Selecting and Retaining Internal Change Agents: Is There a Better Way?

by Edward J. Cripe

Do any of these situations sound familiar?

- A new manager of organization development is hired, after an extensive recruiting effort, to lead a major cultural change process. He has excellent credentials, including a Ph.D in organizational psychology. After one year on the job, it has become clear that the new manager of OD is not meeting the expectations of the company. He is perceived to be ineffective and not a good fit with the existing culture.

- A high performing line executive is appointed to head up the company's quality improvement process. Much progress is made during the first six months. A steering committee is set up, task forces are established, training at all levels commences. During the next six months, resistance by some executives comes out in the open causing progress to slow down. Into the second year, the new director of quality becomes increasingly frustrated and asks to be transferred back into a line job.

- A new company president is appointed and four months later decides to replace the vice president of human resources who is viewed as a good administrator, but unable to help the new CEO create a participative work environment that will improve quality and productivity.

These are only a few of countless situations where a key position to facilitate major cultural change in an organization, i.e. a "change agent" position, was not staffed successfully. Obviously, most placements of change agents are successful. However, the number of unsuccessful placements is high. My unscientific poll of people in the field, combined with many years of experience in staffing and developing both internal and external change agents, leads me to estimate that 30 to 40 percent of change agent placements are deemed to be not meeting the requirements of the position six months after being on the job.

The negative impact on the organization can be enormous. Recruiting costs and relocation costs are wasted. More important are the difficult-to-measure lost opportunity costs. Efforts to improve quality and productivity (and the bottom line) get bogged down, delayed, or put on the wrong track because the internal change agent has been ineffective. Other key people become discouraged and perhaps elect to go back to their regular day-to-day tasks, forsaking any hope of making major changes. The people who initially resisted the change effort now have more ammunition to continue their resistance.

Why does this problem exist? What factors contribute to successful placements that are missing in unsuccessful placements? First, let's explore why the selection and placement of change agents is a difficult task.

In other words, why are some change agents perceived as not meeting the expectations of the organization?

Problem Causes

1. The outcomes of the position are difficult to measure.

Unlike positions such as sales, the work of a change agent is difficult to measure. Organizational climate or attitude surveys can be used to track progress, but the accuracy of the measurement is mitigated by other variables outside the control of the change agent. For example, a highly competent change agent who does all of the "right" things may still not be able to be "successful" in changing a culture or implementing a total quality process if adverse business conditions create a need for short-term survival actions. A new CEO appointed in the middle of a change effort can have a negative or positive impact for which the change agent has no control.

2. The performance appraisal system used to determine whether the placement was a success is ineffective.

Unfortunately, this condition is not confined just to the appraisal of change agent positions. However, it seems to be magnified for change agents partly due to #1 above. Criteria for the appraisal of performance is often too subjective. "Instilling confidence," "impacting the bottom line" or "being an excellent facilitator" are not measurable, or even verifiable, and yet I have seen many actual cases of change agents being evaluated on this kind of criteria. On the other hand, to evaluate results totally on quantifiable measures, such as number of employees trained, does not give a fair and accurate picture of performance. A balance is needed. In addition, a dynamic process of establishing objectives and negotiating expectations with regular reviews must precede the evaluation of performance.

3. Selection criteria are unclear, undefined or inaccurate.

There is a dearth of research on the skills, knowledge and motives (i.e. competencies) that are required for successful performance as a change agent. Usually, selection criteria are defined in terms of number of years of experience and educational background. While experience and education can be valid requirements, in that they help build competencies, this is not where the selection process falls down. The main problem is that positions are filled without having a clear understanding of the base level competencies, sometimes referred to as "threshold" competencies, and the competencies required for superior performance. What specific behavior would have to be observed in order to determine the existence of a competency? How can a competency be uncovered during the interviewing and selection process? How can competencies be developed in order to help unsuccessful change agents become successful?

4. The change agent lacks the required competencies (or shoots himself or herself in the foot.)

The first three causes listed above are for the most part system problems that need to be addressed before a change agent's performance can legitimately be evaluated. There are, however, many cases where the change agent lacks one or more key competencies. Although I will discuss required competencies later in this article, I want to mention two major mistakes that change agents often make that get them into trouble which reflect a lack of competency.

One is to overuse the jargon of the various fields of expertise so that line management cannot understand what is being communicated. In many quarters, the term "organization development" or "OD" is a fuzzy concept. In fact, I am using the term "change agent" with some hesitancy, recognizing that the term may not be clear to some readers. A second mistake, directly related to the first, is to not think and communicate in the language of line executives, which is usually the "bottom line," i.e. financial results such as

ROI, ROE, earnings per share, net profit, etc. It is very easy for change agents to get so passionate about the process of managing change that they forget why change is necessary, i.e. to improve competitive position and financial performance while enhancing the quality of work life for employees. Executives need to feel confident that the change agent's personal and business objectives mesh with their own. I have seen some of the most talented change agents stumble because they viewed their role too narrowly and led a crusade to improve working climate or quality but forget the relationship to financial objectives.

5. The selection process is flawed.

Even if the selection criteria have been accurately determined, it is necessary to have a selection process in place that allows the existence of competencies in a candidate to be properly evaluated. Sloppy interviewing by untrained interviewers and haphazard reference checking usually lead to unsuccessful placements.

Related to #3 above is the failure to accurately evaluate fit with the current culture (some call this "chemistry"). This presents a unique dilemma. Is it better to have an agent of change be a match with the existing culture or with the culture that the organization wants to become? For example, if the company wants to move from a conservative, no risk-taking culture to an innovative entrepreneurial culture, should the change agents be conservative or entrepreneurial in nature and disposition?

Possible Solutions

Here are some actions that some organizations and change agents have taken to improve the "hit" rate for the selection of change agents. One solution to a selection problem is to develop the selected change agent to be successful.

Keep in mind that while these actions have worked for others, each situation is different. Thus, use common sense and customize when necessary.

1. Contract for long term outcomes and short term objectives.

Solutions to #1 and #2 above start with a recognition that a change agent position is a "knowledge worker" that requires a different measurement and appraisal system than what is used in most organizations. Even though the end state of a change effort may not be visible for three to five years, it is helpful to have clear and specific objectives spelled out, objectives that are flexible and dynamic, reviewed often (at least quarterly) and modified as necessary. This also helps communicate progress and identify and fix problems before they become serious. Expectations regarding behaviors, i.e. competencies, should be included.

For example, shortly after being appointed director of quality improvement for a major service organization, the new director drew up an end state outcome statement of: "Help create a participative work culture as measured by our organizational climate instrument (at the end of two years, increase by 10 percent favorable response, 20 percent total at the end of three years, etc.)." She and her team also drafted a vision and mission statement for the function and a list of objectives for the following year that included:

- "Ensure that the executive group understands basic concepts of service quality by conducting workshops and through one on one coaching. Measure by obtaining written feedback from each executive at the end of the year."

- "Increase executive level commitment to service quality improvement process. Begin pilot implementation in at least two divisions."

- "Establish credibility with executive group as the corporate resource for service quality improvement."

Her entire list of objectives along with the vision and mission of the function were presented and discussed in a

four hour meeting with her immediate supervisor (the vice president of human resources), the CEO and the president. The director's six person staff, including two administrative support employees, also attended. This process built in ownership and commitment by all parties to the success of the function. It also uncovered areas that needed resolution by the executive group. In developing a vision, mission and objectives for the quality improvement functional group, it was necessary to understand the corporate vision, mission and strategic plan. In this case, several areas were too general and did not provide guidance to anyone in the organization regarding the intent of the company. So a new objective was added to everyone's list, namely to devote whatever time was necessary to clarify the corporate vision, mission and strategy during the first quarter.

Other topics covered in the meeting were resources needed, possible barriers and ways to overcome the barriers. It was also agreed to hold quarterly review meetings. The focus of the meeting was a constructive "how do we make this change process successful."

This change agent had a number of positive things in her favor, most importantly a CEO and president who were committed enough to devote four hours up front and several hours each quarter to a review of the change agent's objectives. Many change agents who are not blessed with this initial support have to settle for a negotiation and discussion of objectives/expectations with the immediate supervisor. The process is just as important, perhaps more so, where top management commitment is not as strong.

The process is not an exact science. In fact, most of it is based on the old management-by-objectives (MBO) philosophy, which unfortunately fell out of favor a number of years ago due to poor execution and unethical execution. When used properly, the concepts work, particu-

larly for nebulous hard-to-define staff positions (such as change agents).

2. Emphasize specific change agent competencies as selection criteria.

Some research has been completed regarding competencies required for success in change agent positions. *Examples of competencies from one study, completed by McBer and Company, are shown in Exhibit 1 (page 27). Using this generic list can help improve the selection of change agents in situations where one does not currently exist. There are, however, some pitfalls. To have totally valid selection criteria, the specific job in the specific organization would have to be studied in order to determine required competencies. For most change agent positions, the McBer list will be 80 percent to 90 percent accurate. The problem is that the other 10 percent to 20 percent may be key competencies not identified that are essential to success or conversely, competencies shown that have no relevance to success. Therefore, the preferred way is to develop a change agent competency model for each organization.

With a competency model in hand, how can you determine the possession of a competency by a candidate? One method is to give the candidate an opportunity to actually demonstrate the competency through a role play or practice exercise, following assessment center types of processes. Designing and conducting an assessment center for selection of change agents is a costly and time consuming, yet effective, technique.

Another technique, probably more practical for most organizations, involves using the interview itself to evaluate the existence of required competencies. Competency assessment interviewing, which is similar to the better known critical incident method, is a structured and focused probe strategy, rather than merely a set of standard interview questions. It elicits the most critical job experiences as seen by the interviewee. Being more investigative

Exhibit 1

Change Agent Competencies

A. Interpersonal Skills

Competency	Superior Performance	Low Performance
1. Accurate empathy: social sensitivity	Sensitive to others' concerns; appears sympathetic	Insensitive; appears unsympathetic; confronts people in a way that prevents productive relationships from developing
2. Positive regard: positive expectations of people	Feels warmth toward others; tends to believe the best of people and to have faith in their ability to solve their own problems and improve	Tends to be critical and deprecating of others; doesn't really have faith in others' ability to solve their own problems without direct help
3. Genuineness	Feels and appears relaxed and open with others	Feels and appears formal, rigid, controlling, or uncomfortable with others

B Diagnostic Skills

4. Knowledge of principles of individual and organizational development: variables and systems	Demonstrates good knowledge of organizational development theories and methods and of the client's systems	Has poor understanding of organizational development and how client functions as an organization
5. Data-collection skills: ability to collect meaningful data from individuals and organizational systems (via interviews, surveys, observations, etc.)	Good observer; remembers specific events	Does not notice or remember specific events; gets vague, muddled impressions; does not distinguish causes from symptoms
6. Critical thinking: ability to draw conclusions from complex individual data to make accurate diagnoses	Conceptualizes: quickly sees meaningful patterns in data and can state the most important problems	Does not see "big picture," cannot organize data to state significant findings

C. Initiation Skills

7. Influencing and marketing skills: ability to identify and persuade prospective internal clients to use services	Interested, proactive and persuasive in promoting use of consulting methods and services	Reactive; does not initiate contacts with prospective internal clients
8. Presentation skills: public speaking, presenting lectures and briefs in concise, interesting and informative manner	Presents information in an interesting, persuasive way; enjoys making presentations	Not good at and dislikes presenting (prefers informal chats); his or her group presentations are disorganized, rambling, dull
9. Group management skills: ability to manage group dynamics	Knows what is going on in a group and has a sense of timing and the influence to lead group in task accomplishment	Appears awkward, not "with it" in group leadership roles; gets involved in individual problems; tends to abdicate or lose control of group activities
10. Problem solving and planning skills: ability to manage group dynamics	Actively motivates and otherwise helps clients to take actions	Tends not to follow through on recommendations, so that intervention ends with assessment

D. Organization Skills

11. Design skills: ability to design adult-learning experiences (e.g., training courses) and OD operations	Designs experiences that participants find interesting and informative (appropriate to client objectives and learning styles)	Designs experiences that clients find boring or irrelevant; often has wrong group of people attending activities
12. Administration skills: ability to administer the logistics and resources (personnel, materials, schedules, training sites) of programs	Runs program smoothly, efficiently, and in sync with client organization's needs	His or her programs appear disorganized; gives poor attention to organizational activities

Competency assessment interviewing ... is a structured and focused probe strategy ...

27

than reflective, the objective is to gather the most accurate performance data possible, not to collect candidates' ideas about what they "might have done" under similar circumstances. Candidates are not allowed to draw their own conclusions about what it takes to do a job. Instead they are asked to describe in detail, times when they felt successful and times when they felt their performance was less than expected. The interviewer presses for actual behavior and the thoughts and actions of the interviewee during the incident being described.

To maximize the effectiveness of this technique, interviewers should be trained to conduct the interview and to interpret the responses of the candidate. Some companies have implemented selection processes that include interviews along with a series of assessment exercises. Other companies utilize external experts to provide evaluations of candidates using these techniques.

Exhibit 2 is a model of selecting for competence. There are many advantages of this approach, including:

Exhibit 2

Competency Assessment Selection Process

Applied Research on Competencies
↓
Competency Assessment Interviewing
(A specialized data collection technique developed out of applied research)

used in   used in
↓   ↓
Applications

Position   →   Candidate
Specifications   Interviews
↓
Results

Selection
(Most competent and qualified candidate is selected for position)

• It focuses on what change agents do that is most important for job suc-

cess; and, by asking about critical incidents, the technique gets at the 20 percent of the behaviors that make 80 percent of the difference.
• It gets behind espoused values, or what people think they do, compared with what they actually do, i.e. the motives, abilities, and knowledge people really have and use.
• It determines social as well as technical knowledge and skill factors, which are important for job performance.

3. **Think and speak the language of the internal customers.**

If the first two solutions discussed above are followed, it is not likely that this solution will be required. However, since I have witnessed so many cases where not following this suggestion has been a change agent's Achilles' Heel, I believe that it deserves special mention.

"Speaking the language" does not mean that new expressions and words should not be introduced in order to educate a group of people. It does mean that better results will be achieved when complex principles can be simplified and dejargonized. The change agent's primary customers, usually executives, are busy people who like their communications to be concise and to the point. Get to know the core business of the company, and what motivates the key executives. Think about the value you and your function are adding and are capable of adding to the business. Customize your approach. Be flexible when business conditions require, but be persistent and keep your eye on your vision, mission and objectives.

4. **Put discipline back into your selection process.**

I am surprised to see the number of organizations that have gotten sloppy about the selection process itself and fail to do some of the basics, such as checking references. Speaking with prior bosses, clients and subordinates can produce valuable data to confirm
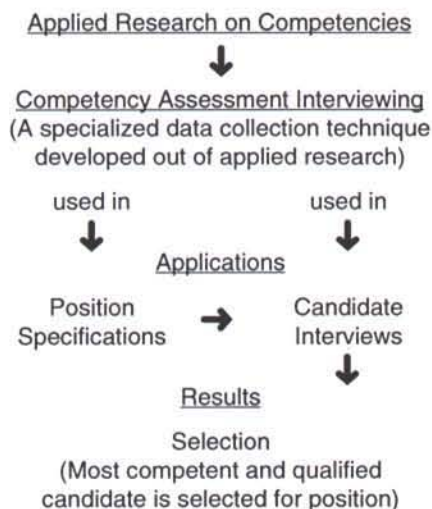
other data or alert you to potential problems.

Anyone who is given a role in the selection process should be given the necessary training to carry out his or her role. For example, employees who are asked to participate in group interviews must be trained on what to look for, i.e. the competencies discussed in Exhibit 2. Assessment or interviewer training is the most common form of training and is available off the shelf from a number of training firms.

A word of caution is appropriate here. Do not expect to find the perfect change agent, as everyone has some flaws. The key is to find someone who is the best fit, whose flaws can be overlooked or fixed through development. Don't overlook qualified internal candidates whose shortcomings happen to be more visible to you. After the "honeymoon" period, you may discover (particularly if you fail to improve your selection processes) that the external candidate you hired, who you thought walked on water, actually has more serious shortcomings than the internal candidate you passed over (and who has since left your company). Remembering the principles of the "Pygmalion 1" and the self-fulfilling prophecy, which are familiar to most business people by now, can generate significant insights when evaluating internal or external candidates, or in evaluating the performance of incumbent change agents.

This article outlines several ways that both a new or prospective change agent and the person selecting the change agent can increase the odds that the placement will work. The task of helping change an organization is a formidable one in itself. Having a competent, highly motivated and satisfied person in the change agent role is a key to success of any change effort.

References

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29