Change Management: You’re Doing it Wrong

A POPin White Paper

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" We did it wrong. We educated people. We communicated. We assessed. But we didn't truly create engagement or buy-in. We didn't ask them what would prevent this change from succeeding. Even though they were in the trenches and knew every mine in the minefield, we didn't ask them what their biggest pain point was so we could build something that helped them."

I am a recovering change management consultant. Over the last 20 years or so, I've focused my career primarily in the people change management space. My job was to help companies realize the ROI of their multi-million dollar investments – whether they be investments in organizational redesign, new systems or large scale business transformations – by mitigating resistance, creating buy-in and driving adoption. The way to do that was to get the people on-board with what was happening. If they stopped resisting what was inevitable and just adopted the change, then all would be right in the "corporate" world. And I use the term "corporate" as a catch-all. These challenges and my project work spanned industries and organizations, from non-profit and government to privately owned and publicly traded enterprises.

The challenge is and always will be people. People will make or break the success of any change a company wants to make. So my job was part data analysis, part coaching, part writing, part training and part shrink. Get into the heads of the people to figure out what they wanted and find a way to make this change something they want. Or better yet – need. Call it marketing. Call it change management. Call it what you want. No matter how you slice and dice it, or whatever you call it, I was doing it wrong. And so are you.

I understood the change journey, the J-curve. I read all the books by Kotter and Connor and got certified in Prosci's ADKAR methodology. I knew what I had been taught by these experts and by my mentors through the years. And none of them are wrong. They are successful because there is strong theory and sound logic in their approaches and they have years of experience to back it up.

But in my opinion, we were still doing it wrong. All of us. Each one of us that has created a sense of urgency or built a strong guiding coalition or administered a change management self-assessment tool. We were missing one crucial step – giving the people a voice. Sure, we thought we were doing that. We did change management surveys to score their awareness and desire. We created townhalls and brown bags so people could learn and ask questions. We designed elaborate videos and scheduled open office hours. Posters, t-shirts, training sessions, more surveys….

We tried it all. To varying degrees of success. None of this was wasted effort. But how effective was it really? Think back to those townhalls or open office hours. Who raised their hand with a question? Who popped in to the office to ask about the change? Did anyone? Was it always the same few people?

And what did we do with our survey results? We created pretty charts and had meetings with slides to show where people were in the change journey. But did we really know what they meant when they answered "agree" or "disagree" to our questions? No, we applied our own definition of agree and disagree and just assumed that's how everyone else defined them.

And what about those open-ended questions? We spent hours reading and analyzing what people wrote. We synthesized. We summarized. But we didn't really know if the themes we pulled out of this data was really the common voice.

To be fair, how could we? Surveys are one way. I asked. Each person answered...without any knowledge or insight into how other people were answering. Objective, for sure. But it left me as the survey facilitator to decide was what most important in all the comments. Me....the outside consultant that wasn't experiencing the change personally.

We did it wrong. We educated people. We communicated. We assessed. But we didn't truly create engagement or buy-in. We didn't ask them what would prevent this change from succeeding. Even though they were in the trenches and knew every mine in the minefield. We didn't ask them what their biggest pain point was so we could build something that helped them. We didn't ask them what would stop them from using the new system. We didn't give them a way to get things off their chest, to vent their frustrations so they could move on. We didn't let them have a voice in what was happening or how the change was being rolled out. We didn't give them a voice.

I didn't give them a voice.

I'm a recovering change management consultant. Scratch that. I'm a reformed change management professional. I've learned from my mistakes and now I'm on a mission to help others do the same. I want to take all the popular change management methodologies out there and make them better, make them work more easily. With the people. For the people. I want to empower change leaders and build new ones. Anyone can do it. It starts with a simple mantra: "ask, listen and do".

ASK, LISTEN, AND DO

It sounds simple. And it actually is. But it requires a certain mindset. A willingness to admit you don't have all the answers, a willingness to be humble and vulnerable. That's not behavior that comes easily for everyone. Like any new habit, it takes practice and repetition. But it's worth it.

Then, once you're willing to step out on that limb, all it takes is a tool to facilitate the process of asking and crowd-sourcing. Of course, I use POPin. I left my change management consulting job to work at POPin because I saw what it could do to enable change management people like myself and make us way more effective. But there's other tools. All you need is a tool that lets people answer a question in a way that everyone else can see their answers, so they can add their own commentary. Similar to using social media platforms like Twitter and FaceBook, have an open dialogue. But unlike those social media platforms, let people do it anonymously. After all, they're working for an organization. If you want people to tell you the truth, they need a way to do it where there isn't fear of repercussion or job impact.

