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# Formalising the Role of Change Agents to Facilitate Communication

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## Abstract

The term 'change agent' is often used, yet there is confusion as to who this person is in an organisation. Some writers are referring to the project manager as the change agent while in reality, the change agents may have no connection to the project. This paper examines the recruitment and formalisation of operatives as change agents within the Tasmania Police. Change agents are used to provide an extra communication channel in the organisation for purposes of information dissemination. The formalisation of the role of change agents has altered the communication channels in the Police allowing factual information to flow more freely.

## Keywords

AA1101 Change, AA1102 Resistance to change, AF10 Change Management, Research, DD01 Organisational Change,

## Introduction

The change management literature refers to change agents within organisations and how they can help facilitate the implementation of change. This reference is usually associated with the key concept of communication. The references however are usually vague and, when examined closely, the term change agent can be referring to different people in the organisation. Buchanan and Boddy (1992) identify the project manager as the change agent. Other writers refer to members of management or the IS professionals as the change agents in the organisation (Cummings & Huses 1989; Kanter et al, 1992; Markus, 1996). Markus (1996) suggests that there is substantial disagreement in both theory and practice about what it means to be an agent of organisational change. She further states that the lack of consensus about what it means to be a change agent is an impediment to progress because the term creates misunderstanding when talked about. This paper offers an alternate explanation as to the identity of possible change agents. Literature suggests that the project team and management must utilise change management strategies when implementing change. However this paper suggests that frontline workers can be effectively used to promote the change and ensure that the communication channels not only remain open but the message being spread

contains facts rather than innuendo and gossip. It is this concept that has led the Tasmania Police to formalise the role of change agents within their organisation.

## Research Methods and Question

This case study is a part of a large doctoral study involving the Tasmania Police. The author is involved in Action Research and is monitoring the implementation of six projects being undertaken by the Police. The purpose of the doctoral research is to develop a model for utilising change agents, by reviewing the use of such agents and their role in relation to the implementation of projects in an organisation.

## Tasmanian Police

Tasmania is the island State of Australia and has a Police force of approximately 1100 sworn officers. The state is divided into four policing districts: Northern, Western, Eastern and Southern. Each district has its own hierarchical structure that, at times, results in differing work practices. The Tasmania Police can be equated to any typical organisation with a three tiered structure. Upper management consists of the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioners and Superintendents. The middle management sector consists of Inspectors and Sergeants with the lower level containing operational police, the constables. A pool of 'unsworn personnel' supports the organisation. These employees have varying duties ranging from clerical/reception functions to speed camera operators.

The Police can be mistakenly viewed as a para military organisation where instructions issued from the Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner would be implemented throughout the organisation without question. However, in a previous study (Thomas, 1996) the Inspectors were identified as being possible inhibitors to change. The study found that if the change being implemented had been perceived by the Inspectors as threatening to their resources or authority, they would modify the change to enable them to maintain control and lessen the effect on their area of responsibility.

*Figure 1* details the communication channels prior to the recruitment of the change agents. The communication process prior to the recruitment of the change agents was very structured with the majority of communication being

generated from the top. Directives or instructions would be issued to upper management of each district who in turn would feed the information down the ranks to other personnel. Information in relation to projects would be communicated directly from management to the project team. This model did not allow for personnel to communicate directly with management. All upward

communication was channelled through the formal tiers of management. As this diagram indicates there is no channel for the project teams to communicate with the district management.

