

## Change Leadership Snapshot

### Internal Networker as Change Agent

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Senge (1996a) proposed three essential types of organizational leaders: executive leaders, local line leaders, and internal networkers. While the first two are well known, the internal networker largely works behind the scene in the informal organization. Yet, it takes all three types of leaders working together to bring about deep cultural change.

#### Executive Leaders

While this is the traditional view of a leader, it is very different in many regards. These executive leaders “provide support for line leaders, develop learning infrastructures, and lead by example in the gradual process of evolving the norms and behaviors of a learning culture” (Senge, 1996b, p. 2). Executive leaders often see the need for change and can initiate the movement. A key role is that of teacher, steward, and designer and not that of power-wielding hierarchical leader. Their attitude should be more subtle, contextual, and long-term than the traditional picture of the CEO.

#### Building a learning organization.

Executives play three roles in building an environment for learning. First, they articulate the organization’s guiding ideas. Note they don’t develop the guiding ideas, because such values are arrived at gradually, over many years, and are a reflection of an organization’s history and traditions. What the executive does is identify the guiding ideas and aid others in understanding how such ideas make up the corporate culture and impacts what everyone does daily. The second function of the executive in building a learning organization is through conscious attention to the learning infrastructure. This is the arena of knowledge management, how the organization recognizes learning, how it is captured, stored, and diffused. Too often, attention is directed to learning from competitors with little or no attention to learning from ourselves. The third way the executive helps build a learning organization is by being an example of self-analysis. Executives must see that what has made them personally successful may be inhibiting further growth and change. This requires examining their own thinking and exposing areas where they are weak and then taking public steps toward self-improvement.

#### Local Line Leaders

Nothing can happen without the support of the local line leaders. There are numerous examples of significant change being brought about by local line leaders, often without any executive support. It is also interesting to note that

there are no examples of significant change being brought about by top management without the support of the local line leaders.

Line leaders have significant business responsibility and are “bottom line” oriented for their local area. Within their area of control they can develop a subculture that may differ significantly from the mainstream organizational culture. In this role, they can undertake small experiments to test new ideas and push the learning capability of the organization to adopt different business practices. To be successful, the line leader needs an understanding of systems thinking, collaborative inquiry processes, and how to build a shared vision.

However, engaging line leaders is often difficult. As pragmatists they often find ideas like systems thinking, mental models, and collaborative inquiry both abstract and difficult to operationalize in concrete terms. Their strength in focusing on local results also turns into a limitation when the needs of the larger organization are considered. They have little time to devote to spreading their learning and often lack the political skills required at the higher organizational levels, especially when dealing with those opposed to change. Complex organizations have numerous forces that maintain the status quo and inhibit the introduction of new ideas. Local line leaders are then prone to frustration when dealing with others who don’t understand or appreciate their ideas. They need someone to identify their situation and provide assistance to tearing down barriers that stand in their way.

#### Executive link to local line leaders

Local line leaders can benefit from executive support as protectors, mentors, and a provider of organization perspective. Often change can be threatening and executive support is needed to encourage the change process to keep it on track. Guidance can also be provided to orient the line leaders to their role in meeting the corporate goals. Executive attention can also assist when people are too busy to take the time to notice what the innovators are doing by drawing attention to local ideas and successes. In all of these activities, the executives are providing the support the line leaders need to continue pushing grassroots change. Executives also play a mentoring role in helping local line leaders to mature and to understand complex political crosscurrents within the organization.

#### Internal Networkers or Community Builders

This group is made up of those in the organization that can move freely about the informal organization structure and spread new ideas. They identify those predisposed to bring about change and encourage them and communicate their needs to others in the organization that can assist. The only authority possessed by internal networkers comes from the strength of their convictions and the clarity of their ideas, which is often sufficient to bring about deep cultural change, regardless of their organizational position.

It is often difficult to identify internal networkers because they can be found throughout the organization. Often they are found in staff positions, such as internal consultants, trainers, human resources, or systems development. Or they might be front-line employees who have contacts throughout the organization, such as engineers, sales representatives, or shop stewards. In some circumstances they may be in senior staff positions. The key is their ability to move freely about the organization with high accessibility to many people within the organization. They understand the informal organization structure. What matters is that effective internal networkers are seen as credible, knowledgeable, committed individuals who are not a particular threat to anyone.

The vital function played by internal networkers is to identify local line managers who have the power to take action and are predisposed to develop new learned behaviors. They often serve effectively as project managers and as facilitators. Gradually they may help develop the more formal coordination for moving from local experiments to organizationwide learning. Even where they may not be directly involved in the change process, internal networkers often have input that influences the process and outcome itself.

This group of leaders is self-appointed and can only be identified by their actions to promote change. Research has shown no specific factor that causes someone to assume the role as an internal networker. Role drivers range from a specific class or project early in their career to a slow demonstration of ability to make small, meaningful shifts in the organization thinking or decision process. Once identified, the key is to nurture their behavior so that it is not stifled by the normal organizational response to change.

While the internal networkers gain strength from lack of organizational constraints they are sometimes limited when faced with the need to confront hierarchical authority. If a local line leader becomes a threat to peers or supervisors, the internal networker may be powerless to help. They have no authority to institute changes in organizational structures or processes. Therefore, internal networkers are most effective when working in concert with local line leaders and executive leaders.

#### Executive link to internal networkers

Internal networks can be mobilized by executives and assisted in identifying local line leaders with similar ideas. The executives also often have the power to clear barriers to change that have been identified by the internal networkers.

#### