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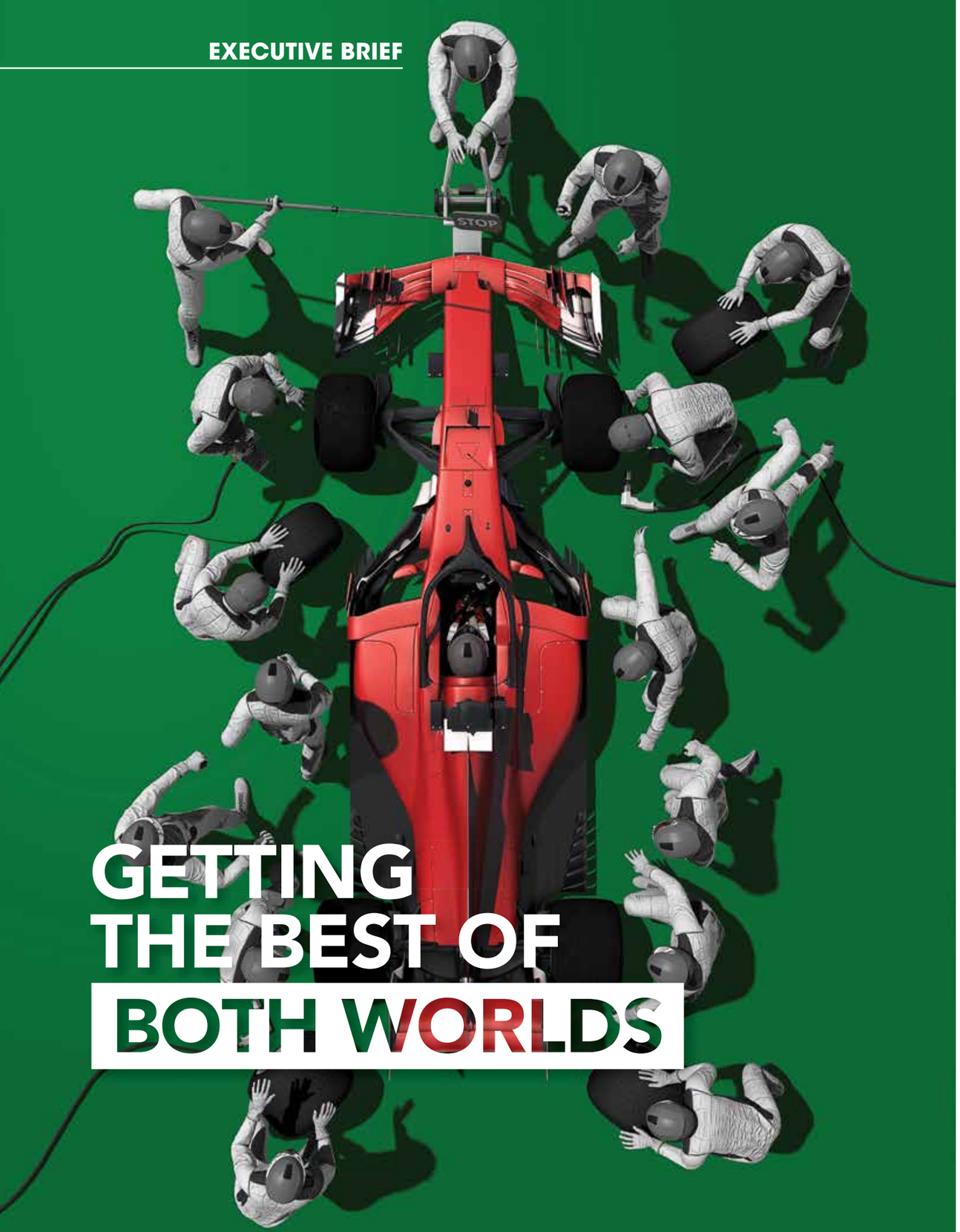

GETTING THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Pair a technical expert with a generalist for successful change management.