The most critical step though comes next. You have to hear what they are saying and respond accordingly. Asking and ignoring their answers does nothing but create distrust and in fact makes people even less likely to want to adopt the change you are rolling out. You have to listen. And they have to know their voices were heard.

For example, if you ask impacted employees why they wouldn't use the new system you're rolling out, listen to what they are saying. If their number one answer is they're worried they can't use it when they work from home so they won't be able to work from home anymore, then address their concern. Validate if they can use it from home. Then communicate openly and honestly with them about it. That's resistance management. Or if the number one answer is that they rely on a specific functionality today that helps them work faster and they're worried that functionality is going away, hear them. If that functionality isn't planned but could be added to scope, you're easing their concerns and showing they are being heard. If it can't be added, tell them why and even give them an alternative if that's applicable. Real and practical resistance management.

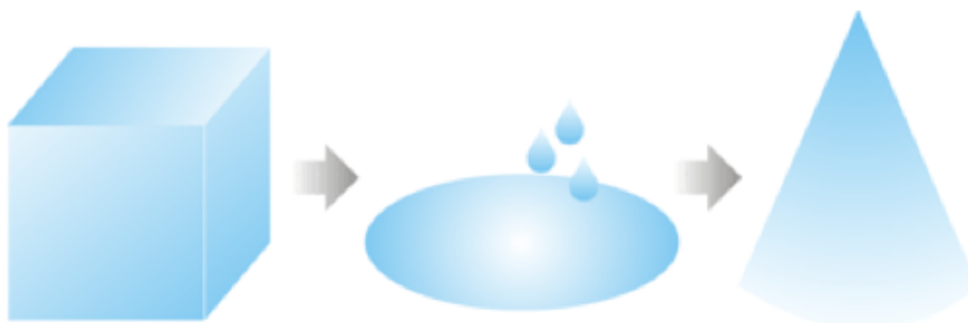
APPLYING THIS TO CHANGE MANAGEMENT MODELS

I want to reiterate that the most common change management models are popular because they work. But like anything else, these models can be made better thanks to evolving technologies. If we apply the "Ask, Listen and Do" mindset to each model, I believe we as change management professionals can increase our effectiveness while enabling organizations to actually realize the ROI of their big dollar investments.

Let's look at 2 different change management models to see the difference and similarities.

Lewin's Change Management Model: Unfreeze – Change – Refreeze

Kurt Lewin developed his change management model in the 1940s. It's a 3-stage process whereby you create the perception that change is needed, then you move towards that future state, and finally you solidify the new state as the norm. This model is commonly described using the analogy of an ice cube that you want to refreeze in the shape of a cone. You first thaw out the cube shape to make it amenable to change (unfreeze), then pour the water into the cone shape you want (change), then finally solidify the new shape (refreeze).



Each of the phases of this model has suggested key steps to make this more practical for change management practitioners to follow and execute:

UNFREEZE: determine what needs to change, ensure there is strong support from leadership, create the need for change, manage/understand doubts and concerns

CHANGE: communicate often, dispel rumors, empower action, involve people in the process

REFREEZE: anchor change to the culture, develop ways to sustain the change, provide support and training, celebrate success

As a change management consultant, I would lean heavily on surveys, and meetings with key stakeholders, project sponsors, and steering committees to Unfreeze. I would coordinate townhalls, open office hours and focus groups throughout the Change phase. And I would work with training groups and HR and internal communications teams through the Change and Refreeze phases.

But I'm a reformed change management professional that places high value on engaging directly with people, including the impacted managers and staff, to drive engagement and buy-in and enable project success. In addition to or even instead of those tactics I listed previously, I will apply the "Ask, Listen and Do" mindset and give them an anonymous voice from the beginning. Here's what I would do differently to engage people in each phase (using a large system implementation as an example).

UNFREEZE

I would ask leadership a question to ascertain their level of support and alignment for this change. "What questions or concerns do you have about this change and its ability to solve our business problem?" Then I'd listen to their concerns and develop a plan to remove obstacles or address holes in understanding. If necessary, I would even raise a red flag to highlight an overall lack of support and alignment that could inhibit the success of the project. It's important to surface these issues in the beginning before investing big dollars in the change.

I would ask all those involved in delivering the project (project team, steering committee, etc.) a pre-mortem question to understand risks and obstacles. A pre-mortem question goes something like: "Imagine it's next year and we just completed the implementation of this system but it wasn't really successful. What happened? Why did it fail?" Their answers will be the risks that need to be mitigated. I'd listen to what they said and incorporate their thoughts into a risk management plan or even into the definition of what's in scope (or not) for the project. I might even follow this up and ask them to help me solve one of the problems they surface.

