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Aligning Agile Change with ADKAR®

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Introduction

In this paper I describe how my Agile Change approach to adopting and embedding new ways of working supports our journey through the lifecycle of change. This is all part of my “layering” mantra. The volume and continuous nature of organisational change isn’t going to get any less any time soon. There is no one simple answer to how to manage effectively in these circumstances, so I am layering the wisdom of many different models one on top of the other to help me find new answers to supporting people through change. I draw inspiration from Kubler-Ross, Bridges, Lewin, Kotter and even the AIDA communications model.¹

We know that the experience of change doesn’t follow a linear path, but the advantage of these linear models is that we do not lose our way when we go back and revisit an earlier step because those experiencing change need more explanation and reassurance. These models help us to know where we got to before we had to go back and revisit the earlier steps, and to know what is coming up next so we can confidently explain what is going to happen next.

For my book Agile Change Management, 2nd edition, I created a 5-step behavioural change lifecycle to explain the emotional and psychological transition from current to new ways of working.



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This lifecycle helps us develop our ability to lead ourselves and others through a change at work. This model follows my passion for using positive psychology and neuroscience to shift someone’s thinking from how they currently behave to a new set of habits, routines, and attitudes.

Aligned to this lifecycle are forty-three practical techniques that offer simple, intuitive activities that those impacted by change can use to cope with the combined challenge of stopping working in the old way and learning the new ways of working. The reason for so many techniques is that we all have different perspectives and preferences for how to do things, so I have created a menu of techniques to select from depending on what works for us, our stakeholders and the situations we face.

¹ If you want to immerse yourselves in the theory of change management, join me at one of my 5-day [Change Management Foundation and Practitioner](#) courses.

Many of us who regard ourselves as change professionals are aware of ADKAR©, the popular change management approach from Jeff Hiatt, Prosci Learning Center Publications ©2006. In this paper I explain my ideas for how we can supplement our use of this model with practical activities and “how to” guidance to explain how to do things, with new and exciting techniques drawn from the worlds of neuroscience and positive psychology.

Awareness

The first step of ADKAR© is Awareness, creating an understanding of the reasons for the change, the scope of the change and the impact if the change does not go ahead. I have included techniques to help “fan the flames” of initial interest by those most alive to the possibilities of change (early adopters) so that we can use their early involvement to generate understanding in their peer groups about the change.

The Awareness step of ADKAR© also explains the importance of effective sponsorship. The lack of engaged, active sponsors has been an issue in change management forever, and it continues to be one of the most difficult issues to address. I have created practical techniques for addressing sponsor behaviour, helping them to be more visible and involved. One of the most important concepts is to recognise that often it is not that sponsors don’t want to be part of the change effort, it is that they are just not sure what is the best use of their time. I think we can help being more explicit about what we need from them.

In Agile Change, I have provided activities for sponsors, including a technique for removing misunderstandings about the scope of the change and aligning the change to the strategic objectives, values and culture of the organisation. This addresses another key point from ADKAR© which is the importance of transparency of business information to explain the necessity for change.

I also address the issue that awareness can be lost because of all the other changes taking place simultaneously. We are in a world of change overload, so I have included a technique to create an integrated picture of change. Knowing that one change complements rather than competes with other changes increases the value of the change to those involved in implementing it.

ADKAR© explains how important it is for local managers to coach their teams in understanding why the change is needed. Prosci conduct a great deal of research in effective organisational change, giving us a great deal of evidence of the importance of hearing the change from your own manager. In Agile Change there is a technique for facilitating a conversation on the personal relevance of the change, and guidance on how to nail a mechanism for sharing questions raised by team members and the answers to spread the message.

Desire

The ADKAR© Desire step recognises that change is a personal choice. It addresses the importance of engaging employees in the change process. Agile Change contains the techniques to make this happen, including designing activities so people can experience aspects of the change and experience it, share their views and begin building their skills before the change is launched. Using concepts from positive psychology, I have included techniques throughout the Agile Change Behavioural Change Lifecycle© for defining what areas of the change can be authored by those who will have to work in new ways.

The “Desire” step also addresses something I know to be important, but also that places pressure on managers – the need to become the cheer leaders for change in their area, and to have a plan for how they lead their staff through the lifecycle of change. For me, this goes to the heart of the challenge we face in change management, that a lot of our work must be done by managers who are not schooled in change techniques because they already have a day job and do not see change as one of their core responsibilities.