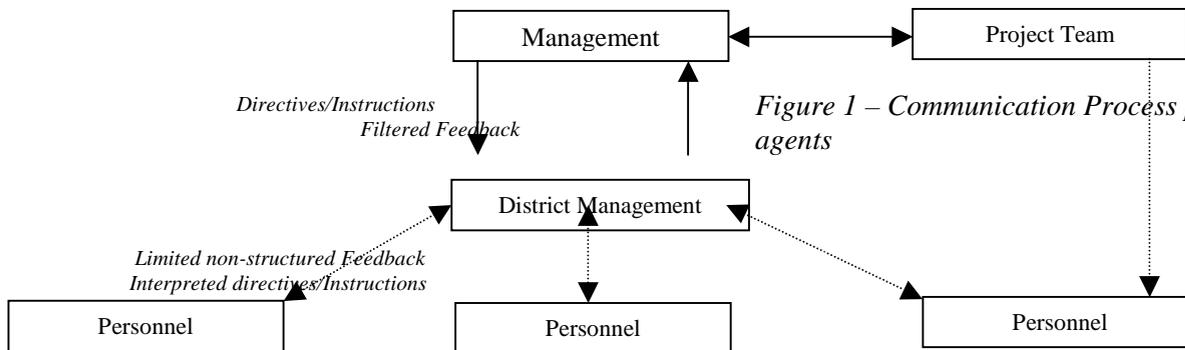


Figure 1 – Communication Process prior to change agents

## Change Management

Various models and theories have been developed in an attempt to identify characteristics of change and appropriate methods to handle such change within organisations. Two well-defined approaches to change management are the planned and emergent approach. A number of writers have criticised the planned approach to change with the main arguments challenging the assumption that an organisation exists in different states at different times and that planned movement can occur from one state to another (Burnes, 1996). For the purpose of our discussion we will eliminate the planned approach to change.

Unlike the planned approach to change, the emergent approach recognises that organisations operate in a turbulent environment. The emergent approach to change is based on four main aspects that are said to promote or obstruct success. These are:

- Organisational structure identifying the need for the structure in the organisation to be flattened prior to implementing change to facilitate communication.
- Organisational culture requiring the organisation to be ready to accept the forthcoming change
- Managerial behaviour, managers must actively promote the change and not be seen to pay lip service to the change.
- Organisational learning recognising the need for the organisation to have a vision and be able to communicate this vision as a guide to implement change.

Other models of change management share similar components. The key to implementing change is keeping the communication channels in the organisation open and communication flowing. It is important to identify who will be apart of the change, set up consultation with employees at every level and keep communication flowing. In this way individuals feel they are being respected and empowered rather than dis-empowered (Pontoni, 1996). Kramlinger (1998) discusses that best practice for designing the employee version of a change message is to rethink the learning objectives from employees' point of view. Kramlinger's best practice can be used to provide focus for this paper.

## Change Agents

Tasmania Police has undergone a major business process re-engineering (BPR) exercise, which commenced in 1995. The BPR exercise involves numerous projects over a number of years resulting in incremental change. The projects impact all areas of the organisation and personnel, with some projects specifically focussing on operational issues. The re-engineering was conducted in conjunction with the consulting firm KPMG. It was during this initial process that the opportunity of recruiting change agents from within the organisation was highlighted. The project team, with the help of the consultant, selected the change agents. The criteria simple - they chose people in the organisation that had credibility with their peers. The issue of credibility was so strong the team included the selection of an outspoken anti-management officer as a change agent because he was seen to have enormous credibility in the organisation. Having credible personnel was the priority of the

program, rather than management 'yes' people. Recruiting the anti management officer represented a strong message that change agents were individuals with their own views and not puppets of management.

Twenty people were chosen, ranking from Inspector to Constable officers, and some unsworn personnel. The twenty were selected from around the state providing coverage over the four districts with the main focus being placed on coverage of the major stations. A conscious effort was made to include the Inspectors as change agents. Inspectors had been previously identified as possible inhibitors to change and it was thought that including them as official change agents may reduce their resistance to change by keeping them informed and thinking strategically. While this strategy had the desired effect, a review of the change agents identified that the Inspectors had minimal, if no time, to devote to the role and were viewed as being a part of management and therefore operating on a management agenda. A decision was made to keep the Inspectors as change agents ensuring that resources, such as time and organising meetings happen at a district level. This decision resulted in a need to increase the numbers of change agents around the state, with a stronger focus on recruiting people from the lower levels of the organisational structure.

An expression of interest was sent out via e-mail and newsletter asking for interested parties to nominate themselves. This list was reviewed for suitability. The review was subjective and relied on the opinions of members of the project team as to the credibility of the people nominating. Tasmania Police has a mobile workforce. This combined with a relatively small number of 1100 people statewide results in most sworn officers being aware of the location and duties of other sworn officers. The project team were able to give some background information in relation to the nominee or were able to conduct another officer in the nominees workplace to gather this information. As the change agent must be a person who is credible in their workplace there was little choice but to utilise this type of review. After the nominations were received, districts were identified that still required a change agent. In those areas people were specifically targeted as being right for the job but no pressure was applied to force them into taking on the role. Contact was made either in person or over the phone. The role of the change agent was explained and they were informed that they had been nominated as the most appropriate person in their workplace to perform that role.