I would ask key stakeholders and even a larger cross-section of end users to help define the solution requirements. "In order for this new system to solve your biggest pain points, what do you need the new system to do?" Then I'd listen to their ideas, validate what should be added or removed from scope as necessary, and share with them the things that are truly a "no, we can't do that" and the reason why.

I would ask all impacted staff a question meant to enable them to voice their concerns or share their frustrations. "What questions or concerns do you have about this change and its ability to help you be more effective in your job?" This question lets them get things off their chest but it also informs a larger communication plan and may identify possible features to add to scope. There may even be a follow up question needed where you can engage the same group to help you solve one of the problems they surface. This makes them part of the solution instead of just being a problem source.

CHANGE

As all change statistics tell us, the middle management layer is the most challenging group to engage. Therefore, I would engage them by asking: "What support do you need to help you manage and support your staff through this change? What can we do to help?" Then develop a plan to get these managers the support they want so they feel less burdened by the change.

During most big changes, companies do townhalls or roadshows where the same attendees are the ones that will ask questions every time. Give people a voice in advance of those events so you can have a richer discussion during them. Ask invitees: "What questions or concerns do you have about the upcoming rollout that we can address in the townhall?" During the event, display the list of top questions/concerns and answer them live. They will literally see the effect of their engagement.

The first group to test or pilot the solution is in a tough spot as they don't always have a way to safely share what they honestly think of the solution. With an anonymous tool, ask them: "What feedback do you have on the pilot? What works well and what could be better?" You might identify some low hanging fruit that will make the solution better for everyone. And they will tell you what they are most excited about – something you can share with the rest of the impacted staff.

Resistance management was always one of my biggest challenges. Now, I would just ask staff, "What would prevent you from wanting to use this new system?" They could tell me all the reasons they won't use it and I can begin taking steps to break down those barriers. I probably won't be able to address all their reasons, but there's value in being able to say no if I tell them why it's a no. The beauty is that I don't have to rely on assumptions or hearsay to create a resistance management plan. They will tell me what I need to mitigate.

REFREEZE

Part of the refreeze phase is training staff on the new change. Inevitably, training surfaces more questions for people because you don't know what you don't know until you learn more. After training is complete, but before the roll out happens, ask staff, "Now that you've completed training, what questions or concerns do you have about this change?" Keep an eye out for those quick wins that could make a huge difference at go live.

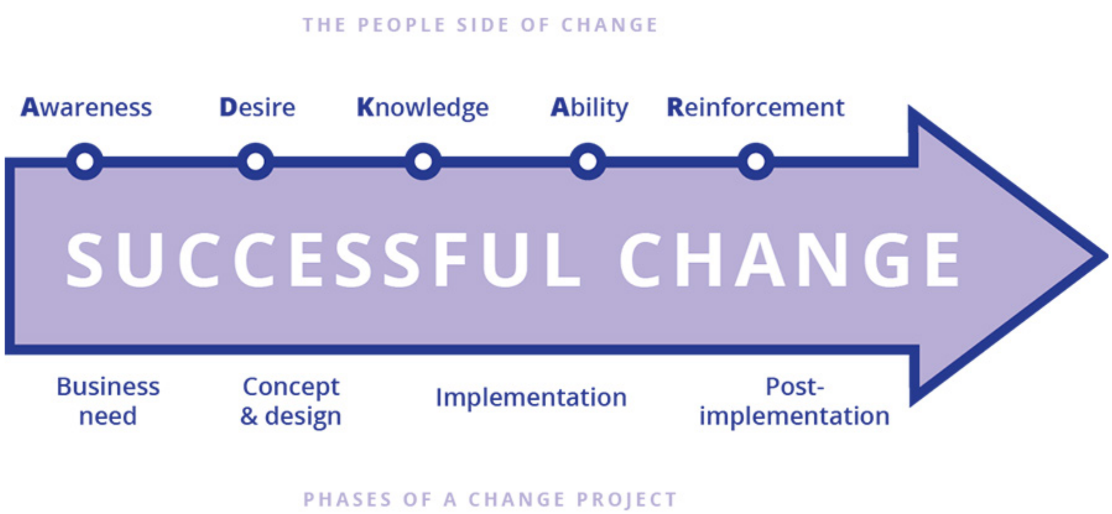
Many people think change management ends when the project goes live. But long-term adoption requires doing the things that make the change sustainable. And admitting you didn't get it all right the first time is empowering. Therefore, ask staff, "Now that you've been using the new system for a month, what can we do to make it better for you?" They could surface quick wins, a list of features for phase 2 or even some policy issues that are having a negative impact. Listen and act.

Finally, keep the momentum going while showcasing people's creativity. Ask staff, "What tips and tricks have you learned that would help others in using this new system?" You might find some useful FAQs or even identify things that could be codified to make everyone's life easier. This is a great way to celebrate what's working.