For this reason, I provide you with techniques based on neuroscience to engage, excite and enthuse people already busy and overwhelmed. A lot of these approaches require us to reframe the change, tailor the explanation to meet the interests of our audience and create easy to follow behaviours. Role modelling has always been one of our techniques, but I take it to the next level and help you find the actions that others would be most interested in following.

ADKAR© recognises that the sponsor has responsibilities for building the desire for change, so I have created techniques to enable sponsors to generate willingness to change, by bringing the future into the present so staff can feel the urgency and understand that doing nothing is not an option. These are supported by several comparison techniques to generate excitement for the change and overcome the desire to stay as we are.

Knowledge and ability

ADKAR©’s Knowledge step explains how important information, training and education are, helping people to know how to change and how to perform effectively in the future state. The Ability step turns this knowledge into action, explaining how important it is to provide the time, resources and coaching to develop new skills and behaviours.

My Agile Change Behavioural Change Lifecycle© doesn’t map exactly to ADKAR©, but the participation step of my lifecycle applies techniques to drive involvement in the change. This is where the know how is acquired, and this knowledge is turned into action. These techniques include giving those who have to change the choice over which activities they do first and how they do them. This removes the psychological barriers including the fear of making mistakes and looking stupid. Choosing something easy, where you feel empowered reduces this fear. Using the power of others, following their lead as

they role model the change is a powerful technique, but learning what aspects of the change make the best examples is a technique.

There are also practical techniques to address the most common barrier which is lack of time. These techniques use visualisations to imagine where in the day additional work will fit in, along with the creation of checklists to reduce cognitive load on the brain, slowing down progress and inhibiting achievements.

The Agile Change Behavioural Change Lifecycle© has a specific step dedicated to creating resilience. The motivation to develop new skills and behaviours is impeded by the desire to give up when the going gets tough. This includes refraining techniques that help people see their difficulties as less overwhelming. They are given the tools to evaluate how they are feeling using evidence of their past successes. This provides the evidence that their current feeling of "I am useless, I don't understand the new way of working" is only a temporary situation.

Reinforcement

Reinforcement is all about sustaining the change. Acknowledging the efforts people are making to change, rewarding and celebrating their achievements so that the new ways of working are promoted, and the old ways of working fade from the memory.

Agile Change contains techniques that support this. I created these techniques because in my experience, everyone agrees how important it is to sustain change, but it requires effort, and usually by this point their attention has been taken by the next new thing they are working on. With my clients, I have created simple, practical ideas for recognising how far we have come, and what has been achieved. If we do not have tools to easily track our progress, it isn't possible to celebrate, because we don't recognise we have anything to celebrate. I help you establish what the "new norm" is using baselining techniques. I provide tools to personalise this baseline, so everyone involved can recognise how much they have learnt, have many new skills they have developed, because organisational achievement is not as motivating as personal achievement. These techniques empower us to keep going with our changes, further enhancing how we work.

Conclusion

It was always my intention when I wrote my Agile Change Management handbook, and the Agile Change Agent and Agile Change Coach courses I have created using my book, to add to our ability to make change happen. I have deliberately used "we" and "us" throughout this paper, because I am a practitioner, working in the field. Just like everyone else, I need practical ideas, things that prove their value because they give those I am guiding through change little "aha" moments that enable them to feel positive and enthusiastic about working in new ways.

I don't believe methods, approaches and guidance should compete. Change is a complex subject, because humans are complex! Layer different approaches on top of each other, take things that work from one approach and meld them together with other ideas. From every challenge you encounter, build your personal toolkit of things that help you help others adopt new ways of working.

I hope this paper has given you some ideas, and if you want more content like this, please sign up for my newsletter where I regularly share new thoughts and ideas

<https://agilechangemanagement.co.uk/newsletter/>

About the author

I have been responsible for the successful delivery of effective change and for creating environments that support transformational change for over twenty years. I am the founder of the Continuous Change Community and the Chief Examiner of the Agile Change Agent qualification. I am a respected author of books and articles on change, project and programme management.

To access more resources about change management, connect with me on LinkedIn

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