CHANGE MANAGEMENT TOOLKIT

Circling the Pyramid

Building Lasting Commitment to Change

By Edmond Mellina

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Circling the Pyramid

In any change initiative, the overarching objective is to drive the lasting adoption of new behaviors and attitudes within the organization. The challenge can be framed through a series of questions: What is the best strategy to build commitment to the change? How do you monitor the level of allegiance? What is the difference between mere compliance and full internalization? We have developed a model to help address these issues. Although simple in its form and application, it has proven effective in a multitude of change situations.

The Pyramid of Change Commitment

As illustrated in Figure 1, the core of the model is a pyramid projected from above. The corners at the base of the structure correspond to specific states of mind among the people in the organization:

1. **Persuaded**: when people understand and agree with the rationale for the change; when they come to realize the status quo cannot be sustained.

2. **Excited**: when the change truly resonates with the interests, values and beliefs of the people in the organization.

3. **Confident**: when people have confidence in the ability of the organization to navigate the change journey; when they believe the leadership has the resolve to see the change through.

4. **Able**: when people feel they possess the skills required to display the new behaviors and succeed in the new environment.
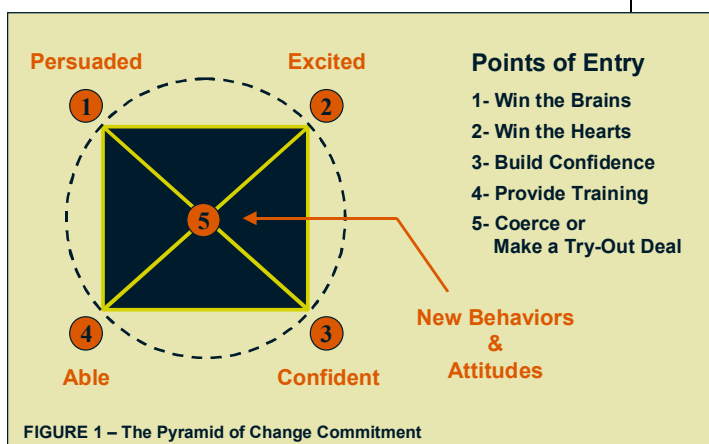
The tip of the pyramid represents the end-point, i.e. when people adopt fresh attitudes and behaviors.

Circling the Pyramid

The four states of mind constitute the critical ingredients to producing lasting commitment to change. To illustrate why, let's consider a few examples.

A service organization decided to redesign its core business processes. The objectives were to increase efficiencies, improve customer service and capitalize on new strategic opportunities. The corporate leaders did an outstanding job articulating the case for the change, thus *persuading* the leadership teams in the various business units. Because the company had a very strong customer-service culture, the initiative resonated with everyone's beliefs and a general sense of excitement quickly developed. Nevertheless, resistance surfaced shortly after the transition plans were communicated. The general managers of the business units were leading the rebellion. They had come to realize a significant portion of the implementation costs would affect their profit & loss for the current year. It was bad news for their bonus. Their initial *excitement* quickly collapsed, replaced with anger and resentment.

In a professional services firm, line management and the finance department had been complaining for years about the accounting software. When the company finally decided to replace the technology, the finance group welcomed the news with genuine *excitement*. It was a case of preaching to the convinced (*persuaded*). They had *confidence* in the technical abilities of their I.T. colleagues. Yet, the rollout of the project didn't go smoothly.

Persuaded   Excited

① ②

Points of Entry
1- Win the Brains
2- Win the Hearts
3- Build Confidence
4- Provide Training
5- Coerce or
   Make a Try-Out Deal

⑤

④ ③

Able   Confident

New Behaviors & Attitudes

FIGURE 1 – The Pyramid of Change Commitment

The training provided by the software vendor was too generic and superficial. Resentment and resistance grew among the accounting clerks. They were unable to function effectively with the new systems. Like a chain, their commitment was only as strong as the weakest link – i.e. their *ability* to operate the software.