By Steven Burton and Janice Wong

Organisations globally are experiencing an accelerated pace of change, driven by a combination of digital disruption and future-of-work pressure, and further intensified by the dynamics associated with the drawn-out Covid-19 pandemic. The situation is leading to the fast-tracking of digital transformation efforts, the formation of new sets of rules and structures for the future-of-work reality, and perhaps even new business models.

Confronting this urgent need for change is the fact that large-scale organisational change efforts historically fail at roughly twice the rate that they succeed.[1] This presents a rather gloomy outlook and a formidable obstacle to executives fighting for the future of their business. It is therefore imperative for business leaders to look beyond generally accepted change processes, and focus on executives within their firms who can be tasked with detailed-level strategic planning and the implementation of these initiatives. A possible reflex response to this may be to rely heavily on technology or technical experts to deliver the goods. However, we argue that this approach may be unwise since it may bring about unintended or even adverse outcomes.

Leading enterprise-wide change: Who is better?

We introduce a working framework to organise our thinking around leading enterprise-wide change. In addition to intrinsic motivation, there are three capabilities consequential to managing large-scale organisational change, namely technical, operational, and organisational capabilities. We argue that while having an inherent desire to deal with the complexities of an extensive change effort is necessary, it is not sufficient to ensure success. Change leaders also need to demonstrate their ability to execute the wide range of tasks involved.

Technical capabilities are a necessary component. In the case of digital transformation, for example, change leaders would require a high level of digital technology understanding. Change leaders need to have *operational* capabilities, such as adjusting how work is done, and appreciating which processes need to be developed, removed, or updated. This component would need change leaders to have adequate system-level operational skills to facilitate the smooth transition from current to revised operating norms. Finally, and most importantly, the success of change initiatives relies on individuals, and by extension, organisations. Successful change leaders must have well-developed *organisational* capabilities, ranging from sufficient knowledge of the organisation's structure and culture to the requisite communications and political mastery to manage resistance. They need to have the ability to harness what is needed in the organisation to implement properly the new ways of working.

We zero in on one key characteristic of change leaders, and ask: who are likely to be more successful in leading organisation-wide change efforts–experts or generalists? By generalists, we refer to business managers who have accumulated experience and knowledge over a broader range of positions not specific to a specialised domain (e.g., information technology [IT], engineering operations, or supply chain management). In other words, these managers are not the technical experts in the area they are leading. An example would be a finance-trained leader who has led non-finance departments and is now running the technical division of an engineering company. Conversely, an expert leader would be someone who is technically trained and

proficient, has led specialised units, and built his or her career within a specific domain.

From our experience and research (refer to Box 1), we have seen that in many cases, existing technical leaders are tasked with planning and delivering the change and transformation initiatives set out by senior executives, with limited regard for their intrinsic motivation to deliver.

RESEARCH ON CHANGE LEADERS

The research project compared core area technical experts to generalists as change leaders in non-core areas of their firm. Tenure-track faculty (experts) and non-faculty administrative staff (generalists) from mid- and large-sized higher education institutions were surveyed regarding their change attributes. The surveys focused on change in the education domains of their institutes, rather than the research areas. The study sought to conclude whether differences existed between these two groups when they lead non-core-area (education) changes in four areas: recognition of the need for change, motivation to lead change, perception of skills needed to lead change, and perception of empowerment to lead change.

