

Lead Change With A Leadership Network

By Chuck Schaefer and Jeff Evans

If you want to sponsor a lasting change, search out the people who will be visible leading learners — people to cooperate in the work of creating a new vision and living out the changes in their behaviors. We've come to call this virtual group a *change leadership network*, a critical mass of natural leaders aligned with the new future.

These people will be the front-runners in understanding the implications of the change for their organizations and thinking through how their work systems will need to be impacted. *Your* change leadership challenge is to form and nurture this phenomenon.



Why a special "network?" Why not just depend on the formal hierarchy and the normal chain of command? Certainly, people with formal authority in a traditional organization have communication channels in place and have more leverage for pulling a change ahead than anyone else. Why not just depend on them? There are a couple of reasons.

First, some people in a change leadership network will be bosses; some will not be, since the natural leaders aren't always on the organization chart.

Second, bosses are busy. Depending on them to work together to create an unaccustomed future at the same time they are responsible for maintaining the success of the present has generally not worked out well.

In fact, their jobs and working relationships are *specifically* designed to enable the current state in the face of all kinds of disruptions, and they do their jobs well.

So the third point is this: people in the formal hierarchy aren't always "onboard" for driving change — they may have a lot to lose, and may themselves be big time "targets" of the change. Major changes often need more help than they can give.

Who? Identify these leaders by the influence that they presently provide to the organization. Also, look outside of the organization for key figures who can provide a pull towards the vision for the future as well

as people inside who can give it a push. Look for the less than obvious source of leadership on the edges of the system. Community figures, union leaders, and customers can all provide a positive source of leadership in a change effort when they are enrolled and committed to the vision.

A change leadership network will need some members in the formal hierarchy, especially key senior sponsors and people with control of needed assets in the earlier phases. But don't forget to look for leaders among the technical advisors, process operators, sales staff, trainers and many others.



How many? To answer this question, you'll want to think through the number and

locations of change leaders that you need by studying the diffusion pattern of the organization, the potential impact of the changes, and how close to implementation you are. The objective is to get a large enough group to establish local visions of the new future, and to identify any local issues that must be dealt with.

As you get closer to implementation, the numbers will grow. Informal leadership roles will often become formal transition management responsibilities, and the regular hierarchy can be mustered to take on change leadership tasks through the normal channels of command and control.

The more complex the change, the more complex your leadership network will need to be. Here are some examples:

- In a fundamental business model change for a national marketing organization of about 1500 people, we ended up with about 180 contacts from inside and four customer groups of about twenty people each on the outside.
- In a large manufacturing plant of about 1200, we only needed a couple of people from each of the five major organizational groups since the changes didn't impact the culture much.

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"These people will be frontrunners in understanding the implications of the change..."

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- In a small manufacturing facility of about 380, we ended up with monthly “get-together” of about 30 people with two-thirds regulars and a third guests because they were moving from a strong standard hierarchy to a pretty radical team based way of operating. These meetings continued for more than a year, under their own steam, after all consulting support ended and the new work system was initially put in place.

Getting started in the right way will help ensure success. Here are a few key steps.

Position the role. First, it is important for the people you enlist to understand that their primary job is to change their own behaviors, not to try to change the behaviors of others. Once they get that firmly in mind, they will be more comfortable with the idea of being a change leader.

But they should know what they are getting into. Because these change leaders will also operate in their regular roles in the larger organization, becoming a part of the change leadership network will pose some difficulty and even risk. They will continue to do their ongoing work while taking on an additional component as a promoter of the vision. There will be extra work for these people.

A common error is to think of change leadership networks as deployment taskforces, used late in the game to roll out the changes. Network is not a code word for a formal change deployment structure. A leadership network is a creative change initiating body, an early-on phenomenon whose work is as much to set the direction of the organization as it is to eventually enable its transition.

Acknowledge the risks. Often there can be no promises of payment or reward for the network members’ role in the change, and they know it — and will still give it their passion. If you can provide safety nets, great, but sometimes safety nets for the few undermine their ability to be trusted by the many.

The only advice we have here is don’t make the risks an “unmentionable” topic. Help the network talk it out, deal with the realities and get on with job of supporting the change and each other in the now and in the future. In one large chemical company business unit, the network participated in carefully designed its own demise in the face of overwhelming market realities.

Then the members continued to work to successfully place every one of the group’s employees even after they themselves were working in other jobs in other locations.

Help the network form and think big. Engaging potential change leaders in exploring the overall vision and creating local visions of the desired future state is the best way we know of to get people excited and evoking their leadership. Take the concept of “building a network” literally. Maybe you could get it started by throwing a “party,” so to speak. Large group processes (like a Future Search or other conference) can be a real help in getting a network going, and today’s newest communication technologies can keep it connected.

Help the network members think about the possibilities that lie within the changes in addition to just getting the initial things done and in place. The idea is to create a tension between people’s present thinking and a larger range of possibilities.

Provide field trips. Bring in “Here’s what we did!” visitors. When we were working on developing a “high performance organization” with a complex of refineries, a light bulb came on for the lead executive while riding back from a visit to large computer manufacture. He realized that they had developed a “competency for changing” that was even more important than the immediate changes that were being put in place. This fresh perspective diffused through the refinery’s network and led to some truly creative local initiatives.

Equip them to sell the change. It is vital that network members be clear on the vision, understand the benefits of the change, and be able to describe them easily.

You shouldn’t need to oversell. If it is truly a good change, simply helping the network members get thoroughly grounded in the vision and the realities of both the costs and benefits will do the job. This is not only for their own motivation, but also to prepare them to answer the question “Why?” over and over again throughout the organization.

Enable them to act. Members of a change leadership network will participate because they have some passion to create positive changes in the organization, but they will need sponsorship for the activities they are about to pursue.

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This is another gift you can give them: work with their senior sponsors to make sure they can actually get the sanction, resources and protection they need to participate. Most importantly, ensure they can operate publicly in their role. The people with whom they interface need to be aware that these people will have a special role for some time to come.

“Provide field trips [for a] fresh perspective.”

Provide training, skill development, and mentors from the sponsor group, and any additional support network members need to help them move the vision forward.

Stay the course. The change leadership network is essentially a body that exists outside the system. Eventually, as the changes are absorbed by the system, the leadership network will dissolve into the woodwork.

However, as the full implications of the changes

diffuse into the depths and far reaches of the system, sustainability requires that there is still the kind of support available to the diffusion and development that the change leadership network provided in the glamour days of the major impacts. To sustain the good work, the system needs to create a way for this to happen.

A change leadership network's job is to engage all parts of the existing organization and serve as a linkage between the sponsorship for change, the change stewards, the targeted populations and the emerging work system. The people in it will stand as beacons for the change and

local integrators of the unique needs of all parts of the organization. ☞

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