

Changefirst



A GUIDE TO ADAPTIVE CHANGE LEADERSHIP IN DISRUPTIVE TIMES

Why your leadership style matters more than
ever right now

Why we believe adaptive Change Leadership really matters right now

The importance of effective Change Leadership has always been central to delivering effective organizational change. But the need for a more adaptive approach to leading change, that is best suited to the current highly disrupted social and business environment, is more critical than ever.

In this eBook we explore the topic in detail including exploring:

- **4 key areas of focus** for adaptive Change Leadership amidst the disruption
- ways leaders can **strengthen change resilience** in challenging times
- **key personal competencies** of adaptive Change Leaders
- **5 key building blocks** of effective, adaptive Change Leadership

It is a bi-product of our research, observations and work with organizations towards a deeper, but practical understanding of what adaptive Change Leadership really looks like.

We hope you find it helpful.



Audra Proctor
CEO, Changefirst

4 key areas of focus for adaptive Change Leadership amidst the disruption

The current high levels of disruption are challenging Change Leaders like never before. Both in terms of their personal ability to deal with what seems like a constant tsunami of change and also their ability to steer an effective course for their organization at time when many of the norms associated with this have evaporated.

In this eBook we plan to consider what Change Leaders can do to successfully navigate these exceptional times. And in this initial section we are going to **consider 4 key areas of focus right now**.



But it strikes us that there are two elements to the equation.

Firstly, there is how Change Leaders need **to “be”** to enable them to lead change effectively at this time. Which is distinct from what they need **to “do”** to be effective.

And we take a look at each in turn in this first section.

How Change Leaders need to “be” in disruptive times

Disruptive times require a disruptive leadership mindset.

During the current chaos all types of things have been thrown up in the air for Change Leaders from knowledge & understanding, to methods of observation and data-gathering. To processes and structure. And even the underlying stability of the organizations they support.

The current situation calls for a certain type of Change Leader. One that isn't frozen or overwhelmed by the situation. One that isn't hesitant or unsure to set direction in the midst of the chaos. One that is open to change, continuing to create opportunities that allow their organization to adjust and pivot quickly in disruptive times. But also one that:

- **focuses on the things that really matter** including establishing and managing a new rhythm of work on change initiatives and projects
- has **credible Change Management data, transparency and knows the ‘right’ questions** to ask in order to refocus the team around what is really important
- can **rapidly and flexibly create new frameworks, tools and change networks** to continue to get work done and take decisions forward. As McKinsey point out in times of extreme crisis – like the current pandemic – [existing operating models typically fail](#) and leaders need to quickly establish more agile working practices to see the organization through turbulent times
- is **able to skilfully balance being well-informed and realistic** about the actions that need to be taken

In this type of environment Change Leaders are going to “be” the type of people who thrive on confusion and ambiguity. They need to “be” highly resilient and able to identify and develop resilience in other key leaders. And be able to plot a course out of the chaos that employees in the organization can align behind.

This type of mindset is a cornerstone of adaptive, agile Change Leadership. A topic we will return to later on.

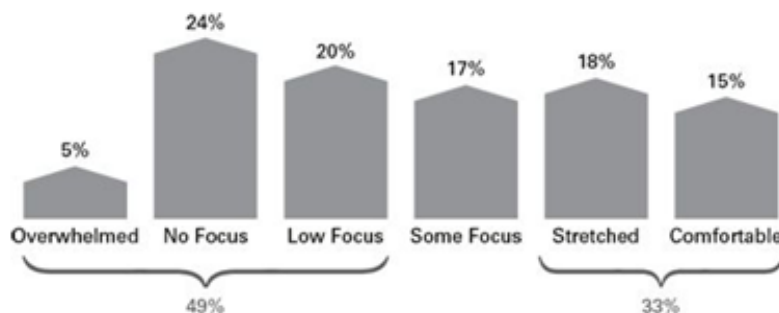
4 things you can “do” to be more adaptive as a Change leader

So, we outlined how Change leaders need to “be” right now. But what can you actually “do” to be effective at Leading Change?