BOX 1

Source: Steven Burton, "An Exploratory Comparative Study of Experts and Generalists as Change Management Leaders in Non-Core Areas of Organizations", Singapore Management University, 2018

It is common to see a senior IT manager being put in charge of enterprise-level digital transformation, or key human resource (HR) managers tasked to lead enterprise-level future-of-work transformation. This arrangement is not ideal because we found that experts highly preferred tasks associated with their technical domain. Additionally, when placed in leadership positions, experts reported that they were more than twice as likely to prefer reverting to their technical roles to remaining in leadership positions. Generalists however were found to prefer leading change initiatives at the same or higher levels of intensity, compared to that of their other responsibilities.[2] In a nutshell, experts, while ideal for strictly technical change initiatives, may find it challenging to transfer or project their experience to enterprise-wide change efforts that will demand their willingness to build and be comfortable with cross-functional and multi-disciplinary teams.

Furthermore, even though both experts and generalists may have the organisational capabilities to lead change initiatives, there is a critical distinction between them. Experts demonstrated strength when communicating about and dealing with technical matters in the midst of their expert colleagues.[3] Their comfort in expert-matter communications would also be expected to influence or perhaps dominate their interactions with non-expert stakeholders. Generalists, on the other hand, with their broader multifunctional background, would be expected to have the experience and knowledge to exhibit wider organisational capabilities in influencing, communicating and advancing a change initiative throughout the many functional and organisational areas that would be impacted. With large-scale change initiatives impacting an extensive range of functions and departments within an organisation, success relies upon a leader's ability to effectively coordinate, motivate, and influence across the impacted areas. The comfort, willingness, and effectiveness in engaging and mediating across the organisation is critical. Certainly, there would be instances of experts intrinsically motivated to lead change, or generalists with sufficient technical skills. We argue that they are, however, the exception, not the norm.

Our discussion thus far suggests that experts often face difficulty seeing change-related implications broadly or in the longer term when these fall outside their area of expertise. Like Abraham Maslow's adage: "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail", expert change leaders have a preoccupation with technical issues. There is therefore a likelihood that the resultant 'expert myopia' may derail organisational change initiatives.

We believe this issue of 'expert myopia' may become increasingly salient when organisations embark on digital transformation and future-of-work job redesign, among many other large-scale change efforts launched to deal with disruptions caused and exacerbated by the pandemic. The reflex to rely solely on technical experts to lead such enterprise-wide initiatives may not bring about the intended transformation. We provide a vignette below of how an enterprise-wide digital transformation project at an Asia-based service organisation that relied heavily on expert leadership for its envisioning and execution did not succeed.

'Expert myopia' thwarting technology-led digital transformation

The firm was a small to mid-sized organisation, approximately 500-strong, that developed and delivered customised human capital training and development programmes globally. It was a relatively young organisation, which had devoted its energy and resources to building and delivering core service offerings. Technological and operational matters had received less attention, and this was beginning to affect its competitiveness and ability to grow.

At the outset, there was a consensus among the executive leadership that substantive technology, automation, and compatibility upgrades were needed throughout the organisation. However, the firm's chief executive had relied almost exclusively on technology experts to lead the design of the transformation. Under the experts' leadership, vision-setting focused heavily on an idealised technological future and new capabilities the technology could generate. As a result, minimal consideration was given to other factors like process updates, stakeholder impacts, and organisational design requirements. The dominant focus on a technological solution clearly demonstrated the inherent motivation of expert leadership around technical concerns. The IT experts wanted the IT solution to work but paid scant attention to other important aspects.

WHY VARIOUS CHANGES FAILED TO EMBED

Due to an expert-dominated vision design process, challenges were encountered during the execution of the initiative. The lack of upfront engagement to address factors involving people, processes, and organisational design meant that additional post-design adaptations were necessary to boost the chances of success. However, the tendency to defer to technical experts extended to selecting a senior IT leader to implement the project. The expert, however, exhibited behaviour consistent with high intrinsic interest and capabilities in technical matters, such that there was a disproportionate focus on technological components of the initiative. Leadership focus on the initiative's complexities around processes, and organisational design and politics was much less prevalent. The result was a largely misunderstood initiative where stakeholders were directed along a narrow tech-focused path.

