

# The Straight Talk Coach

## Insights for Leading From Strength

### The Change Agent Challenge: Engineering a Sustainable Future

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**C**ongratulations! You have been hired to ~~fix~~ a troubled organization. You are thrilled about the opportunity, especially because your experience and intuition suggest a clear roadmap. In the past, your reorganization, cost-cutting and restructuring initiatives produced immediate results.

A year later, you're out of a job. What happened?

Chances are, you walked into a classic Change Agent pitfall: focusing so heavily on fixing problems that you failed to engineer a sustainable future for the organization  $\pm$  and yourself.

We often caution clients to beware the Change Agent role because it presents as many risks as it does opportunities. Unless Change Agents redefine their responsibility from fixing an organization to positioning it for future growth, they are more likely to find themselves seeking employment rather than leading a revitalized organization to new successes.

#### **Fix it Fast!**

When trouble hits, most organizations recruit an outsider who has a reputation for resolving problems quickly. The direction is clear: ~~fix~~ it. Fast.

The outcome is usually an internally oriented emphasis on cost-cutting and speed that encourages reliance on ~~ready, fire, aim~~. Unfortunately, this kind of change is similar to constructing a building on sand; the Change Agent delivers impressive short-term results, but does not build a foundation of a new strategy, culture and leadership that can support ongoing growth.

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**There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to institute a new order of things.**

~ Machiavelli

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Further, Change Agents typically use position power and personal power (often in the form of a forceful but not necessarily charismatic personality) to push their agendas. This rarely generates the credibility or political capital

they need to lead an organization long term.

At some point after the initial crisis has passed, stakeholders lose patience with such rapid, turbulent change. They begin to demand a growth strategy that offers the organization a viable future, yet often perceive that Change Agents who resolved the situation through ~~ready, fire, aim~~ cannot provide it.

Or can they? Most Change Agents can fix an organization's problems and shepherd it through growth by consciously applying leadership skills such as balance, external orientation, future outlook and building a wide base of support.

#### **The Balancing Act**

A balanced approach to the Change Agent role is among the most valuable drivers of long-term sustainability. This means balancing tactical thinking with strategic thinking; extending the breadth and depth of thought; weighing intuition against analysis; taking action according to a plan; and balancing results with innovation.

Fundamentally, a Change Agent who hopes to be as effective tomorrow as she is today must understand how the change agenda will create a new

strategic intent and develop a workable plan to support it. But a leader who defines his role as **Fix-it** tends to focus only on tactics within the narrow constraints of the current crisis, relying on past experience and intuition to deliver speedy results. This creates such a tightly defined context that few or no resources are deployed against broader opportunities.

Transitioning from **Fix-it** to longer-term leadership requires that a Change Agent extend the breadth and depth of her thinking (perhaps by partnering with a Thought Catalyst). Start by analyzing the situation broadly. Ask probing questions; drill down using a **Five Whys** and **Five Why Nots** process to make sure all opportunities have been fully explored (see **Leading Questions**, Volume 1, Issue 7 of *The StraightTalk Coach*).

She should look to past successes for lessons, but not automatically replicate them: The people, products, processes and external environment are never the same from one change initiative to another. Take time for a fact-based analysis and balance the results with experience and intuition to set a new direction for the organization. Pursue that direction with a plan that will deliver results today and innovation tomorrow.

### Look Outside and Ahead

A global external orientation is critical to every organization's long-term success. Change Agents who want to lead an organization beyond the current crisis must cultivate it, because **Fix-it** change that reflects only an internal perspective and narrow geography is not sustainable.

Future orientation is equally important. Change Agents frequently define their objective as helping an organization catch up to competitors. This is often necessary. However, in today's **And** world, a growth-focused strategy that anticipates the evolving landscape to move ahead of the competition ± and stay there ± is the only sustainable change.

### Embrace Uncertainty

Uncertainty is a defining characteristic

of today's fast-paced global environment. Change Agents who welcome and leverage it will have a stronger foundation for leading their organizations into the future.

Start by staying fluid: Imposing too much structure on the organization too soon will limit options. Remaining flexible until you better understand the external environment and future prospects can reveal promising opportunities.

Similarly, establish an appropriate risk orientation. Taking too little risk will prevent the organization from catching up to and moving ahead of competitors; **Rolling the dice** and taking too much risk can jeopardize its viability.

For example, Change Agents may not perceive cost-cutting as risky, yet it can be extremely hazardous. Slashing staff to the minimum, postponing technology investments and starving infrastructure may produce quick results ± and make future growth impossible.

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**People cannot discover  
new oceans until they have  
the courage to lose sight of  
the shore.**

~ Anonymous

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### Build the Team to Build for the Future

Change Agents who want to lead their organizations into the future need credibility, political capital and a wide base of support. These are best developed through the use of fundamental leadership skills such as StraightTalk dialogue, expanded stakeholder relationships, adaptability, respect for others, valuing diversity and motivating and empowering others.

StraightTalk dialogue is essential. In addition to surfacing issues and opportunities that are the cornerstone of sustainable change, StraightTalk also fosters wider accountability for achieving an

organization's strategic direction. Change Agents who facilitate StraightTalk dialogue will have more perspectives, creative ideas, options and innovative thinking with which to shape current changes and future direction.

Influencing and being influenced by a greater range of stakeholders helps Change Agents optimize strategies and implement them effectively. This not only builds stronger relationships and political capital; it will also help extend the limits of what a leader can affect in today's uncertain and rapidly changing world.

A leader's ability to adapt often defines her organization's adaptability. Change Agents who hope to lead for the future must elicit new options and alternatives, be flexible enough to incorporate new information and adapt to evolving environmental circumstances.

Respect for others and their diverse opinions helps prevent a Change Agent from forcing his agenda on others at all costs. Obedience without respect and trust does not last; Change Agents who respect others and their varied skills and perspectives will develop champions who support ongoing growth.

Creating a culture that motivates and empowers people to achieve excellence will foster innovation and long-term success. Set high standards for yourself and others, and reward personal growth and teaching to accelerate learning and results.

Ultimately, Change Agents who hope to lead their organizations into the future face a dilemma: Should they slash and burn their way to quick results or set a steadily improving course to growth? In today's **And** world, Change Agents must do both.

Just as an emergency room physician stops a patient's bleeding before addressing its cause, Change Agents who seek long-term leadership roles must quickly address an organization's most critical challenges ± and lead in ways that build a strong foundation for sustained future growth. **HK**

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