A manufacturing company decided to drastically revamp production in one of its plants. The goal was to improve quality and time-to-market. The Regional Vice-President and the plant's General Manager were absolutely committed to the initiative. They invested the necessary resources and assembled a team of respected experts to run the project (*confidence*). They met with the various shifts of workers to communicate the rationales for the project. They also made it clear to everyone the only option was to come along: the executive concluded each town-hall meeting by declaring, "those who don't change will have no future here!" This statement alone *persuaded* the workers that compliance was in their best interest. The project team designed a thorough training program so that the employees were fully equipped to operate in the new production environment (*able)*. The project was a great success, at least on the surface. Once the new processes were in place and running smoothly, the project managers returned to their regular duties. A few months later, the sponsoring Vice-President relocated to another region as a result of a promotion. Shortly after, pockets of resistance emerged throughout the plant. Some workers started to complain vehemently about the new procedures. Others quietly reverted to the old way of running the production. The tension grew steadily between employees and management. The plant experienced a sharp decrease in quality and significant production delays. Why this late-stage setbacks? The change leaders had overlooked the need to build emotional commitment throughout the change process (*excited*). As 19th century French writer Joseph Roux once said, "nothing vivifies, and nothing kills, like the emotions".

The lesson is that change leaders must work on all the four elements at the base of the pyramid in order to build lasting commitment to change. That is to *persuade* people and generate *excitement*, earn their *confidence* in the organization's aptitude to navigate the change

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journey, and ensure they are *able* to operate in the new environment. We refer to this process as "**circling the pyramid**". How you go about it is less important than ensuring your cover each of the bases, the sine qua non of proper change internalization.

Change Implementation Strategies

Figure 1 highlights the five possible ways to start circling the pyramid. We can map each entry point to a generic change strategy, as described in the table below.

Generic Strategy	Entry Point	Emphasis	Premise
Persuasion	# 1	Win the brains	People are rational. They will change once convinced.
Seduction	# 2	Win the hearts	People are emotional. They will welcome a change that resonates with their beliefs, values and interests.
Confidence-Building	# 3	Build confidence in the organization's ability to change	People want to be part of a winning team. They will jump on a campaign that is heading to victory.
Training	# 4	Ensure people have the skills necessary to perform in the new environment	People resist change because they are afraid of failing.
Coercion or Try-Out	# 5	Immerse people into the new environment	People are empirical. Commitment is built through experimentation of the new environment.

There is no single-best approach to implementing change. Each strategy emphasizes one of the building blocks of change commitment. However, as previously discussed, lasting commitment is built by circling the entire pyramid – i.e. by addressing all four elements.

Consequently, the best approach is to adopt a portfolio of strategies and tailor its application,

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first to the overall situation and second to the target populations. As with a marketing campaign, the change leaders should segment the various stakeholders into groups sharing specific attitudes toward the initiative. They should leverage their insights into these segments to develop customized implementation plans. Furthermore, they should craft individualized plans designed to win over the key players in each segment, such as the top executives, local managers and opinion leaders.

Commitment Building Activities

Commitment to change is built over time, through a series of activities performed during the entire implementation. The sample below links activities and strategies.

Persuasion Strategy: making the case for the change (for more on this, please refer to the Abyss & Lighthouse concept described in our article titled "From the Abyss to the Lighthouse – The Six Fundamental Principles of Effective Change Execution"); explaining why the status-quo cannot be sustained; producing tangible arguments; involving the target population in defining the vision and developing the plans to make it a reality; providing incentives to change.

Seduction Strategy: articulating the need for change in terms (often intangible) that resonate with the interests, values and beliefs of the target population. For example, in an organization with a strong customer service culture, by stressing how the change will enable employees to better serve their clients.

Confidence-Building Strategy: ensuring the project is led by talented and respected people; communicating the implementation plans and how they were developed; designing a program

of change aiming at generating "quick wins"; running pilot projects.

Training Strategy: providing effective training and tools to ensure the workforce is fully equipped to succeed in the new environment.

Coercion or Try-Out Strategy: forcing people to change through the use of power and punishments; or making a deal along the line: "instead of arguing, let's try it for a while and then we'll talk about it".

Conclusion

Building lasting commitment to change is a multi-dimensional undertaking that requires a multi-pronged approach. We recommend you leverage the pyramidal model to think through the challenge; craft customized plans; and monitor change internalization.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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