

Managing Organizational Change

Process, Social Construction and
Dialogue

Second Edition

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UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE CHANGE AGENT

Let us keep in mind that effective change does not happen spontaneously. Effective change requires a change program that is coordinated by a change agent (or a change team) that is responsible for planning and sustaining the change effort.

Our **objective** in this chapter is to explore the role of such a change agent/team and to examine the skills required for success in this role.

Learning objectives

By the time you have completed your study of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define agency and the role of a change agent (or a change team).
- Distinguish between external and internal change agents.
- Explain the connections between agency and structure.
- Describe connections between agency and change leadership.
- Highlight the importance of communication in effecting agency.
- Distinguish between monologic and dialogic agency.
- Discuss the consultant–client relationship.
- Highlight the role of power and politics applied to change.

Let's start by defining the term 'agency' ...

The term 'agency' basically refers to the activities of a person (or group of persons) that are directed towards getting something accomplished.

In terms of leading and/or managing change, the term 'agency' (or 'change agency') therefore refers to the activities by which change is accomplished.

Let's define the notion of a change agent ...

A change agent is a person willing to help others to understand and act upon the environment.

The word 'agent' comes from the present participle ("the one doing"). Here we have a sense of to "do", to "accomplish", or to "make".

A change agent is a person who initiates, stimulates, or facilitates a change programme.

Schein (1988: 1) sees agency as a philosophy of 'how to be helpful' [emphasis added].

Now, what are your thoughts on Schein's definition?

Being 'helpful' ...

The notion of being 'helpful' is important in understanding change agency because it emphasizes the significance of getting people to reflect on their own role in effecting change. It emphasizes the idea that agency achieves its meaning through a process of 'helping', namely that of *co-being* with the other.

There is also the importance of openness to new ideas. Being open to listening to employees ideas, rather than prescribing a method of change, can lead to a more effective change effort. Being close to people and the site where change is unfolding, a change agent can often have a much more involved understanding of the views of 'others' and what works and doesn't work.

An agent might come from within the organization or be external to it. A change agent does not have to be formally charged with the responsibility of effecting change. A person can act as a change agent without knowing that they are actually doing so; for example, even without seeking to effect change in any direct way, a person with awareness and ability (having the touch of a change master's hand) can greatly facilitate such change simply by making organizational life more meaningful.

Defining the role of an internal change agent

An internal change agent is a member of an organization who is charged with the responsibility of facilitating change. Such an internal change agent might be a board member, a senior executive, or any other person in the organization's workforce.

An internal change agent must have sufficient knowledge of the organization to be in a position to provide meaningful advice.

