more resistant and unreasonable. They get stuck.

When applying some of the effective change management practices outlined shortly, it's not reasonable to expect that you'll have everyone's buy-in from day one. It's more realistic to anticipate some natural resistance. But when anticipated and planned for, when empathy is applied to hearing

people's concerns and allowing their expression within reasonable limits, the resistance can quickly give way to openness—a willingness to cautiously move forward.

“As many as 70 percent of change initiatives fail to realize the anticipated benefits.”

Over time, this caution can also make way for a more wholehearted commitment. But such positive conviction needs to be earned—it can't be demanded. To insist on the buy-in of others while they're still expressing reservations will likely only compound the resistance. When managed skillfully, resistance can be dissolved relatively swiftly, perhaps even in the course of one artful and empathic conversation.

But when people don't feel that their expressions of concern have been heard and taken into account, they can get stuck in a resistant, cynical, hostile, oppositional state, sometimes for years. So, with each new change the organization embarks on, it faces an increasingly hostile resistance movement. Morale and engagement inevitably tank and performance sinks, wiping out any of the anticipated benefits of the change initiative.

As many as 70 percent of change initiatives fail to realize the anticipated benefits. That's usually not because the idea wasn't sound in principle. Rather, such “benefit realization” shortfalls are typically the result of poor execution of change management and a failure to win the hearts and minds of the people who needed to be brought on the journey.

The Stages of Change

IN OUR WORKSHOPS, WE conduct an exercise where we invite participants to recall two changes that they have experienced:

- One that they embarked on of their own volition, such as a change of job or career direction, buying a house, getting married, having children, taking up a new diet or exercise program.
- One that was determined by others, such as an organizational restructure, a new boss, the introduction of new processes or procedures.

We ask them to describe the feelings at the outset of the change, during it, and at its conclusion. We then ask them to estimate how long it took them to become sufficiently accustomed to the change so that it felt like the norm again, with no further adjustment required of them.

In just about all of these cases, they describe the experience of undertaking change of their own volition as the most preferable of the two experiences. They had ownership of the intended outcomes. They were making changes to achieve some self-determined benefits which no one else had to sell them on. They were the intended beneficiaries, with no trust issues about whether or not they were being told everything or whether there was some undisclosed agenda at play.

“The change curve describes emotional reactions, not logical ones.”

They also felt that they had probably estimated what kinds of challenges there might be in making the transition to the new way of operating. Even if there were occasional surprises—after all, they were charting new waters—they were prepared to accept responsibility for them because they owned the decision. No one else was to blame for any unanticipated challenges.

Sometimes, as participants considered this self-imposed experience, there was a recognition that they had perhaps suffered from uninformed optimism. The change had proved harder to implement than they’d envisioned, it was more unsettling or disruptive, and the new reality wasn’t everything they had hoped for. But nonetheless, they owned it.

Most participants had quite a different experience when change was imposed upon them as a consequence of others’ decisions. Participants’ descriptions of this aligned with a typical progression of emotions.

We call this the change curve (see Figure 34.1). As you can see, there are various stages, which we describe below.

Denial, anxiety and shock

Participants usually say that the announcement of the change was a surprise, and the impact it might have on them was a shock. Denial follows quickly afterward—that “this isn’t really happening” feeling.

We’re not describing logical reactions here. The response from most participants is that their comfortable world is being disrupted, even ended. These are *emotional* reactions.

Fear and anger

In the next stages, people become angry and then fearful. “Why didn’t anyone warn us? Whose fault is it that we have to change? Why can’t others change while I stay the same?”

This anger is quickly followed by fear of an unknown future. “Is my job safe? Will I lose valuable colleagues and friends? Will I be successful in my new role? Will I enjoy the responsibilities? Did I do enough in the last year or so to survive this change?”