In the end, the effort failed to gain acceptance, with considerable confusion amongst stakeholders on how to accomplish the transformation, and how it would realistically benefit them, their group, or the organisation. Rather than a solution that led them towards a unified vision of the entire organisation, stakeholders viewed the efforts as a technology implementation project with challenging schedules, a lack of guidance in defining and reworking processes, and insufficient resources for the extra work required. The limited engagement across the organisation on the why's, and the subsequent execution revolving around the technically-driven how's, led to resistance. What we had was an elegant but inoperable solution.

THE PROBLEM OF 'EXPERT MYOPIA'

It is clear to us that the 'expert myopia' we observed was largely responsible for the failure of the initiative. During both the visioning and implementation stages, technical experts were tasked with leadership roles. Also, the output from both stages showed characteristics of a dominant expert focus. During the visioning stage, capabilities and features were evaluated extensively and almost exclusively by the technical leader and members of the IT team. User input was minimal–there was greater interaction with technology suppliers than with internal groups impacted by the changes. As a result, a technically elegant solution that showed great potential emerged.

However, the planning had been undertaken without a sufficiently deep and detailed understanding of the organisation's current processes and tools. Also absent was a clear, detailed picture of how the new technologies mapped to the needs of the business, as well as its existing processes and tools. From this, we note potential deficiencies in intrinsic motivation beyond technical matters, and change management capabilities beyond technical design. Most likely, it was a combination of the two, both of which we had identified as potential gaps to be plugged.

During the implementation phase, compounding the potential challenges associated with being an expert in a change leadership position was the fact that the nominated leader was also a new hire. The new leader's inability to build up sufficient institutional knowledge and political equity was an additional limiting factor that hampered his capability to lead the change effort effectively. Additionally, as the change journey was guided largely by technical considerations, a gap in communication skills quickly surfaced, since excessive expert jargon hindered the understanding of those affected outside the IT team. The expert leader did try to look beyond technical components early in the project, but as the change efforts moved along, interest became more cursory.

How to select change leaders

One likely major reason that large-scale organisational change efforts fail is that there has been insufficient thought and effort in selecting the appropriate point person or team for planning and managing enterprise change efforts. Taking into account the importance of intrinsic motivation and the three capabilities we discussed earlier, we suggest using the following four criteria below to zero in on the right change leader profile during the selection process.

1. AUTHENTIC DESIRE FOR LEADING CHANGE

Assess prospective change leaders for their inherent passion, both for leading change in general and for the specific change initiatives to be implemented. High-visibility transformation projects would be expected to draw interest due to heightened professional exposure, so digging and assessing for genuine intrinsic motivation for leading change and taking charge of the specific change initiative are vital. Ask the candidate about the "why", not only the "how". Explore why the change is personally important to them. Look for related change examples in their past where they played a substantive role, digging into the details of their contributions in the areas of process, communications, and interpersonal management. If the "why" is strong enough, the "how" should work itself out.

An example of a change leader lacking authentic desire for leading change can be seen in one of our recent projects to restructure the sales and marketing functions of an organisation. The aim was to centralise a basket of activities for enhanced knowledge sharing, create a more fluid customer experience, and integrate automation into the related processes. The senior leader tasked with making the proposed change adopted a detached approach after the strategic envisioning stage. A consultant was then brought in for the bulk of the detailed work including conducting interviews, designing organisation structures, and communicating plans to the team. Concerns and resistance from the team were pushed down to the line managers, with the overall change leaders mostly observing from a distance. His interest in the end-result was sincere; however, authentic interest in detailed engagement was lacking. The project was eventually abandoned.

2. EXTENSIVE SKILLS COVERAGE

Ensure that the change leaders demonstrate a sound understanding of each of the three capabilities outlined above, i.e., technical, operational, and organisational. Screening at a sufficient level of detail for each skill, preferably with prior demonstrated experience from potential candidates, would help ensure that gaps in capabilities will not be a stumbling block to the initiative. From our experience, it is rather common to check for technical skills, and in many cases, the most rigour is applied to this dimension. Having said that, it would be remiss to pay less attention to operational and organisational competencies. Operational challenges are regularly discussed during the selection process as a necessary component of change projects; however, a basic grasp of the topic is not sufficient to address the component changes required in a large-scale change initiative.