© Lewin's Change Management Model

Prosci's ADKAR Model and 3-Phase Process

I'll transition to a different change management methodology - Prosci. With its basis in research data and a solid training curriculum for organizations and change management practitioners, Prosci has developed a change management methodology that tackles both individual change management (ADKAR Model) and organizational change management (3-Phase Process) together.



The Prosci model acknowledges that for an organization to achieve long-term adoption of change, each of the individuals within the organization have to adopt the change. The methodology is well scripted and includes a set of templates and assessments to help practitioners execute it.

With my reformed change management professional hat on, I can look back and see how to address the challenges I faced when applying this methodology and completing these templates. I didn't know what to put into my resistance management plan because I had to make assumptions and conduct interviews to learn second hand about where the pockets of resistance might be. Similarly, I didn't know what to put into the coaching plan for managers because I didn't know exactly what support they needed to help them lead their people through the change. I could go on, but you get the point. All the plans in the world don't help if they are based on assumptions, squeaky wheels or hearsay.

The missing piece in this methodology is how to get the real truth so the plans that are created and executed against can actually be effective. The real engagement and buy-in comes from the mindset "Ask, Listen and Do". The questions posed to employees as examples in the Lewin change management methodology section above can be applied here.

ADKAR Model

ADKAR Step	Engagement Question
Awareness: of the need for change and of the nature of the change	What questions or concerns do you have about this change and its ability to help you be more effective in your job?
Desire: to support the change and to participate and engage	In order for this new system to solve your biggest pain points, what do you need the new system to do? What would prevent you from wanting to use this new system?
Knowledge: on how to change and how to implement new skills and behaviors	Now that you've completed training, what questions or concerns do you have about this change? What additional support do you need?
Ability: to implement the change and to demonstrate performance	Now that you've been using the new system for a month, what can we do to make it better for you?
Reinforcement: to sustain the change and to build a culture and competence around the change	What tips and tricks have you learned that would help others in using this new system?

These sample questions were mapped at the individual level using the ADKAR model to demonstrate how to engage people at each step in their journey. The results you get from each question would be used as input to the templates in the 3-Phase organizational change process.

3-Phase Step	Engagement Question	Input To
Preparing for Change: defining your change management strategy, team and sponsorship model	To Leaders: What questions or concerns do you have about this change and its ability to solve our business problem?	Sponsor Assessment, Change Management Strategy
	To Staff: What questions or concerns do you have about this change and its ability to help you be more effective in your job?	Impact Assessment, Change Management Strategy
Managing Change: develop change management plans, take action and implement plans	To Staff: In order for this new system to solve your biggest pain points, what do you need the new system to do?	Resistance Management Plan
	To Staff: What questions or concerns do you have about the upcoming rollout?	Communication Plan, Sponsor Roadmap
	To Staff: What would prevent you from wanting to use this new system?	Resistance Management Plan, Sponsor Roadmap
	To Managers: What support do you need to help you manage and support your staff through this change? What can we do to help?	Resistance Management Plan, Sponsor Roadmap
	To Staff: Now that you've completed training, what questions or concerns do you have about this change? What additional support do you need?	Training Plan, Coaching Plan, Communication Plan, Sponsor Roadmap
Reinforcing Change: collect and analyze feedback, diagnose gaps and manage resistance, implement corrective actions and celebrate success	To Staff: Now that you've been using the new system for a month, what can we do to make it better for you?	Action Plans
	To Staff: What tips and tricks have you learned that would help others in using this new system?	Action Plans, Recognition Approaches

To reiterate, Prosci states that the individual and organizational aspects of change need to be integrated and they've mapped the integration points as depicted in the diagram on the following page.

	Awareness	Desire	Knowledge	Ability	Reinforcement
Communications	X				X
Sponsor Roadmap	X	X			X
Coaching	X	X	X	X	X
Resistance Management		X			
Training			X	X	

Asking each of these engagement questions provides that integration while giving people a voice in the change process from start to finish. The insights you get from the answers to these questions strengthens the plans you develop and the actions you take. This elevates a proven change management methodology and makes it even more reliable and effective.

Summary

There are many proven change management models that change practitioners around the world lean on to guide how they manage change. In my experience, these models are good but there's room for them to be even better. While you may not have been doing it all wrong over the years, you haven't been doing it all right either. Advances in technology will continue to enhance how you manage and drive change. Once you realize you can rely on those technical advances to give people a voice, you will understand you hold the power in your hands to easily and effectively increase engagement and build buy-in. You will have a whole new level of understanding of what's really happening and what people really think and you can use that to drive better plans and more effective actions. And when it comes to multi-million dollar investments, who wouldn't want better plans and more effective actions that result in long-term adoption and maximum ROI?!