The change agents were made aware that one of their main functions involved being attuned to the grapevine and identifies issues before they became major concerns for the organisation. Those concerns needed to be communicated upwards. In the past when personnel were

unhappy with a proposed change, whether a directive or project based, the feedback had not been communicated to the project team or management. In extreme cases the grievance was leaked outside the organisation with a view to involve the media who in turn may ask management to explain publicly the reason for the decision or change. To demonstrate this, the local paper was informed that Tasmania Police were taking a 'soft approach' in dealing with juvenile offenders. This information was leaked from within the department. The directive that had been issued was as a result of officers not implementing a request from the Commissioner.

The change agent's role involves conducting formal presentations in relation to projects and keeping their peers up to date with the current state of a project. They are briefed prior to any change being announced which often occurs concurrently with upper management. The briefing provides factual information relating to the reasons and the proposed benefits of the change prior to the change being disseminated throughout the organisation. The driving force of the change the police are undertaking is focused on restructuring to allow their sworn officers to spend more time on core policing functions. The mission statement 'To provide a safer Tasmania' provides the strategic focus for the majority of change currently being implemented. The change agents are not asked to endorse the change. They are asked to provide factual information relating to the change. Management would not like the change agents to be viewed as 'company people' pushing the company line. The strategy is, that if the change agents are provided with the facts then those facts will address most of the concerns and fears people in the organisation have.

The literature consistently identifies the need for top management support if an organisation is committed to the change process. As such, the Deputy Commissioner of Police has taken on the role of the program sponsor. He demonstrated his commitment to the project by dedicating time and resource as well as offering an open door to the change agents to enable them to clarify an issue of concern with him directly. The open door policy was a significant cultural shift for this organisation. The Deputy Commissioner was not in the habit of explaining his decisions or explaining his actions to members of the organisation. The change agents determine how they will perform the role in their workplace. The program relies on the change agent being able to assess the most suitable method of delivery to their workplace.

### **Change agent coordinator**

Hutton (1994) provides a handbook for change agents and states that change agent develop and manage a support network. The advice and the role Hutton describes is the change agent coordinator not the change agents and

the support network are the actual change agents in the Police

Late in 1997 a change agent coordinator was seconded for a period of six months and attached to the current project team. The primary role of the coordinator is to work with the project team and inform the change agents as to the progress of the current and future projects. Initially the coordinator organised presentation materials to facilitate the change agents conducting presentations in their workplace. The format of the presentation was a decision made by the coordinator with little input from the change agents themselves. In the early stage the change agent role was very formal and driven by the coordinator.

Early in 1998 a second coordinator was seconded for a further six-month period. After the initial settling-in period, the coordinator observed the change agents operated in a very formal environment. In interviews the agents acknowledged that they had been waiting for information to be provided to them for dissemination. The failure to recognise they could have been pro-active in their function resulted in the second coordinator rethinking his objectives. There was very little feedback being provided to the project team on related issues. To place this in perspective, a project was rolled out in the two biggest districts at the same time. The project team were aware of problems during the first few days yet did not receive a single call from a change agent. This insight made the coordinator question the current role of the change agent and to modify the focus on the informal processes of communication.

In the past, the choice of the adopted method of communicating information relating to the projects has been the responsibility of the change agent coordinator. The coordinator called a meeting of the change agents to assess the possible methods of delivery in relation to upcoming projects. This meeting required members to travel from the North and the North West of the state and have time off from their normal duties. A representation of change agents from each district met to formulate the best method of disseminating the information regarding the next two projects. This meeting gave the change agents ownership of the dissemination of the information relating to these projects. During the meeting the change agents identified a group within the organisation that would be threatened by one of the projects as it attacked their very culture. Strategies were discussed and developed to reduce the perceived impact. One of the strategies adopted identified the project manager as being the best person to brief the threatened group on the project. The project manager had credibility with the threatened group and would be able to answer questions arising from the briefing. This realisation was significant as it demonstrated that the change agents were not just

playing lip service to the dissemination of information in the organisation but thinking about the possible reaction to the change. With little intervention by the change agent coordinator the group focussed at a deeper level to reveal groups in the organisation that may be threatened by the proposed change and developed strategies to disarm those threats.

