



# The Case for Change Leadership in Development Projects

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In 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the development agenda titled "Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." As part of this resolution, the 193 countries of the General Assembly committed to achieving 17 global goals dubbed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs cover social and economic development issues including poverty, hunger, health, education, global warming, gender equality, water, sanitation, energy, urbanization, environment and social justice.

The SDGs are the latest attempt at focusing the development agenda and accelerating progress against ambitious global improvements. Achieving these goals will take multi-faceted efforts from governments, civil societies, development agencies and individual citizens. Success will require projects that have the right strategic approach, a focus on evidence-based policies and interventions, excellent execution and the seeds of sustainable behavior change.

None of this will be possible without change leadership.

## **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "CHANGE LEADERSHIP?"**

Change management as a discipline that focuses on the process, tools, systems and techniques to help organizations implement successful projects on budget, on time, and with minimal disruption. These elements of change management are instrumental to a successful change, and there are many examples of where these aspects are done well – both in the public and private sector.

However, what is most often missing is a focus on building the capabilities to *lead* change at all levels – the human side of change, where changing attitudes and behaviors of people whose *commitment* to the change, not just their acceptance of it, is needed. This requires eliciting input and urgent action from all stakeholders, increasing collaboration and collective problem-solving, and generating and celebrating success in new ways. Over and above shifts in tools, technology

and processes, the shifts in mindsets and behaviors achieved through building change leadership capacity are massively important to the success, scalability and sustainability of any change.

## GOOD – EVEN GREAT – CHANGE LEADERSHIP DOES EXIST

Successful change *does* happen in both the public and private sectors - but usually organically and rarely intentionally. In fact, our research is based not on hypothesis, but on the observation of hundreds of change efforts – both those that succeeded and those that failed or fell short.

The most successful transformations, whether at an organizational, regional or national level, always have a few critical ingredients. Well known examples like Nelson Mandela’s leadership and the reconciliation efforts in post-apartheid South Africa, or the mobilization of people that resulted in the Arab Spring and the host of less well known but equally effective efforts at a community and local level, have been able to create movements by inspiring aligned action from a range of stakeholders. These examples highlight the impact that change leadership can have on implementation in complex situations. In most instances, these efforts rely on an inspired leader or a lucky combination of other factors that are hard to replicate or scale.

## 70+% OF CHANGE EFFORTS FAIL

Research has repeatedly shown that a vast majority of initiatives that require a significant change in behavior fail to meet their expectations, with only 25% achieving their stated objectives.

While there are many examples of success, there are also many examples of development efforts that do not meet their goals. Whether it is providing textbooks for communities that never get used because students can’t read and there aren’t enough teachers, or building toilets without addressing cultural norms, there are many examples of projects that get “executed”, but are simply not effective. Others like the PlayPump project that builds roundabouts for children to play on, which in turn powers a water pump, were effective in pilots but did not achieve scale.

## THE PUBLIC SECTOR STANDS TO BENEFIT EVEN MORE FROM DOING THIS WELL THAN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

While change leadership is essentially about human nature (i.e. the concepts are agnostic of industry, sector, scale, culture, etc), the specific approach and impact is context specific. Development projects pose some implementation challenges that are distinct from those faced in private sector projects.

**The complexity of change in the development sphere is increasing sharply.** Development projects are inherently complex in their nature, scope and scale, and are becoming even more so. From the increasingly varied donor landscape (both in unilateral and multilateral aid agencies) to the impact of digital technology in how services can be accessed and delivered, the complexity in designing effective interventions continues to rise.

**Short leadership tenures and political influence on implementation timeframes.** Speed and flexibility are required across both public and private sectors, but the public sector faces the additional challenge of short leadership tenures and changing political landscapes that put a premium on the ability to implement quickly and accelerate the adoption of new ways of doing business. While some visionary leaders might focus on projects that could outlive their tenure, most only pay attention to projects that can be conceived, designed and implemented within their tenure.

**Leadership capabilities and experience with change.** In most cases, leadership roles are filled based on technical competencies, tenure or political motivations - not demonstrated leadership skills. Project or agency leaders are not often selected with the capability of leading a transformation in mind. Additionally, the public sector lags in the recruitment and development of highly talented managers and leaders.

**Ability to introduce and utilize incentives.** While the effectiveness is disputable, private sector companies have a greater toolkit of monetary and non-monetary incentives to motivate behavior change in individuals. Most public sector and development work is constrained by procurement and HR procedures that have been developed to reduce corruption and bad governance. The unfortunate side effect is that limited options are available for leaders to reward performance.