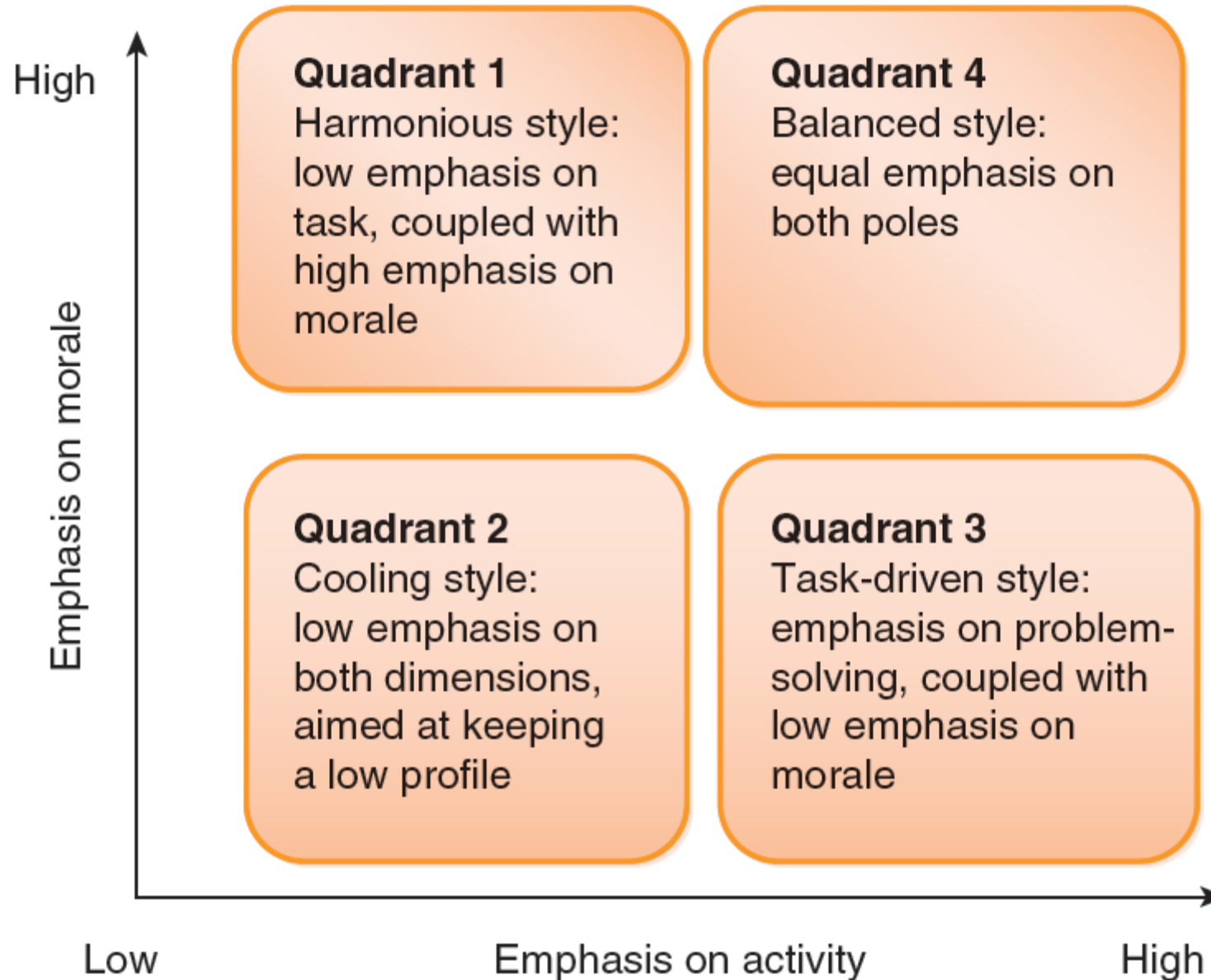
The agent must also have a commitment to the change process and an ability to communicate, discuss and resolve issues. It is also beneficial if internal change agents have sufficient managerial authority to enable them to make decisions on the change process.

Examples of tasks that might be required of an external consultant:

- sowing the seeds for the growth of special capabilities;
- accessing special areas of expertise;
- advising on leading-edge technologies;
- advising on sustainability and diversity;
- analysing how strategy and structure might be aligned;
- reviewing a major undertaking or plans for action.

Defining the role of an external change agent

An external change agent is a person (or a small group of people) brought in from outside the organization to facilitate change or organizational development. Because such external agents are usually specialists in effecting change, they are commonly referred to as 'consultants'.



Modes of Agency

Most standard treatments of agency concentrate on the change agents themselves, their skills and styles.

Little is done to emphasize a mode of agency where the emphasis is placed on speaking with rather than speaking to.

Modes of agency

'speaking to' versus 'speaking with'

Following on from our discussion of the differences between monologic and dialogic communication (see Chapter 2), a monologic agency is driven by a singular treatment (using one channel – *speaking to*) that pushes for a dominant (authoritative) view depicting how change should proceed. It relies on cliques for legitimating change as an objective system. In sum, it suppresses the knowledge of different things or courses of action.

A dialogic agency (*speaking with*) aims at enabling people in an attempt to allow for the change to include varying viewpoints. It relies on rolling out multiple sources of experiences. It capitalizes on the polyphony (multiplicity) of voices and representations achieved. In sum, it flourishes by not declaring *itself* to be the final word.

Agency and organizational politics

Examples of situations that politicize and bring issues of interest into the role of the change agent include:

- proposed restructuring;
- changes in organizational goals;
- proposals for outsourcing;
- managerial appointments and succession;
- performance appraisal;
- selection of personnel;
- redesign of jobs;
- choice of criteria for multiskilling;
- feedback involving sensitive interpersonal issues.