## Discussion

The Police have experienced the benefits that a structured change management strategy can have on implementing change and the effects of trying to implement change without change management. The project team will always play a significant role in the change management process with continual consultation with participants in relation to the project. Both project and change management strategies should be a component of all managers' skill set in today's business environment. These skills will enable change aligned to a project to be implemented with less resistance.

To be a 'change agent' in an organisation requires ability to communicate openly with the operatives keeping them informed as to the status of the change and listening to their fears or concerns. When the fears or concerns are identified then facts must be sought to address them. This can be achieved through the coordinator or the sponsor. If there is no immediate answer at least the concern has been raised at a level where they can be assessed and a strategy developed to address the concerns. Managers can be seen as having vested interests in the promoted change making it hard for the message to be viewed without suspicion. Change management is a skill necessary to all organisations to help effectively implement change and thereby reap the proposed benefits.

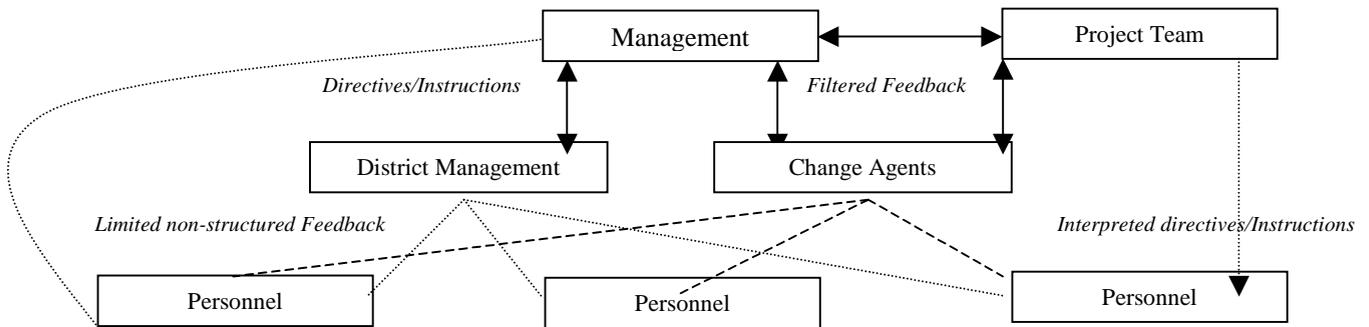
Using the lower level as the area to recruit the change agents provides an opportunity for a more open communication channels in the organisation. Information being disseminated in the organisation through the normal hierarchical channels can result in inaccuracies. By providing a direct and simultaneous communication channel to all levels of the organisation results in information being received in its entirety. However top down communication on its own is not enough there has to be the ability for bottom up communication again allowing the message to be received in its entirety. Change agents are not required to support the change or take ownership of it. The function is to disseminate factual information to their work place and follow up on any question or concerns raised.

*Figure 2* outlines the new communication process in the Police as a result of recruiting and formalising the role of the change agents. Management can now communicate

with personnel without having to use the district management. As previously discussed, the Deputy Commissioner now briefs the change agents at the same time as he briefs the management in the districts on a proposed change. The other aspect this model offers is

that of the open door to the program sponsor, usually conducted by utilising the change agents. Change agents can contact the Deputy Commissioner of Police to gain clarification on change whether it is project or directive based.

Figure 2 – New Communication Process



There is little disagreement that the project team should have a change management strategy in place when implementing change. Monitoring the implementation of change is the role of project teams, project managers and other members of management. Change is often conceived at management level, developed by project teams who then act as a facilitator between management and the rest of the organisation. The change agents operate at the lower levels of the organisation effecting the change.

Tasmania Police are continually developing new strategies for utilising their network of change agents. While the original focus was on the formal process of disseminating information in relation to only projects it became clear that this role did not provide the types of benefits the organisation hoped to gain by adopting such a strategy. The current focus incorporates not only the formal but also the informal role of the change agent, along with the increase in the numbers, may come closer to providing the benefits being sort. The change agents are currently refining and exploring their role in the process of change

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