

Ideas that drive change

WHITEPAPER  
**CREATING A  
NETWORK OF  
CHANGE  
AGENTS**



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# INTRODUCTION

Organisational changes impact every role and every layer of our organisations, so it makes sense to build teams who can take the change directly to those affected.

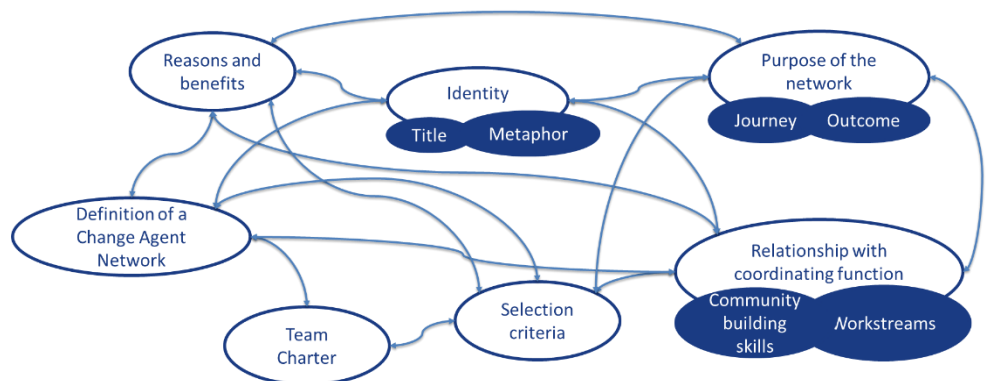
This paper is titled “Creating a network of change agents” but I question if it really is a network, because the most successful of these are supportive communities of colleagues and experts who collaborate to understand the change, communicate this understanding and gain support for its adoption.

Irrespective of the naming convention, there are multiple factors that inter-connect in creating an effective network of committed, enthusiastic and capable people to generate new ways of working. This paper will address the following:

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*Change Agent Network Activities Map © Agile Change Management Limited 2022*

The source of the ideas in this paper come from a review of change networks that I and those I work with have created and managed over the last 5 years, to cover the period before and during Covid. I think it is worth stating that the post Covid landscape of hybrid working has created new challenges and opportunities so I am sharing these insights with the hope of giving you ideas for what will work best for your changes.

## Definition a Change Agent Network

The term Change Agent or Change Champion Network is frequently used, but I am not convinced that “network” is the best description. Network implies we have something in common, but team describes more intentional interactions. I use these two definitions to help me remember that a team requires common objectives and a level of planning and coordination to achieve these objectives.

GROUP	TEAM
<p><i>“Any number of people who interact with each other, are psychologically aware of each other and who perceive themselves to be a group”</i></p> <p><i>Source: Schein and Bennis</i></p>	<p><i>“A distinguishable set of two or more individuals who interact interdependently and adaptively to achieve specified, stated and valued objectives”</i></p> <p><i>Source: Morgan et al</i></p>

This clarification identifies the need for some type of coordinating function. Our Change Agent Networks do not run independently, and in this paper I have referred to a central coordinating function. In my experience, there are a variety of forms this can take:

- Provided by a centralised change management team or centre of excellence that is responsible for the change management activities across the organisation or for a specific transformation programme
- Provided by the programme management team, who have taken on responsibility for the change management activities in their transformation but do not have a central team of experts to call on, so have resourced a change management professional from outside their organisation
- Someone from the operational side of the business or from learning and development who recognises that there is a lot of activity to explain and train people in the new ways of working and that this effort needs to be organised to avoid chaos

Have a think about what is happening in your organisation and how this coordinating function can best be managed. One thing common to all the networks I have seen is that their day-to-day management takes a lot more time and energy than is initially realised and whoever is coordinating them, they are constantly rushed off their feet.

The reason for this is the need to support those on the front-line of supporting their colleagues through change. They themselves need help in planning their work, managing the resistance they encounter, being coached to hold difficult conversations and to be listened to when it is all getting too much.