This was clearly demonstrated in a sales automation project in which we were involved. The change leader was clear from the outset that processes would need to be mapped and updated, so that the change could be implemented effectively. However, when working through the details, the inability of the change leader or his delegates to guide the team knowledgeably through the process-mapping and definition steps highlighted their weakness in this area. The front-line team became confused and uncertain about how to proceed. This created a sizeable hurdle to moving forward that was misinterpreted by the change leader as resistance. Had the change leader, or a strong process associate, been involved, this could likely have been avoided.

3. ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITIES

Strong organisational skills are often the most important of the three capabilities required. This is because of the difficulties involved in getting individuals to adopt new ways and tools for their work, in addition to the political nature associated with changes in organisational design and processes. Large-scale change efforts can be threatened by an individual or a group's resistance to new tools, methods, processes, and organisational structures. There are many organisational landmines along the path of change projects, so having the capabilities to navigate them will be critical in ensuring success.

One example would be the ongoing power struggles brought about by organisational design changes. There will likely be perceived, and perhaps actual, winners and losers that emerge from some of these struggles. If not addressed and managed appropriately, the change could be impacted or derailed by resistance from those who 'lost out' because of the change. In particular, look out for informal leaders as potential candidates. They could be staff who may not have the rank or title but possess the influence, communicative ability, and social networks in an organisation. How do you find them? Just ask. Check in with employees casually who their go-to person is when making sense of changes in the organisation, when adapting to a new

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culture, or when needing to be connected to someone else in the organisation. The same names are likely to surface again and again.

4. THE POSSIBILITY OF IMPLEMENTING A HYBRID TEAM STRUCTURE

It would be rare to find a single leader with all the above prerequisites. To address this, we propose adopting a diversified co-leadership model where an expert and a generalist are paired up. Their complementary skills would provide the combination of motivation and expertise necessary for success. No doubt, such a leadership arrangement would require more coordination and communication, but ultimately, this is the responsibility of the sponsoring executive tasked with preparing the organisation for the future.

For example, we contend that in the Asia-based service organisation case, if a co-leader had been appointed–one who was not an expert but a generalist skilled in process mapping and definition, organisational design and change, and interpersonal communication and effectiveness, he or she would have been a good complement for the selected expert leaders. This would be a proposition we would like to test in our future research.

Where it is not possible to appoint a co-leader, the expert leader or sponsor should work hard to identify the blind spots caused by 'expert myopia' and take active steps to mitigate the problem. Had the appointed expert leaders been further developed and guided in institutional change management capabilities, they would have had an opportunity to develop their interest and capabilities, and be appropriately evaluated in these areas. As a result, their organisations would have benefited in such instances. Alternatively, more weight should be given to project team leads to enable a concerted plan to address the challenges in other important organisational aspects of change, such as business impact, internal communication, and people management.

To conclude, large-scale, enterprise-wide change initiatives are necessary for the growth and future competitiveness of firms. However, there exists a dismal track record of failures for these projects. Based on the intrinsic motivation, willingness to commit, and capability differences observed, we see a need for executives to exercise intentionality in selecting change leaders to roll out large-scale initiatives. Defaulting to existing technical heads, while seemingly convenient and initially efficient, may unintentionally handicap the likelihood of the project's success. An intentional and rigorous effort upfront in planning for and selecting the right leaders is one early step that organisations can take to prepare a solid foundation for a successful outcome. It is also noteworthy that while capabilities and skills can be picked up and honed, an authentic desire to be a change-maker comes not from a job description but from the heart, so discern for that during the selection process.

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