Capability: CHANGE IMPACT

The Change Curve

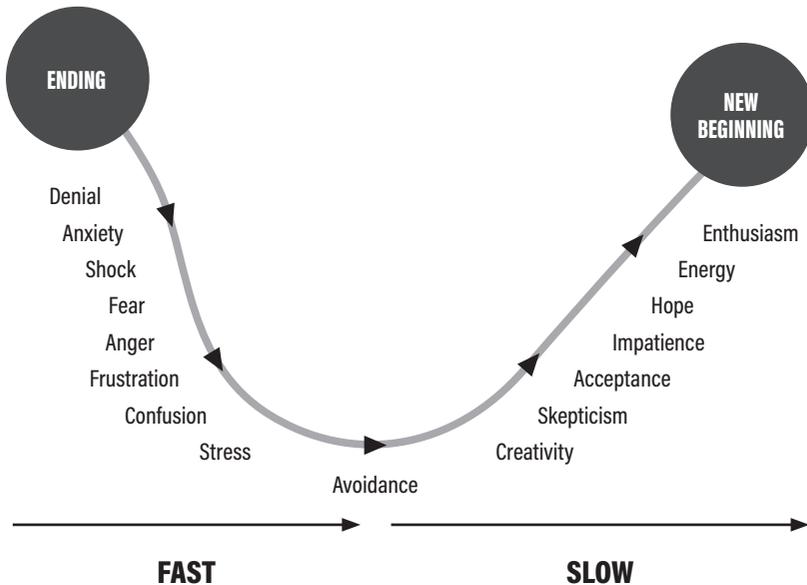


FIGURE 34.1: The Change Curve

Skepticism and acceptance

The next stages of dealing with change lead to acceptance. This is the turning point that's reached after anger and fear have been exhausted. It takes more time for some people than others, and in some cases, it's never achieved.

This stage often manifests as ambivalence—no longer caring one way or the other. Whatever will be, will be. But, gradually, skepticism gives way to acceptance that the change is going to happen whether we like it or not, and we might start thinking about what part we might play in this new world.

Enthusiasm

The final stage is enthusiasm. In this stage, we're prepared to get on the bus and accept the change. We might even start to feel enthusiastic about it because we can see some of the benefits.

By this stage, participants are getting used to the change and recognizing that it was necessary. They may also see the potential for personal and professional growth. The memory of how things used to be fades. It feels like a new beginning.

Ending and new beginning

One last observation about the change curve represented in Figure 34.1. At the top left of the curve, we see Ending. Participants often ask us why the ending is actually positioned at the beginning of the curve.

The ending is a stage that is very often ignored by those driving the change. But it's far more difficult to ignore if you're the one having change imposed upon you. The whole concept of change is that "now things will be different." What was normal for me before will no longer be normal for me going forward. In work life, this sometimes means a change of team members (often team member losses), changes in responsibilities, or perhaps even relocation. Our life up to that announcement was X, and now X will be replaced by something else. There is a significant feeling of loss.

"Different individuals navigate the change journey at different speeds."

As an aside, senior leaders often compound this sense of loss by inadvertently laying blame. "We've been approaching this process all wrong, and we now need to do it differently," comes the cry. The response, usually muttered under the breath, is "Well, it was you lot who told us to do it that way..." Most particularly, the participants have often experienced a lack of recognition for their previous work—no "thanks for all your efforts so far and for the fact that your hard work and great teams have got us here." This accentuates the sense of loss and starts generating the more aggressive emotions, like anger and fear, that are to come.

The New Beginning is actually signaling that we're moving from the "change in progress" stage to accepting and normalizing the new arrangements, whatever they may be.

Changing Insights

WE'VE CONDUCTED THIS DISCUSSION with thousands of participants over the years, and also more recently with many hundreds of subject matter experts. The consistency with which these descriptions arrive is quite remarkable.

Not everyone has negative reactions to the initial announcement of change. We estimate about 10 percent of people are ready to embrace change straight away and are excited about it. Typically, upon exploration, these participants have either a remarkably positive disposition, or have benefited from the last few changes and therefore see change as a good thing.

But for most people, their initial response to change travels through these four steps. By the end of the story, about 90 percent of participants say the change they were initially worried about turned out well for them. About 10 percent say it ended up being a complete disaster, as they initially predicted.