## Reasons for the network

On the surface there is no direct cost to creating a Change Agent Network because all those involved already work for the organisation, and they are volunteering their time and effort. However, the real cost to the business is the amount of their current work they cannot get done



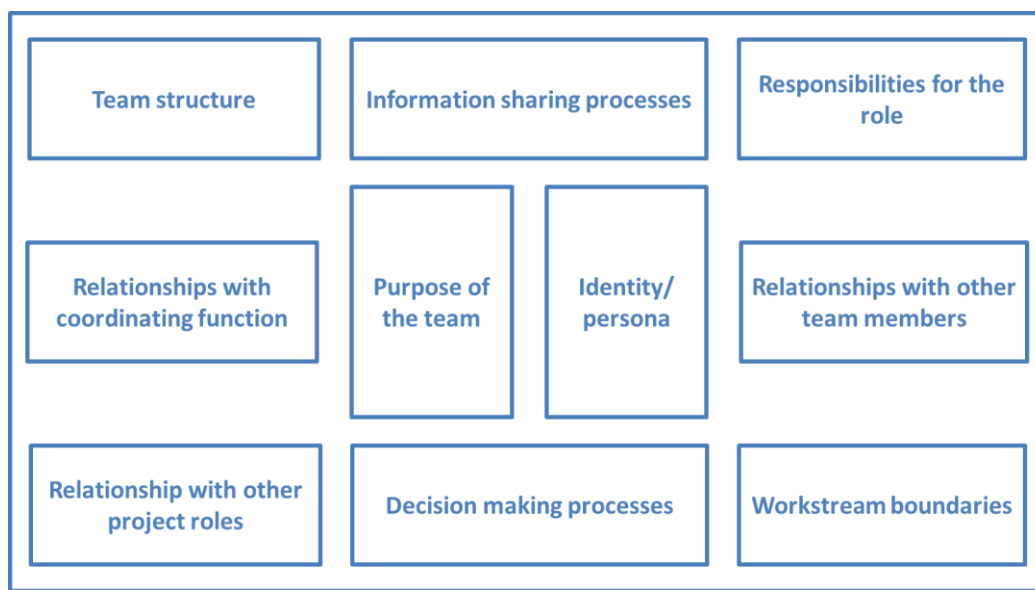
because they are helping their colleagues develop new ways of working. Time is needed for meetings, workshops, developing new processes, liaising with the project team on the progress of the changes, finding colleagues to become members of the network and share the burden.

The cost of this network should be fully reflected in the business case of the change initiative or transformation programme. There are three audiences who have to be convinced of the value:

- Sponsor – needs to authorise costs associated with administrative support, including the coordinating function described above and the costs of all the change management activities run by the network
- Line managers – the cost of disruption to business as usual from releasing key members of their staff to the network, and the pressure this puts on results
- Members of the network – training and development costs, so that they are supported in taking on these additional tasks

### Team charter

As with any form of collaboration, team formation and ongoing management cannot be left to chance. The team charter enables organised sharing of information and activities. I use this “team charter” template to facilitate a discussion with potential change agents and those who are supporting their staff to adopt this role.