We think there are **4 areas of focus** as follows:

1. Prioritize demand to release capacity for the things that matter most

Perpetual loading has always been a challenge for organizations. It refers to the situation where Change Leaders, rather than effectively assess and prioritize the change load faced by people in their organizations, simply operate as though there is an unlimited supply of energy and good will to “get change done”.

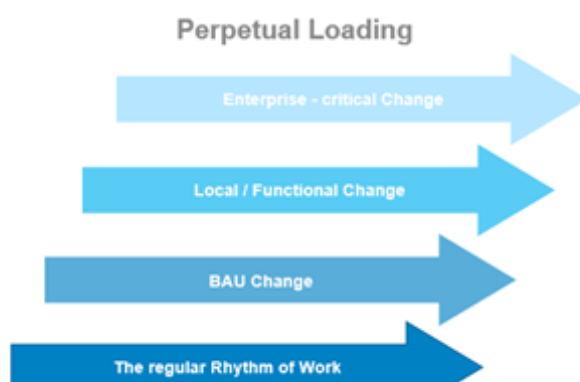


Source: Change Demand Assessment, Changefirst

Even pre-COVID this was a major issue for Leaders with our own Change Demand Assessment consistently indicating that almost half (49%) of employees felt that their organization was already overloaded by change and lacked the focus to get business critical changes implemented.

But the sheer level of disruption we face today is throwing the regular rhythm of work & BAU into disarray. As well as quickly depleting the capacity needed for business critical and survival type changes. As the organization struggles to identify the best way forward.

The challenge for Change Leaders is to put in place the effective mechanisms and collect the type of data that enables effective change delivery across the organization.



2. Replenish resilience in key employees to meet the challenges ahead

We have always strongly believed that resilient organizations need highly resilient people to be effective. And, in fact, [Forbes recognize resilience as one of the essential leadership skills](#) everyone should develop to better navigate change.

The implication for Change Leaders – something that is brought into even sharper focus at times of high disruption like right now – is that they need to take a structured approach to developing and [replenishing the resilience of key individuals](#) in the organization who are tasked with leading change. This applies to not only themselves but also other business leaders and high performing individuals that are going to be the engine for the organization in highly disruptive times.

Resilient leaders are not immune to the impact of disruption. However, by specifically focusing on developing their resilience levels it is possible to help them become more adaptable, open to learning and willing to engage in new ways of working. Which means they can rebound faster and adopt new attitudes to change that deliver better outcomes.

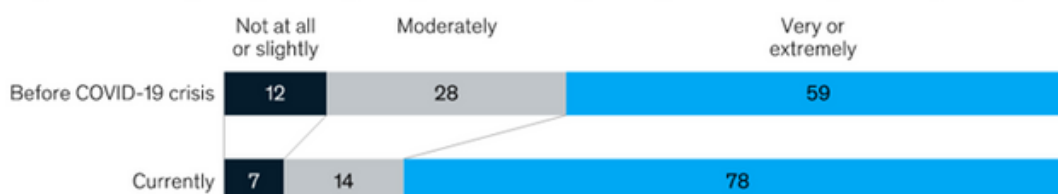
3. Adopt new frameworks, methods and tools to manage more effectively

The past 12 months has been one of the most challenging ever for Change Leaders and their teams. In terms of how they communicate, collaborate and deliver change initiatives.

However, research by McKinsey points to the fact that [building capability to lead organizations out of the pandemic is actually more important now than before](#) the COVID-19 crisis began.

Capability building is much more important now than before the COVID-19 crisis began.

Importance of capability building to organizations' long-term growth,¹ % of respondents (n = 868)



Note: Figures do not sum to 100%, because of rounding.

¹Question was asked only of respondents in leadership roles (eg, C-level executives; senior managers; and department, division, and/or business-unit heads) in their organizations.

Source: McKinsey

The challenge for Change Leaders in what continues to be a disrupted environment is that the nature of those capabilities has changed dramatically. And there is a pressing need to adopt new change frameworks, methods, best practices and tools that quickly bring back structure, flexibility and focus for Change Management teams. Ones that:

- **ensure the right questions are asked** around change capacity, commitment, resistance and legacy
- enables **the right opportunities to be identified and delivered** out of a portfolio of change choices
- allows the broad spectrum of change risks associated with organization-wide change initiatives **to be fully understood, assessed and tracked**
- **provides openness, transparency and accountability to be restored** in Change Management reporting across the organization

4. Match your Change Leadership style to the current level of disruption

There have been a huge number of contributions to the analysis of particular leadership styles but in our work we typically see them fall into 4 categories:

- **Rational leadership** – heavily driven by data, business cases and the more formal aspects of change delivery
- **Symbolic** – much more focused on communication of what needs to be done, heavily invested in symbolism and leading the change
- **Specialist** – believe change is about people and enlist the help of change specialists in departments like HR to help them lead the organizational change needed
- **Adaptive** – require an understanding of the whole system of change that will impact on people and organizational performance

In what is a highly disrupted environment we believe strongly that adaptive Leadership becomes key including the ability to effectively assess change demand, both at an individual and organizational level. And to create the most effective network to drive transformation, to rally people to the cause, to get skills and tools to where they are most needed and make change everyone's business.

5 ways leaders can strengthen change resilience in challenging times

At Changefirst we have collectively lived through some truly exceptional times.

However, we are all agreed on one thing right now. Nothing prepared us for the impact of the pandemic which is affecting both us and our clients in an unprecedented way. Across the board we are being pushed out of our respective comfort zones and having to adapt the way we work on an almost daily basis.



And that is testing us all in terms of both our personal resilience. And the collective resilience of the business as a whole.

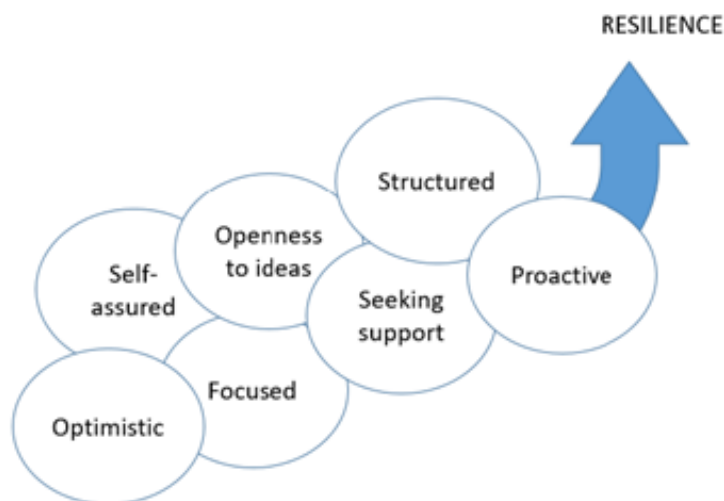
So what **can leaders practically do to develop and build the resilience** of themselves and their teams right now?

The importance of personal resilience right now

In [a recent blog in this series](#), we started to explore the mindset and focus that leaders need to remain effective – as strategic thinkers, motivators and role-models - at what is a highly disrupted time for all organizations. If leaders are to step out with courage, and act with conviction, then there needs to be a structured way to recalibrate chaotic and disruptive situations to make it happen. And developing the resilience of both leaders -and their teams - in a formal way is key to enabling this.

Part of what makes us resilient is probably innate, but people can clearly learn to be more resilient from experiences and education. In fact [as HBR point out](#), the most resilient individuals and teams aren't the ones that don't fail, but rather the ones that fail, learn and thrive because of it.

In our dynamic [Executive Leadership Bootcamp](#) we explore leader resilience – using 7, practically identifiable individual characteristics that need to come together to create a realistic optimism – that ensures that leaders see not just threats, but opportunities in chaos. And a way clear for realistic actions to be taken that move the organization forward as it continues to adapt to the disruption.



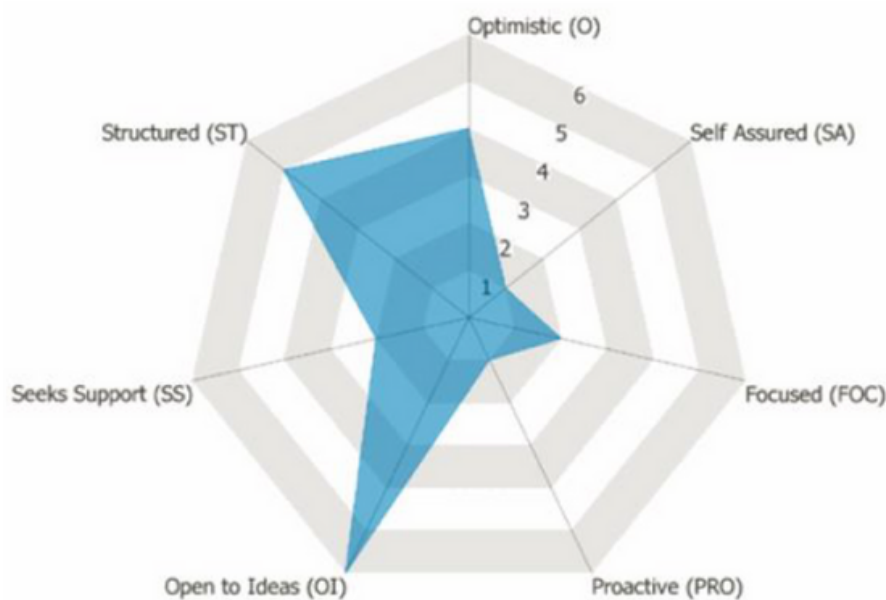
Source: Changefirst

Not all 7 characteristics are needed for all situations. However, the more flexible leaders become at using each of them. The more they understand and can recognize over-use and under-use of the characteristics in specific situations. And the more adaptability they are able to bring to disruptive situations and the more likely they are to boost their resilience.

And as leaders begin to understand how to manage their own resilience levels, the better placed they are to recognize and address the characteristics they see in others.

Tapping into the Personal Adaptability Inventory (PAI®)

During the Leadership Bootcamp we work with our own proprietary profiling instrument - the **Personal Adaptability Inventory (PAI®)** - which enables leaders to proactively self-assess their behaviors in relation to the 7 key resilience characteristics and how they draw on those at times of high pressure and disruption.



So, assessing and developing leadership and team-based resilience is a priority for organizations. But how do you take a more comprehensive approach to this?

We think there are **5 key areas of focus** as follows.

1. Hire resilient people for key change roles

Hire resilient people and place them in key change roles up, down and across the organization. To promote fast, effective adaptation to the disruption that major change brings.

In addition to the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to perform core job activities organizations are factoring resilient characteristics - people's ability to thrive and survive during times of disruption - into their assessment centres, recruitment and selection processes.

2. Ensure that leaders know how to model resilience

Leading by example is one of the most powerful forces for changes in an organization. Leaders being conscious about their own resilience (demonstrating how things should be done and making their own development process visible to others) allow them to model the process of growth and learning.

This is an important role as they interact with their teams and build a followership during major organizational change.

3. Build a culture to support resilience with training, coaching and reinforcement

It is vital when building this supportive culture that there are systems and processes that:

- **place high value** on people's adaptability
- provide the training, coaching and reinforcement to **strengthen people's adaptability levels** to their full potential
- **reward positive responses** to adversity
- **collect and share stories of resilience** to facilitate organizational learning and development

4. Actively manage the change load on the organization

By sharpening the way planned change is delivered.

Resilient organizations are constantly and proactively scanning the environment, assessing change demand and reviewing priorities to ensure that there is capacity in reserve to deliver business critical initiatives.

Ensuring that levels of resilience are not severely depleted by change overload.

5. Encourage people to step out and take risks

People need to know it is ok to employ new behaviors and tools that will increase their overall resilience. An organization can discourage risk-taking when it makes it difficult for people to try out new behaviors - by measuring performance too soon. And punishing failures rather than using them as platforms for learning. This leads people to be cautious and certainly not open to ideas.

So [encouraging a culture of intelligent risk taking](#) that leads to sustained innovation.

Resilience and personal adaptability is not a panacea - and needs to be developed in conjunction with broader change capability building activity. But an organization with resilient people - as well as systems, processes and accessible learning - is an organization that can be more agile and proactive in its approach.

