

Being an Effective Change-Agent

The Key to Interpersonal Skill

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Introduction

Anyone who promotes learning, skillfulness, growth or development in others, or helps them identify and solve their problems or clarify and realize their goals, is called a "change-agent." When two people interact with each other in this way, they are said to have a "change-agent relationship." Examples of change-agent relationships include manager-employee, teacher-student, coach-student, mentor-apprentice, parent-child, friends, spouses, and therapist-client.

It is easy to see that being an effective change-agent is a key ingredient of being a good manager. As managers, we are frequently called upon to advise and coach our employees. The more they learn, the more skillful they become, the better work they will do and the greater range of things they become able to do. Specifically, your employees will

- Become more skillful and knowledgeable
- Identify problems and goals clearly and accurately
- Make good progress towards solving problems and realizing goals

- Develop heightened awareness and perceptiveness of their own ways of thinking, talking, and behaving
- Become more and more autonomous
- Feel more and more confident and satisfied

At the same time, as you become a better change-agent for your employees, you will learn more about the skills you are coaching. You will become more skillful at coaching itself. You will have the pleasure and satisfaction of aiding the development of your employees. Your employees will do a better job and be more rewarding to collaborate with. Finally, your relationships with your employees will improve, becoming more satisfying, enjoyable, trusting, and productive.

The Four Criteria for Effective Change-Agency

Since change-agency applies to so many different fields and types of relationships (as listed above), it has been studied for over fifty years. In fact, well over one thousand separate studies have been done to ascertain what makes a change-agent relationship work best. In addition, there have been decades of trial-and-error work in many of these fields to see what did and didn't work to promote beneficial development in another person. The conclusions from this research are quite reasonable, and even self-evident, upon reflection.

The results of these studies and trials all come down to this: there are exactly four attributes that completely determine the degree of harmfulness or beneficial effect of any change-agent relationship.

1. Accepting
2. Understanding
3. Understandable
4. Skillful

These four attributes of the change-agent must be perceived by the person getting help in the relationship. That is, in the case of manager-employee, it is the employee's perception of these attributes, and the degree of these attributes, in the manager that determines the quality of the relationship and the consequent effect on the employee's development. To the degree that the employee sees the manager as accepting, understanding, understandable, and skillful (in whatever area the manager is helping the employee), to that same degree the employee is likely to be helped by the manager. That is to say, the manager will be an effective change-agent for that employee.

Accepting

The very fact that the manager is trying to help the employee learn or improve some skill implies that the employee has some weakness or lack of skill in the area involved. Therefore, it is crucial that employees trust the manager not to criticize them or otherwise stir up their self-doubts, so they can reveal to the manager and to themselves the areas in which they need coaching.

Employees' own lack of self-acceptance can easily lead to defensiveness, either pretending to be better than they are, doubting the manager, or giving up. All these prevent effective learning.

Acceptance in this case means a manager who doesn't exacerbate, aggravate, or stir up this lack of self-acceptance—someone who is perceived by employees as not judgmental or critical of them personally. It also means being perceived as liking the employee.

Acceptance is the first step. It is the absolutely necessary prerequisite for the other qualities of an effective change-agent. Unless the employee feels accepted by the manager—does not feel obligated to change in order to win the manager's friendship—the rest of the change-agent qualities are for nothing. In fact, the employee is unlikely to request or even permit a change-agency relationship with that manager at all.

Understanding

Once employees feel safe enough to reveal their inadequacies to the manager, the next factor becomes how understanding the manager is. If employees find it easy to get the manager to understand their problems and goals, change-agency has a chance. If talking to the manager is like talking to a brick wall, how can the manager help employees? Employees will be frustrated and soon give up trying to get help from the manager.

Therefore, being a skillful listener is a critical skill for managers. Helping employees get clear about their problem and what they want help with is essential to facilitating their positive change.

Understandable

Once employees trust the manager and are able to communicate their needs, the manager will try to help. At that point, if employees find the manager incomprehensible, how can the manager help? For this reason, the skill of self-expression is important for managers to master. Making it easy for employees to understand what you're trying to teach them is a necessary part of effective change-agency.

In addition, employees have to believe that what you tell them makes sense; it's rational and reasonable. Otherwise, they'll just write it (and you) off.

Skillful

Finally, even if employees trust you, are able to get you to understand what they need easily, and understand and believe what you tell them, you will not be able to help them much unless you have more skill than they do in whatever area you're working with them on. The manager has to have something to teach employees that employees want to learn. Relevance is crucial.

For example, you might be more skillful than your employees at recognizing, clarifying, and expressing problems and goals. Or you might be more skillful at

helping employees solve problems, as well as helping them become more skillful at problem-solving. You may be good at helping employees work effectively towards goals in some areas, as well as helping them learn how to designing ways of working effectively towards these goals.

Assessing Your Change-Agent Effectiveness

You can evaluate your own effectiveness as a change agent in any given relationship. Think of some relationship in which you try to promote positive change or growth in some way in another person. Rate yourself on an absolute scale of 0-10 on each of the four attributes above: accepting, understanding, understandable, and skillful.

You will probably find that you are a more effective change-agent for some people than for others. This is normal. It is partly a matter of fit, partly a matter of the quality of the relationship overall. It's unreasonable to expect yourself to be a terrific change-agent for everyone. When you are unable to do it well for someone, bow out and let someone else try.

How to Improve Your Score

As you probably have guessed, the key to the first three change-agent qualities is communication skill.

Being perceived as accepting by others—while fundamentally a function of how well you accept yourself—is mainly a matter of how you communicate with them. If you convey what is sometimes called “unconditional acceptance,” meaning that they don't have to change for you to like and respect them, they'll probably feel accepted. Avoid characterizing or labeling people.

Distinguish the person from that person's behavior. You are *not* what you do. What you are is unchangeable. What you do is mostly within your control, and it changes all the time. Just because someone does a sloppy job on something doesn't make them a slob. A slob would be someone who always does everything in a sloppy way and always will. No hope of change. There's nobody like that.

Being perceived as an understanding person is a function of your listening skills. Being perceived as understandable and reasonable is a function of your skills in self-expression. These are just the two sides of communication skill. The article titled “Foundations of Interpersonal Communication,” can help.

Finally, being knowledgeable or skillful in whatever area you’re trying to help your employees improve in is a matter of your own development. Skill learning, especially, requires that the coach (you, in this example) be more skillful at whatever it is than the student (the employee, in this example). Teaching knowledge doesn’t require this. But coaching skills does. So there’s no substitute for getting good at whatever your employees need your help with.

Conclusion

The four qualities of an effective change-agent are both necessary and sufficient to promote positive growth and skill-development in others. They are all you have to focus on. They are applicable to every type of change-agent relationship—not just manager-employee. As you get better at them, you will have a better and better effect on everyone around you.

Once more, your comments and questions would be most welcome. We’d be very interested to hear how you liked this paper, whether you found it to be valuable, or any other reactions. We’d also be happy to answer any questions you might have or discuss the ideas in this paper or how they apply to your management or organizational interests. Please e-mail us at info@developmentalconsulting.com or call (303) 468-1510. This paper is from our website, www.developmentalconsulting.com.

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