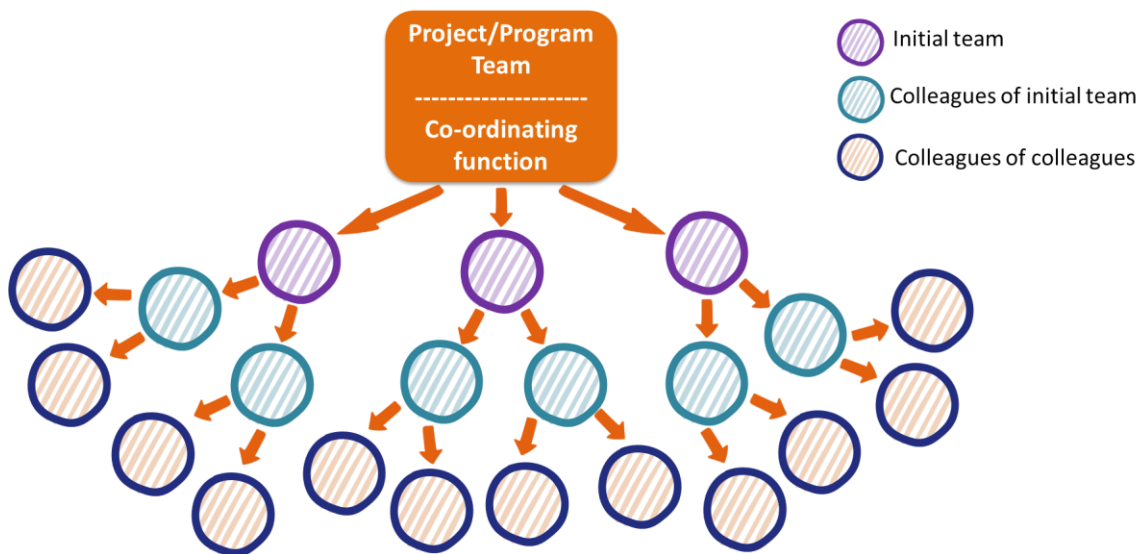
*Change Agent Network Team Charter © Agile Change Management Limited 2022*

### Strategy for building the network

Ideally Change Agent Networks are living organisms. They deepen as the original volunteers bring colleagues into the network to further cascade the change into deeper levels of the business.



A key principle of building your network is to role model how you select and engage the first wave of change agents, so that these initial resources can repeat the activities within their sphere of influence.



*Change Agent Network Design © Agile Change Management Limited 2022*

Ideas in this paper including the team charter and the selection criteria matrix are important because they enable co-creation of the network with the initial volunteers and provide a mechanism by which these change agents can achieve this co-creation with those they invite to join as they build out the breadth and depth of the network.

## Identity

We are asking people to adopt an additional identity of change agent or change champion. If we want them to adopt this willingly, we must make this identity compelling, exciting and aspirational. To achieve this, I think we must create an exciting description of the role, not as a formal job description, with all the skills and competencies required as this can make the role feel daunting and overwhelming.

I think we can have a lot of fun finding a metaphor for change agent and describing what it feels like using this. For example, in my workshops I use the metaphor of a tour guide whilst a colleague of mine uses the role of Head of Marketing for the change. Another colleague uses a metaphor of being a party host.

One of the benefits of taking this metaphor approach is that it gives change agents a ready-made story to tell about their role, which gets others interested.

To give some structure to the creation of the identity, ensure it covers both being a leader of the work and a leader of the people. Essentially it must cover the definition of change management which Prosci describes as:



“The application of a structured process and set of tools for leading the people side of change to achieve a desired outcome.”

- To provide the structured process and tools – see the section on the relationship with a coordinating function
- To lead the people side of change, see the section on community building skills

This identity must cover the split personality of a change agent:

1. The responsibilities of facilitating participation in the change
2. The responsibilities of further developing the change agent network by involving colleagues as change agents

Not only does a change agent have to be an effective facilitator of change for others, we are also asking them to build their own mini network, to further cascade the change through the layers of the organisation.

Along with this identity, those involved need to decide on a title for their role. Are they Change Agents or Change Champions? Are they Super Users or Subject Matter Experts? The only rules are that the title must fit with the culture and naming conventions of your organisation and be something that those performing the role are happy to use as their title.

## Acceptance criteria

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1. Does your description of the role cover all the activities that your change agents are expected to undertake?
2. Have those who are/who will be performing the role of change agent co-created the persona?
3. Have line managers who will be releasing team members to perform the role of change agent helped co-create the persona?
4. Does the persona clearly define the relationship between the change agent and those impacted by change?
5. Does the persona clearly define how the change agent will be supported by a coordinating function?

## Selection criteria

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It is only when you have the detail of what is expected from the role of change agent that you can reasonably define your selection criteria for the role. If we don't clarify the scope how can we possibly recruit the best people?