And a proactive organization is better able to adapt to meet the changing needs of its market - which becomes even more essential in times of high disruption.

4 key personal competencies of Adaptive Change Leaders

As high levels of disruption continue to provide challenges for the way that change is planned, implemented and assessed in organizations, Change Leaders are having to call on all of their experience and capabilities to continue to lead through change.

Adaptive Change Leaders have a style that is particularly well suited to operating right now. So, what are the competencies that are helping them to successfully navigate what are fairly turbulent times?



We believe there are **4 essential competencies** that adaptive Leaders need to have or develop. And we take a closer look at them in this section.

In our experience, adaptive Change leaders:

1. Are capable of creating and effective context for change and transformation

This is one of the key roles of change leaders.

Unfortunately, [as Forbes point out](#) it is also one of the first casualties when there are times of extreme upheaval. As leaders sacrifice the need for vision and replace it with more pragmatic and experimental approaches to setting direction.

However, adaptive change leaders recognize the importance of setting a course – even in times of great change and uncertainty - and also of creating context around change that employees can operate in. They also understand that there are two key aspects to this that both need to be in place to create an environment for successful change – namely vision and imperative for change:

- **Vision** – is about **defining and communicating what change can achieve** for the organization and providing a positive and clear picture of the intended outcomes of change
- **Imperative for change** – is much more about **why things need to change and why the future needs to be different both for individuals and the organization**, and why retaining the status quo isn't a realistic option. What we tend to find in the data in our research with clients is that leaders tend to underplay the imperative element in change which is problematic – as lack of a clear imperative poses one of the biggest risks to successful change

By clearly defining both of these, adaptive Change Leaders quickly help people to understand the change needed in context. And also get on board with it, because they have a clear understanding of why the company needs to make change at a broad level, for example, to stay competitive and continue to develop as a business. As a result, they are much more likely to get behind any projects or initiatives that are linked directly to it by leaders. And pre-disposed to tailor their efforts and commitment to support what they see as a common goal.

Done properly it also ensures that individuals are not confused by conflicting directions and initiatives that [can seriously test their resilience](#) – particularly at times of enormous change.

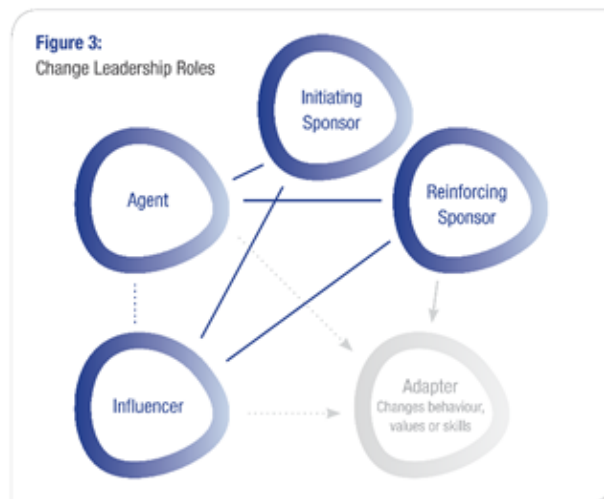
2. Can energize Change Leadership at different levels in the organization

Leadership happens best as a cohesive network where individuals bring different elements of power – for example organizational, project expertise and political power – to ensure that change is able to cascade effectively throughout the organization.

This becomes increasingly important when there is a need to lead through change and teams are disparate and working remotely as many are right now.

It is a topic that we will return to later, but adaptive Change Leaders recognize that - while setting direction for change at the top is a key determinant of change success - Change Leadership happens at a range of different levels in the organization and involves a number of different roles including:

- **Initiating sponsors** – typically have accountability at an executive level for the change and are tasked with authorizing, driving and reinforcing the change
- **Change agents** – have a pivotal role, not only do they need to be effective change leaders themselves but they need to help the initiating sponsor identify and develop a network of sponsors to drive the change
- **Reinforcing sponsors** – in many changes success is heavily dependent on middle and front line managers being effectively prepared to lead change in their local areas – to drive local deployment plans and to try to engage and support their teams through the change
- **Influencers** – lack formal authority in the change process but can use informal influence to provide additional legitimacy and support for the change. In fact, in his book [the Tipping point](#), Malcolm Gladwell explains that change stands a much higher chance of being adopted if informal opinion makers in the organization support it. So, it is crucial that Change Agents can identify advocates, connectors, controllers and experts who can be recruited to help deliver change



Adaptive leaders recognize the importance of energizing Change Leaders across this network and focus heavily on this.

