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Siu Loon HOE

Singapore Management University, slhoe@smu.edu.sg

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## What makes a competent change manager? The importance of developing the “right” attitudes

Siu Loon Hoe

Siu Loon Hoe is based at the National University of Singapore, Singapore.

### Change is timeless and everywhere

There is a common adage at work which says, “Change is the only constant”. Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, was believed to have used this quote to refer to life in general. Similarly, in the East, change is also a key theme found in the *Book of Changes*, the oldest of the Chinese classics. Fast forward to the modern day, the rapid evolution of technology dictates an even faster pace for change. The technology landscape has been continually transforming; presenting exciting opportunities for organizations to solve entrenched problems or leapfrog competitors. However, bringing about such change in an organization could be a less thrilling prospect.

While much has been practised, written, and researched about change management, the success rate for most change projects remains quite dismal. Some estimates even suggest that around 70 per cent of change projects fail ([The Standish Group, 2016](#)). With so many change projects happening, the spotlight inadvertently falls on the competency of the change manager.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of developing the “right” attitudes toward change. The viewpoint is based on more than 20 years of experience gained and insights developed through consulting projects and training conducted for numerous multinational companies and public sector organizations across Asia. An overview of international and national competency frameworks that includes change management from Australia, United Kingdom, and Singapore is also presented.

### What does a change manager do?

Very often, we hear organizations mention that people are their most important asset. However, when change is introduced, people-related issues are almost always addressed as an afterthought. Change management is important because it is the people who make things happen. In its simplest form, a change manager provides a structured approach to help people transition from the current to a future state as a result of change. The Association for Change Management Professionals in the USA defines change management as “the deliberate set of activities that facilitate and support the success of individual and organizational change and the realization of its intended business results”.

Many international and national organizations have developed competency frameworks that include change management. For example, the Change Management Institute from Australia listed competencies such as facilitation, strategic thinking, judgment, influencing, coaching, project management, communication and self-management. The Skills Framework for the Information Age Foundation in the United Kingdom recognized skills such as change

implementation planning and management, organization design and implementation, and stakeholder relationship management. In Singapore, the National Infocomm Competency Framework, which was jointly developed by the Info-communications Media Development Authority of Singapore and SkillsFuture Singapore, identified competencies such as contribute to change, implement change management process, lead and strategize changes in various business domains, and build and manage stakeholder relationship.

### Knowledge, skills and attitudes

In the education and training context, a competency can be generally described as a measurable set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that is needed to perform a task effectively (Boyatzis, 2008). Broadly, knowledge refers to discipline-specific content such as concepts and theories. These could include Kotter's eight-step change model (Kotter, 2007), Kubler-Ross's change curve (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, 2007), and Prosci's ADKAR model which emphasizes awareness (A), desire (D), knowledge (K), ability (A), and reinforcement (R) as the goals for change. Skills refer to the application of theory which is usually related to hands-on practical tasks. For example, skills to build leadership alignment, engage the affected stakeholders through motivation, communication and training, and apply a structured methodology. Attitudes refer to mindsets, personal perspectives, or the ways of thinking that are influenced by values and translated into behaviors. Most of us should be familiar with this story – three masons who were working on some stone blocks responded very differently to the question, "What are you doing?". The first one replied, "I am laying bricks". The second one answered, "I am constructing a wall" and third one said, "I am building a cathedral". All three masons were doing the same job but have totally different attitudes.

While one could generally associate knowledge with the head and skills with the hands, attitudes are associated with the heart. A person with the "right" attitude would usually be able to translate actions into desirable behaviors to perform a task more effectively. Consider the simple case of a retail assistant. This person has excellent product knowledge of winter wear and is highly skillful in identifying customers' travel needs. However, the person lacks the "right" attitudes such as friendliness and helpfulness in servicing the customer. Consequently, the person is unlikely to be highly successful in closing sales. Conversely, another person, who has an average level of knowledge and skills but has an excellent attitude, may actually outperform the first person. In a similar note, the efforts of a knowledgeable and skillful change manager could be significantly enhanced with the "right" attitude.

### The "right" attitudes to change management

Therefore, what are the types of "right" attitudes that are important for a change manager? Some suggestions include universal attitudes such as empathy, flexibility, and resilience. Let us elaborate on empathy, that is, the ability to read and understand other's emotions, needs, and thoughts (McKee, 2016). Very often, resistance to change is because of emotional rather than rational reasons. Change is never easy and various emotions such as fear, uncertainty, and anxiety arise as a consequence. In a certain sense, the change manager is really managing intangibles such as emotions, experiences, and expectations. For this to happen, the change manager needs to adopt an empathetic attitude to

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understand and share the feelings of those affected. The rationale that attitudes are important is because a key point to remember about change management is its focus on people and not the plan. When the change manager is able to put him or herself into the shoes of those affected, then change management activities could be designed to encourage greater participation and collaboration. Real change happens when people are engaged. Although empathy, together with flexibility and resilience, has been proposed as the “right” attitude to be used, this list is not meant to be prescriptive. In reality, there could be many types of “right” attitudes that need to be fostered. It really depends on the context, for example, industry and organization. What is “right” is to a great extent determined by the situation.

Most change management education programs focus on the more easily taught knowledge and skills because it is much harder to teach attitudes. Also, it is not so straightforward to assess or measure people who have adapted or “learned” the “right” attitude. Nonetheless, inculcating the “right” attitudes should be an integral part of any change management education programs. One suggestion to facilitate the influencing of “right” attitudes is through experiential learning and self-reflection activities, and complemented with 360-degree feedback as a form of measurement. Thus, further research could focus on the types of “right” attitudes to be developed and learning activities that are more effective in fostering them.

**Keywords:**

Skills,  
Competency,  
Empathy,  
Change management,  
Knowledge,  
Attitudes

### Summary

A competent change manager requires a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitude to effect change. While knowledge and skills have traditionally been emphasized, there is a need to develop the “right” attitude as well. This article contributes to the existing change management literature by providing insights on the importance of competency, in particular, the attitude required of a change manager.

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### Corresponding author

Siu Loon Hoe can be contacted at: [isshsl@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isshsl@nus.edu.sg)