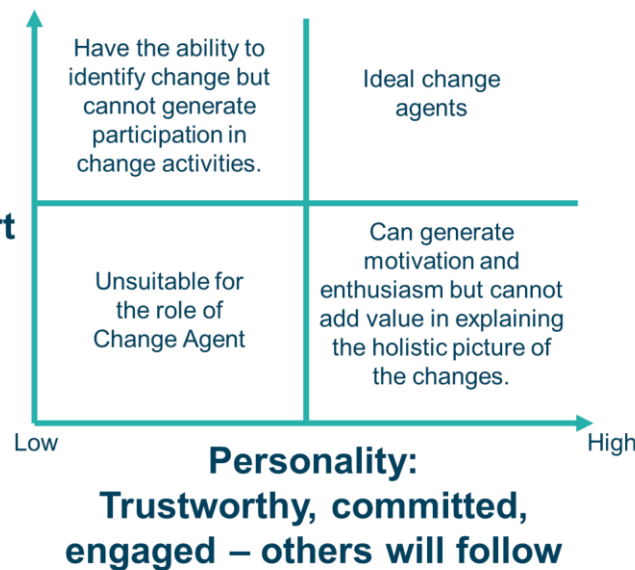
The benefit of defining these criteria is that change agents can apply them to their build out of the network in their area of the business.

These criteria will be a mixture of followship, which in itself is hard to define, as it includes charisma but also includes a positive attitude towards change, a belief in the positive power of change; and subject matter expertise for the work that is subject to the change.

Ideally, we would like to attract people in the top right quadrant of this matrix, but those in the top left and bottom right also have a contribution to make:

**Perspective:**

- **Subject expert**
- **Early adopter**



*Change Agent Network Selection Chart © Agile Change Management Limited 2022*

**Acceptance criteria**

1. Do you have criteria to establish the personality characteristics you are seeking – using Emotional Intelligence criteria and trust criteria?
2. Do you have criteria to establish the required level of subject matter expertise – recognising that subject expertise will be based on technical knowledge of how the work impacted by the change is carried out now and with an interest in how it might be carried out in the future
3. Do you recognise that the criteria for an early adopter must include an assessment of the level of knowledge the person has about how to manage change – this can be trained, but it is an important factor to ask.

**Purpose of the network**

We cannot establish an effective team if we do not first understand what we want the team to achieve. I believe there are two core objectives for a change agent network:

- Leading people through the journey of change
- Delivering the outcome of successfully adopted change

**Journey of change**

For many of us reading this paper, the journey of change is represented by the transition curve, described by many psychologists including Kubler-Ross; Bridges; Fisher. These models form the basis of a lifecycle model for leading people through the psychological and emotional transition from old to new ways of working.





*Behavioural Change Lifecycle © Agile Change Management Limited 2022*

My plan for building and managing a change agent network uses the behavioural change lifecycle in two ways:

1. For the end to end process I am responsible for as the coordinating function
2. As a template for the build out of the network by individual change agents, building their mini network within their sphere of influence

Each of the five steps in this lifecycle identifies the activities the coordinating function and the change agent need to undertake:

- Interest – explaining the part a change agent network has to play in the achievement of change, the opportunities for new experiences and skills development
- Positivity – the benefits of becoming a change agent, running sessions to co-create the identity, define the scope and build the “team charter”
- Participation – activities to create and practice the new ways of working, curated to ensure these activities appeal to a wide range of learning styles and personality preferences
- Enjoyment – bedding down the changes by reflecting on what has been achieved and celebrating these achievements
- Resilience – neuro-hacks to reduce the pressure of motivating ourselves and others to change, and to maintain momentum even in the face of resistance

To give our change agents the best possible chance of success, we need to invest in training them in practical and intuitive techniques to address the most common problems and causes of resistance that they will experience.

I have had the most success with giving people training in how the brain reacts to change, and using this knowledge to create techniques and activities that address these reactions. I continue to build my library of these practical brain short-cuts. If you want to develop your capability in this



area, join me on my [Agile Change Coach](#) course, which contains 41 neuro-hacks to move people through this lifecycle.