3. Have the vision to develop adaptive change capacity in the organization

In fact, they see this as their own personal responsibility and are focused on recruiting and developing fellow leaders at all levels who are 'change ready'.

Adaptive Change Leaders are laser focused on embedding adaptive change capacity in the DNA of the organization. By finding and developing the type of fellow leaders that are going to lead through change and thrive rather than flounder during times of disruption.

In practice, this will typically take a range of different forms including:

- **Recruitment** – tasking recruiters with integrating profiling techniques with prospective candidates that allow the identification of specific characteristics that align with a ‘change ready’ outlook
- **Development** – offering and [embedding programs that help build leader resilience](#) into talent management programs

Their objective is to ensure that the organization has the building blocks and capability in place to enable widespread change across the organization.

4. Ensure fellow leaders have the tools to deliver change during disruption

One of the key challenges of the last 12 months or so has been the pressure that has been placed on existing Change Management processes and approaches.

What worked prior to the pandemic doesn’t necessarily work right now - for a whole host of reasons from the increase in teams working remotely, to travel restrictions and restricted access to corporate offices the world over.

A key question for adaptive change leaders in this scenario is – “do my key leaders have the Change Management tools they need to be successful and support me in delivering major change amidst all of the disruption?”

Our work with clients is telling us the answer they are increasingly getting is “no” – and many of them have moved to the fix the problem quickly with a focus on a number of key areas as follows:

- **Using assessment tools to gather change data remotely and in real-time** – at a time when getting Change Management “boots on the ground” gathering data on the impact of change has been challenging but the ability to gather and assess data remotely is key



- **Increasing digital collaboration on change initiatives** – at a time when getting Change Management “boots on the ground” gathering data on the impact of change has been challenging but the ability to gather and assess data remotely is key



- **Boosting skills through virtual learning programs** – for key team members including change specialists and change leaders with virtual delivery replacing face-to-face delivery and workshop training

5 key building blocks of effective, adaptive Change Leadership

Delivering successfully as a leader on your change agenda right now is challenging. Against a backdrop that combines unprecedented personal and organizational change.

So how do you set yourself and your team up for success?



We think there are **5 building blocks** you should focus on right now. And we explore them more as we go through this section.

These are the **5 building blocks** adaptive Change Leaders should focus on right now:

1. Take an adaptive, systems view on change

The current environment calls for a leadership style that is adaptive – and by that we mean one that requires an understanding of the whole system of change that will impact people and their performance.

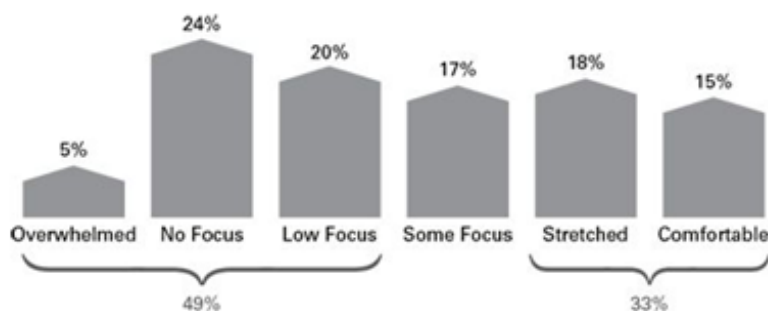
Central to this style of managing change is the belief that change success is not only determined by the ability to manage resistance to change, but also the ability to effectively balance people's capacity for change with the aggregate demands that are placed on them. By multiple projects and initiatives in the organization.

Adaptive leaders ensure that people change planning [becomes embedded in wider organizational planning processes](#). And, just as importantly, become actively involved in developing and agreeing the change plan. Actively devoting their time and energy to supporting it, as well as tailoring it to different groups affected by the change. It is also important to this type of leader that measures of success take account of change legacy and adaptability levels that affect how people are able to contribute to future changes.