**Geographic and stakeholder diversity.** Development and public sector projects are generally geographically disparate with a low concentration of resources in any one location. This makes it more difficult to rely on traditional command-and-control structures to drive action that goes beyond simply following procedure (e.g. innovation, problem-solving, creativity). The diversity of stakeholders that are impacted by - and that can impact the success of - the project is also generally far greater than in the private sector.

The change leadership that is often missing from development work has the potential to significantly improve and accelerate the success of development projects by confronting these challenges of complexity, relevance, behavior change, motivation and sustainability.

## THERE ARE SOME KEY ELEMENTS TO A SUCCESSFUL APPROACH

Over the last few decades, we have been observing success stories in both the private and public sectors, and have distilled them into an approach that is sticky, replicable and scalable. By taking this deliberate, proactive and planful approach to change leadership, the impact of development efforts can be more predictable and measurably magnified.

**Tapping intrinsic motivators.** While external motivators like rewards and performance management are not as readily available in the public sector, intrinsic motivators that connect to the purpose of the work can be even more effective than in the private sector. By ensuring that the purpose and the opportunities to improve the lives of the constituent population remain front and center, leaders can create a sense of commitment that promotes energetic and enthusiastic teams.

Dan Pink, in his book *Drive*, makes the case for motivating employees through creating jobs that provide autonomy, mastery and purpose. Development projects typically have a clear, easy-to-articulate purpose. Leaders can amplify motivation by reinforcing this purpose through creative ways (such as videos, stakeholder interviews, case studies) and by encouraging individuals to explicitly link their day-to-day work to the larger purpose. Motivation can also be amplified through greater autonomy and discretion in how individuals do their work, and in creating opportunities for them to engage in “want to” efforts outside the rigidity of their job descriptions.

**Articulating the vision for the project and constantly connecting to it.** Clearly answering the question “what will be different when we are successful?” will help the team make decisions that are consistent with the overall vision for the project. Development projects typically have multiple stakeholders funding, implementing and benefiting from the work. Constantly reminding people of what the project will and will not achieve is necessary to avoid mission creep, misalignment and wasted resources.

*The Otpor movement in Serbia that started in 1998 was hugely successful and the approach and tactics developed during the movement have been successfully replicated in the movements of the Arab Spring. “Our main goal was to show the general public that the regime could be changed. We started out by making Milosevic nervous. Then we brought down the system,” says Homen, one of the founders of Otpor. This singular clarity of purpose - to remove Molosevic - is one of the critical reasons for the success of Otpor. This clear purpose not only helped inspire the intrinsic motivation amongst Otpor’s members, but also served as a North Star in determining the direction and knowing how to act in different situations.*

**Engaging staff across the organization.** Agency staff and project resources often have much longer tenures and deeper understanding of the day-to-day operations and challenges than the leaders. By involving staff early (even in the project design stage), communicating consistently and creating opportunities for involvement from staff across the organization, change leadership can tap into the knowledge and ideas of the individuals who are in the best position to know what will and will not work. In essence, those closest to the work.

**Encouraging local action.** Projects in the public sector typically touch diverse stakeholders across diverse geographies. Successful implementation is heavily reliant on local action that cannot be easily driven from a centralized command structure. Change leadership is highly effective at creating local action through empowerment and decentralized decision making. By following an approach that can combine the traditional command structure of a hierarchy with a networked approach to information sharing, decision making and problem-solving, projects can achieve scale and impact quickly and sustainably.

*In 2003, the Food for Progress project in Lagdo, Cameroon was intended to restore and activate the Lagdo Dam (which had been built 25 years earlier). A small group of Peace Corps workers led the effort to engage the newly resettled community in the long-term operation and maintenance of the dam, and the agriculture economy envisioned to*

*grow around it. The group brought together eight sets of elders to articulate a vision of what would be possible if everyone worked together (see the comments about shared purpose above), and then they set out to invite villagers to participate in any way they could. People carried sand and laid seed – accessible, yet meaningful activities that produced visible results and therefore encouraged more participation. By 2014, not only had Lagdo grown its crop production into a sustainable source of food and revenue, but the people in the community had built such agency through participation in the work early on that everyone was able to articulate future priorities and anticipated challenges.*

Whether working on improving health and nutrition outcomes, enhancing learning outcomes, or increasing agricultural productivity, we must at the very least be intentional about applying a thoughtful approach to leading and managing the change. The path forward for public sector change must alleviate skepticism, overcome cultural and hierarchical barriers, and protect the investments we are making to improve lives.



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