## Outcome of the journey

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The outcome is that all those impacted by change adopt it as an established way of working. Using Professor Kelman's definition of internalisation, we need those impacted to be able to make decisions about what, why, when and how things are done differently now that they have changed their ways of working.

This outcome is obviously context specific to the change that is being made. Change agents can add value to the original scope of the change by identifying the new ways of working triggered by the changes. It helps if this is a collective activity as each change agent can speak about the impact in their area of the business, but collectively their contributions will create a rich picture of the upstream and downstream impacts of the change and the inter-dependencies between each of the changes.

In my experience, this is often an eye-opening session for those in the project roles responsible for the creation of the tangible changes that trigger the new ways of working. Until this session, the total impact of the change is not understood and in identifying how it will impact not only processes, but standards, policies, roles, reporting lines, timing and skill levels of tasks can help to establish a "one team culture" between those creating the change and those who will adopt it as their "business as usual".

## Acceptance criteria

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1. Have you trained potential change agents in the lifecycle of change?
2. Have you identified the measures of success for each step on the journey?
3. Have you provided a toolkit of materials they can use to take others through this journey of change?
4. Have you identified all the "bumps in the road" that they might experience and provided answers to these problems?

## Relationship with a coordinating function

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As described above, the network needs to be organised, coordinated and supported to be effective. Every network is different, driven by the prevailing culture in the organisation, the type of change that is taking place, and the importance of this change to the organisation as a whole and to local parts of the business.

I am going to discuss two activities that form part of the relationship between agents and the coordinating function:

- Workstreams
- Community building skills



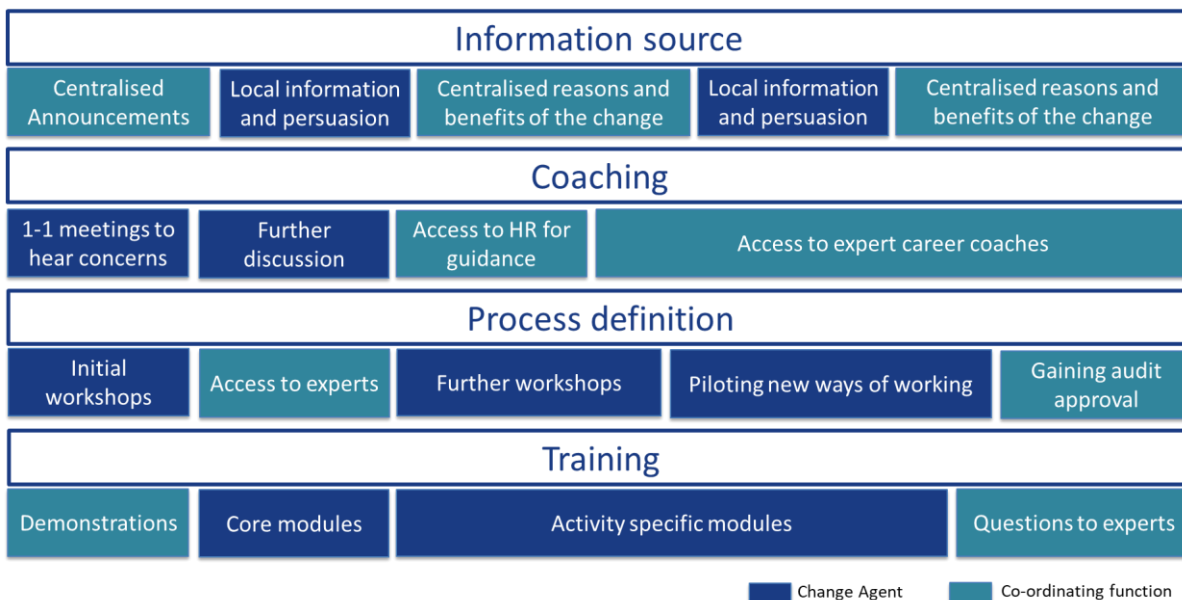
## Workstreams

Effective networks have clear boundaries between the coordinating function and the network, especially as the network grows and develops its range of activities over time.

