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In the above cases, the interaction of the person, situation, and powerful vision transformed a person into a change agent. This can be summarized in the following equation:

Situations play a crucial part in this three-way interchange. Some situations invigorate and energize the change agent. Enthusiasm builds as coalitions form and the proposed change gains momentum and seems likely to succeed. Other situations suck energy out of the change agent and seem to lead to a never-ending series of meetings, obstacles, and issues that prevent a sense of progress. Borrowing from the language of chemical reactions, Dickout calls the former situations **exothermic** change situations. Here energy is liberated by actions.¹⁵ Conversely, the latter situations he calls **endothermic**. Here the change program consumes energy and arouses opposition—which in turn requires more energy from the change agent.

Change agents need exothermic situations that “liberate the energy to drive the change.”¹⁶ However, they will experience both exothermic and endothermic periods in a change process. Initial excitement and discovery are followed by snail-paced progress, setbacks, dead ends, and perhaps a small victory. The question is: Do the agents have the staying power and the ability to manage their energy flows and reserves during this ultra-marathon? Do they have a team to help replenish their energy and keep them going? Or do they run out of energy and give up? Colleagues who serve as close confidantes can play an important role in sustaining energy. They help to keep things in perspective, enabling the change leader to face future challenges and pitfalls. While action taking is the defining visible characteristic of change, discussion and reflection play important and often undervalued roles in the development and maintenance of change leaders.¹⁷ Reflection as a critical practice of change leaders is discussed later in this chapter.

Michael J. Fox Becomes a Change Agent

Most people get Parkinson’s disease late in life. Michael J. Fox, a television/movie star, contracted it when he was 30. Before his disease, Fox was focused on his career. Within a year, Fox had created the Fox Foundation that has become an exceptionally effective organization in fundraising and in shaping the research agenda for Parkinson’s disease.¹²

Being a Change Agent = Person × Vision × Situation

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Change Leaders and Their Essential Characteristics

An examination of the literature on the personal characteristics of change leaders yields a daunting list of personal attributes ranging from emotional intelligence to general intelligence, determination, openness to experience, and so forth.¹⁸ Textbook treatments of leadership provide lists of the traits and behaviors that prove difficult to reconcile. While most of the literature is inconclusive about attributes that matter and can be generalized, six stand out as particularly relevant for change leaders.

1. Commitment to Improvement

The essential characteristic of **change leaders** is that they are people who seek opportunities to take action in order to bring about improvement. They possess restlessness with the way things are currently done, inquisitive minds as to what alternatives are possible, and the desire to take informed risks to make things better. Katzenbach argues that change leaders are significantly different in their orientation from traditional managers.¹⁹ For Katzenbach, the basic mindset of a “real change leader” is someone who does it, fixes it, tries it, changes it, and does it again—a *trial-and-error approach* rather than an attempt to optimize and get it perfect the first time.

2. Communication and Interpersonal Skills

Doyle talks about potential change agents and argues that they need sophisticated levels of interpersonal and communication skills to be effective.²⁰ He describes change agents as requiring emotional resilience, tolerance for ethical conflicts and ambiguities, and they need to be politically savvy. Conflict goes with the territory when stakeholders believe the changes will negatively impact them, and researchers have noted the importance of conflict-facilitation skills in change agents, including skills related to constructive confrontation and the development of new agreements through dialogue and negotiation.²¹ Barack Obama’s soaring oratorical skills allowed him to speak directly to the American people and bypass much of the Washington establishment when he was pushing for changes to the American health system in 2009. This set the stage for the difficult discussions, negotiations, and tactical maneuvers that followed and resulted in new health care legislation. Kramer maintains that this political awareness about what needs to be done may lead, in certain situations, to abrasive, confronting, intimidating behavior.²² Such challenging behavior may be what is needed to “unfreeze” a complacent organization. Stories of Churchill’s arrogant behavior, appropriate in wartime, cost him the prime ministry in the postwar election.