2. Manage the change load into your teams

People's capacity for change is not finite. But their ability to commit to projects and initiatives is.

And simply continuing to add new projects and programs into the mix without assessing the potential people impact it can have on delivery is a recipe for disaster. Even before COVID-19 our Change Demand Assessment tool consistently indicated there was an issue here, with almost half (49%) of employees indicating that their organization was already overloaded by change and lacked the focus to get business critical changes implemented. As a result of perpetual change loading.

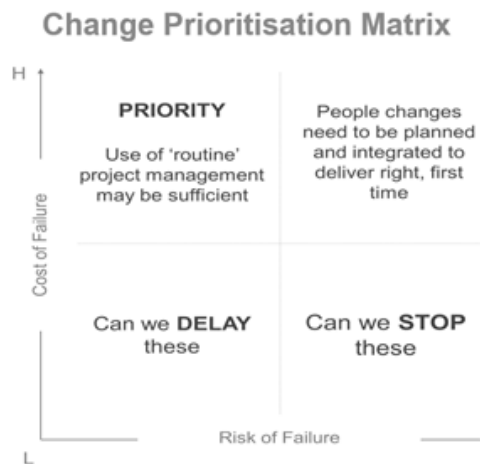


Source: Changefirst, Change Demand Assessment

But the sheer level of disruption we face today is throwing the regular rhythm of work & BAU into disarray. As well as quickly depleting the capacity needed for business critical and survival type changes as the organization struggles to identify the best way forward.

More than ever, it is crucial to your change leadership success that you recognize the importance of managing this demand effectively.

In a structured, data-driven approach to change prioritization that balances both the needs of the business and peoples' capacity to deliver against it.



Source: Changefirst, Change Prioritisation Matrix

3. Create the network that becomes the engine for change

This is one of the key roles of change leaders - creating the coalition or network of fellow leaders that will help you deliver on your change promises.

The network itself is likely to consist of individuals in a number of roles including Change Agents, Reinforcing Sponsors and Informal Influencers that bring different elements of organizational power, influence and expertise to your project or initiative.

Key to your success is getting this network working in a cohesive way so that - as direction for change is set at a strategic level - it can move into action to ensure that change is delivered effectively at all levels right across the organization.

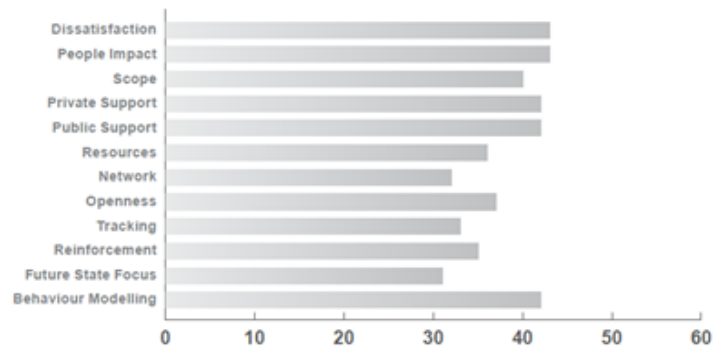
Critical Success Factor 2 – Effective Change Leadership - in our [PCI® \(People Centred Implementation\) methodology](#) enables you to take a structured and data driven approach to identifying and assessing your change network by:

- **Establishing the network of** key relationships that need to be nurtured, maintained and developed to support your change initiatives. By getting all key stakeholders working in a networked fashion you can ensure that communication is clear and consistent, change decisions are reinforced at all levels and, crucially, there is active role-modelling by change leaders to support and drive change forward.



Source: Changefirst, Part of Change Network Mapping process

- **Evaluating the performance of key stakeholders** using digital assessments – like the Sponsor Assessment tool - that can identify any gaps in commitment, presence and active support for change in your sponsor network.



Source: Changefirst, Sponsor Assessment tool

4. Build effective Change Leadership capacity and skills

In disruptive times every step is the first step.

And for many Changefirst clients first steps are small, "sure starts" based around proven, industry recognized thinking and 25 years' plus field and academic research. But evolved to be fully fit for today's environment with new and urgent requirement for scale, digital delivery, transferability and role-relevance.