There is a connection between authority and support. Successful change agent networks know what they are responsible for but also know when they can expect support.

For every activity we ask the network to perform, it is important to clarify how much of the task will be developed centrally, and how much remains the responsibility of the local change agent.

I use this workstream visual to help my networks think about their relationship with whatever central coordinating function exists for the change they are working on.



*Boundaries of authority schema © Agile Change Management Limited 2022*

## Community building skills

I am not going to provide an exhaustive list of skills needed for effective change agents, but I could not finish this paper without highlighting one of the key skills that the coordinating function can role model and which is too often forgotten. Networks are a community, so community building skills are essential. We cannot expect change agents to bring on more change agents if they don't know how to create and maintain a community of volunteers.

Effectively we are asking our change engagements to host the most amazing parties! We asking them to provide opportunities for socialising with others, which is an emotional lever for becoming involved in the change. There are many benefits for this approach:

- Social engagement is the pull mechanism that gets people involved in change, it is as important as the change itself in motivating people into getting involved. This motivation comes from the

desire for connection, feeling part of something, and working with those we like and those we respect.

- Strong within-group ties with co-workers (characterized by frequent social interactions) provide opportunities to facilitate innovative thinking. Strong ties developed by social interactions assist innovators in the search for inspiration, sponsorship, and support within the workplace (Wang, Fang, Qureshi, and Janssen, 2015)
- Employees who engage in positive social interactions also tend to exhibit more altruistic behaviours by providing co-workers with help, guidance, advice, and feedback on various work-related matters (Hamilton, 2007).

We must help change agents identify, plan and host frequent social interactions. These interactions need to create trust, be collaborative, and positive. These can be simple, just asking for an opinion about a single aspect of the change. They can be short, only a few minutes is enough to stimulate a sense of belonging which has a positive impact on our physical and mental wellbeing.

It is worth noting that recent studies in neuroscience have indicated that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs isn't quite right. Instead of putting social needs as third layer, these social needs are a primary driver of motivation, effectively running alongside the other motivational forces.

In my book the Agile Change Management Handbook I defined a checklist for successful collaborative working, which I think gives us a starting point for developing social engagement at work:

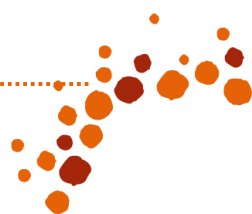
### **Cultural factors**

- Relationship building is a priority and is encouraged
- Information sharing is encouraged/silo-based working is discouraged
- innovation is supported by quality standards to ensure that outputs meet organizational needs
- individuals are respected for knowledge/expertise irrespective of their position
- Recognition that the best solutions are a product of many ideas
- High degree of trust that ideas will be treated with respect

### **Personal factors**

- Suspending judgement when sharing ideas
- Individuals willingly give credit to each other for their contribution
- People make time for collaboration

I have been hosting workshops on this topic recently, helping new change agents build their skills and confidence in engaging with others. One of the most frequently cited criteria for success was to offer value to others, as they will reciprocate by offering value to you. In other words, if you want to engage someone, do something useful for them before asking for a contribution of their time and effort.



Another point made by several of the groups was the importance of following through on positive overtures. If you have contacted someone and they respond, get back in touch quickly, thank them and have options for your next steps ready to present to them, making sure there are several potential next steps so that they can choose what best fits their availability.

### About the author

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I have been responsible for the successful delivery of effective change and for creating environments that support transformational change for over twenty years. I have an impressive track record of successful consulting assignments and I am an acknowledged thought leader in Change Management.

I am the co-founder of the [Continuous Change Community](#) and a respected author of text books and articles on change, project and programme management. I am a talented communicator with a reputation for delivering complex information with humour and passion. I draw on my wealth of practical experience to illustrate concepts and to engage my audience in lively debates on advantages and disadvantages of each approach that I outline.

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