The communication and interpersonal skills needed to navigate the political environment and awaken the organization to needed action receive a lot of attention. However, this more muscular image of the transformational communications skill of change leaders is but a subset of the range of approaches they may deploy in this area. Not all change leaders have a gift for rhetoric, and many are

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not charismatic in the traditional sense of the term.[†] In his book *From Good to Great*, Jim Collins²³ explores the skill sets of change leaders who successfully transformed their average organizations into great ones. He highlights the quiet, humble, grounded, and committed way in which many of these change leaders interacted with others on a day-to-day basis and the influence this had on the outcomes their organizations were able to achieve. Their positive energy was clearly visible, and frustration didn't give rise to the communication of cynicism that can taint the perspectives of others and derail a change.²⁴

McCall and Lombardo identified a number of other characteristics that derail change leaders when they are communicated to others: being cold and aloof, lacking in critical skills, displaying insensitivity to others, being arrogant, being burned out, lacking trustworthiness, and being overly ambitious from a personal perspective.²⁵ When Malcolm Higgs looked at the question of bad leadership, he identified four recurring themes: abuse of power, inflicting damage on others, overexercise of control to satisfy personal needs, and rule breaking to serve the individual's own purposes. He saw these actions as caused by narcissism in the leader—a view of oneself as superior, entitled, and central to all that happens.²⁶

3. Determination

Change agents need a dogged determination to succeed in the face of significant odds and the resilience to respond to setbacks in a reasoned and appropriate manner. After all, in the middle of change, everything can look like a failure. Change agents need to be able to persist when it looks like things have gone wrong and success appears unlikely.

4. Eyes on the Prize and Flexibility

Change agents also need to focus on the practical—getting it done. They must have a constant focus on the change vision, inspiring others and keeping others aligned with the change goal. Change agents must keep their eyes on the prize to avoid getting bogged down in other day-to-day stresses and abandoning the change vision. At the same time, they must be ready to take informed risks, modify their plans to pursue new options, or divert their energies to different avenues as the change landscape shifts—sometimes because of their actions and sometimes because of the actions of others or shifts in other factors in the environment. Doggedness is balanced by flexibility and adaptability, and impatience is balanced by patience. Time for dialogue and reflection on the change process is needed to give perspective and make informed judgments.²⁷ Change agents must reflect this delicate balance of being driven of the change vision, but not so much that they are unwilling to make modifications to the process as the environment inevitably shifts along the way.

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5. Experience and Networks

Given their desire to make things happen, it is not surprising to find that experience with change is an attribute common to many successful change agents. These individuals embrace change rather than avoiding it and seeing it as “the enemy.” They are constantly scanning the environment, picking up clues and cues that allow them to develop a rich understanding of their organization’s situation and the need for change. As the situation shifts, they are aware of those shifts and respond appropriately to them. They make this easier for themselves by ensuring that they are part of networks that will tell them what they need to hear—not what they want to hear. They build these networks over time through their trustworthiness, credibility, and interpersonal skills and through the value other members of these networks derive from them. Networks don’t work for long if others don’t feel they are getting value from them. To ensure that members of the networks and others continue to communicate with them, change leaders are well advised to remember to never be seen as shooting the messenger. If messengers believe the act of communicating will put them at risk, they will alter their behavior accordingly.²⁸

6. Intelligence

Intelligence is needed to engage in needed analysis, to assess possible courses of action, and to create confidence in a proposed plan.²⁹ In general, one has more confidence in a proposal developed by a bright individual than one brought forward by a dullard. However, traditionally defined intelligence is not enough. Interpersonal skills, empathy, self-regulation, a positive and yet realistic outlook, attention to detail, and the motivational drive to see things through are needed to frame proposals effectively and implement them. These factors make up what is called emotional intelligence and it is often highlighted in discussions of change agent characteristics.³⁰

In his investigation of the characteristics of change leaders, Caldwell differentiates the attributes of change leaders from those he calls **change managers**.³¹ [Table 8.1](#) outlines his view of the differences. Caldwell argues that change leaders operate from a visionary, adaptable perspective while change managers are much more hands on and work with people. Of course, there is nothing that says a change agent cannot possess the attributes of both change leaders and change managers (as defined by Caldwell). In fact, they will need access to both, depending upon their role(s) and the change challenges they are addressing.

Another way to think about the various attributes of change agents is to consider the sorts of behaviors they give rise to. The following three categories of change behaviors are a helpful way of grouping their actions:³²

- *Framing behaviors*: behaviors oriented toward changing the sense of the situation, establishing starting points for change, designing the change journey, and communicating principles
- *Capacity-creating behaviors*: behaviors focused on creating the capacity for change by increasing individual and organizational capabilities and creating and communicating connections in the organization
- *Shaping behaviors*: actions that attempt to shape what people do by acting as a role model, holding others accountable, thinking about change, and focusing on individuals in the change process

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