

Major Roles During Change and Capacity Building

The process of organizational change can include a variety of key roles. These roles can be filled by various individuals or groups at various times during the change process. Sometimes, individuals or groups can fill more than one role.

Change Initiator

It is conventional wisdom among organizational development consultants that successful change is often provoked by a deep “hurt” or crisis in the organization, for example, dramatic reduction in sales, loss of a key leader in the organization, warnings from a major investor, or even actions of a key competitor. It is not uncommon then that someone inside the organization reacts to that deep hurt and suggests the need for a major change effort. Often the person who initiates the change is not the person who becomes the primary change agent.

Change Agent

The change agent is the person responsible for organizing and coordinating the overall change effort. The change agent role can be filled by different people at different times during the project. For example, an outside consultant might be the first change agent. After the project plan has been developed and begins implementation, the change agent might be an implementation team comprised of people from the organization. If the change effort stalls out, the change agent might be a top leader in the organization who intercedes to ensure the change process continues in a timely fashion.

Champion for Change

Change efforts often require a person or group who continues to build and sustain strong enthusiasm about the change. This includes reminding everyone of why the change is occurring in the first place, the many benefits that have come and will come from the change process. The champion might be the same person as the change agent at various times in the project.

Sponsor of Change

Usually, there is a one key internal person or department that is officially the “sponsor,” or official role responsible for coordinating the change process. In large organizations, that sponsor often is a department, such as Human Resources, Strategic Planning or Information Technology. In smaller organizations, the sponsor might be a team of senior leaders working to ensure that the change effort stays on schedule and is sustained by ongoing provision of resources and training.

Leadership, Supervision and Delegation

In this Field Guide, leadership is defined as setting direction and influencing people to follow that direction. A person can lead themselves, other individuals, other groups or an entire organization. Supervision is guiding the development and productivity of people in the organization. Effective supervisors are able to achieve goals by guiding the work of other people – by delegating.



See “Client’s Delegation to Maintain Motivation and Momentum” on page 353 for guidelines to productive delegation.

Note that supervisors exist throughout an organization, depending on the particular structure of the Board and employees. For example, the Board of Directors supervises the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the CEO supervises executive assistants, and middle managers supervise entry level supervisors.

The topic of leadership has become one of the most prominent topics in all of management literature today. It is almost impossible to find a general management book that does not include frequent mention of the topic of leadership. There are a variety of reasons for this, one of the most important being that successful organizational change requires strong, ongoing and visible leadership in support of that change. Leaders must model the type of behaviors that they want to see in their organization. Other reasons include:

- Leaders who work with others in the organization to clarify those desired results define the vision and goals, or desired results, for change.
- Leaders in the organization must “walk their talk” – they must behave according to the same values and behaviors that are to be accomplished by the change effort.
- Leaders must ensure the ongoing accountabilities, resources and support to ensure that actions are taken to accomplish the overall change effort.

There simply is no substitute for the role that leadership and supervision play in accomplishing successful organizational change. Thus, it is extremely important that leaders and supervisors in the organization have a strong understanding of basic principles of successful change in organizations.



See “Organizational Change and Capacity Building” on page 182 about principles, roles and activities for conducting successful change.