Our dynamic one-day [Executive Leader Boot-camp](#) focuses on developing Change Management as a Leadership competency for:

- **Senior Executives** – continuing to drive transformation and capability building to deliver that transformation in a disrupted environment
- **Business Leaders** - enabling them to deliver change, alongside having to manage daily business, pivot on local projects and tailoring transformation plans for local deployment

And this is reinforced in the context of the Change Network outlined above with role specific training for [Change Agents](#), [Managers](#) and [individual employees](#). To ensure a cohesive approach to delivering change across the organization.



5. Equip fellow Change Leaders with the tools they need for success

Finally, you need to give your fellow Change Leaders a number of key tools that are a pre-requisite for success including:

- **Tools: to help build personal and organizational resilience**

In times of high disruption like now leaders need to find a way to recalibrate chaotic and disruptive situations. To ensure that they are able to step out with courage and act with conviction.

[Developing resilience](#) is key to this process.

At Changefirst, we see this as a key element of developing an adaptive Change Leadership approach.

And we use our own PAI® (Personal Adaptability Inventory) methodology to enable leaders to assess both themselves and their teams using 7 practically identifiable individual characteristics of resilient people – built from our own client implementation experiences.



- **Tools: to help build personal and organizational resilience**



The combination of the sheer pace and volume of change right now – and the impact of social distancing plus the increasing prevalence of remote working – means that you need to rethink your approach and turn your change planning model on its head.

The answer is to give your teams access to digital Change Management platforms – like [our own Roadmap Pro®](#) - that not only enables them to plan, implement and track change initiatives in real-time. But can also help you quickly align your Change Management activities with project and program activity in a highly agile way.

- **Tools: to assess and mitigate risk**

In an environment where getting Change Management “boots on the ground” is increasingly challenging and sporadic in nature having a Change Management toolkit that enables you to quickly gather, assess and benchmark data is essential to aid decision-making.

In a number of key areas including:

- Change Demand Assessment
- Organizational Capacity Assessment
- Adapter Readiness Assessment
- Change Agent Assessment
- Change Impact Assessment
- Communications Effectiveness Assessment
- Initiative Legacy Assessment
- Initiative Risk Assessment
- Resistance Behaviour Assessment
- Resistance Reasons Assessment
- Sponsor Assessment



Talk to us

Interested in building effective Change Leadership in your organization?

Then **contact us** for an informal, no obligation discussion on how we can apply our globally recognized PCI® (People Centred Implementation) methodology, digital tools and role-based learning to quickly have an impact on your organization.

About Changefirst

Since 1995, we have been enabling private and public sector organisations globally with the skills, tools and process know-how to become more Change capable. To enable them to plan and execute sustainable Change – and to do so quickly and cost-effectively. In a people-centred way.

Our research-based, proprietary methods and tools, together with an innovative use of digital technology allows us to scale and get capability to where it is most needed. Either 'off-the-shelf' or with quick configuration for a closer fit.

We are the home of:

- **PCI® (People-Centred Implementation)** - recognised as one of three Change Management methodologies most used globally by practitioners, leaders and their teams.
- **Roadmap Pro®** - a leading digital Change Management toolkit. The first, best-of-breed digital application to provide on-demand learning, a suite of assessment tools and project planning capability. All in one place and available 24/7 in the Cloud.
- **PAI™ (Personal Adaptability Inventory)** - our psychometric and development system providing a structured way to build resilient, adaptable leaders and teams. To ensure they can survive and even thrive during disruption.

Who we work with

FTSE 500 companies, medium-sized Consultancy Firms and Technology Companies are all benefiting from our methodology and digital platform. Enabling them to build productivity into their teams and drive-up user adoption of technologies, structures and processes.

Global delivery, local expertise

We deliver our solutions globally across EMEA, the Americas and ASIA-PAC through a network of selected strategic partnerships. This includes Change Synergy (AU/NZ), Dextera (South America), Transformation Life Solutions (Caribbean) and a special association with the Pan-African Leadership Institute (Africa).



[CONTACT US](#)