Several other insights usually emerge from these discussions. Firstly, most people agree that different individuals navigate the journey at different speeds. Some participants could easily accelerate from one stage to another, while others took much longer to progress. It's a mistake to believe that everyone should move along the curve at the same speed. This also implies that, as experts leading change, we need to be prepared to dedicate more time to helping some of our colleagues than others.

“TINA (There Is No Alternative) communications have had their impact.”

Secondly, every group tends to agree that by the time the change is announced, those making the announcement are at stage four of the curve—positive, passionate, believing in the change. This is typically senior management, of course, and this helps explain why while the rest of the organization are in shock and denial, the managers (who had their shock and denial stage months ago, prior to shaping the change solution) are impossibly and irritatingly happy and committed.

Thirdly, most groups agree that those in stage four—those leading change—tend to want to drive people through the *disturbed* stages far too quickly. Communication has a great deal to do with this, as insufficient thought, time and attention are allocated for questions from those upon whom the change is being imposed.

Communication emanating from those leading the change is typically one-way during these initiatives. Those who don't immediately agree that the change is a great idea are quickly labeled detractors or negative people. They're told sternly to get on the bus, or that the train is leaving the station, or some similar, highly annoying metaphor.

In addition to communication, the way in which organizations decide to handle change projects is a common problem. Change teams are created and given tight deadlines to complete the change process. These change teams are often populated by professional change managers and are driven by project Gantt charts rather than audience emotions.

And they're rewarded for on-time delivery and achieving milestones rather than winning the hearts and minds of the employees. By the time these change professionals are appointed to the change project, the key mistakes of lack of consultation and TINA (There Is No Alternative) communications

have had their impact. The resistance movement has already formed and is armed and ready for battle.

While the journey along the change curve is reasonably consistent, different people travel through the curve at different speeds. Management, who announce the changes, for example, are often already through the curve before the staff they announce it to have even started. And different personalities have different reactions. The glass-half-full versus glass-half-empty reaction is well documented.

In the next few chapters, we focus on the three roles a Master Expert plays in change agility: that of Change Leader, Change Supporter, and Change Catalyst.

- Change Supporter: the extent to which experts have the ability to promote a positive change culture by modeling supportive behaviors toward change.
- Change Catalyst: the extent to which experts have set a change agenda by consistently looking for opportunities to make positive changes.
- Change Leader: the extent to which experts have the ability to step up into a leadership role on change projects when required, constructively engaging others in change.

These chapters form a detailed primer on how to manage change through the change process for those experts who may have to lead a change initiative.

The Expert Roles of Change Impact

CHANGE AGILITY DESCRIBES THREE roles an expert is in a strong position to play:

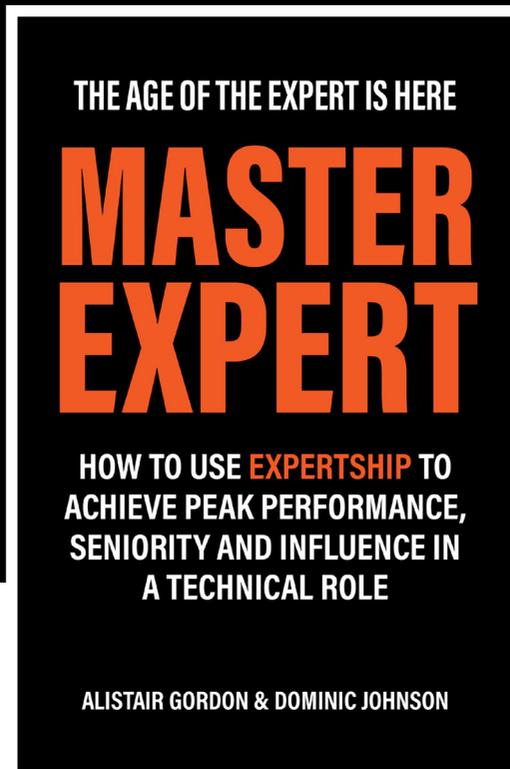
- These are shown in Figure 34.2



FIGURE 34.2: Change Agility Expert Roles

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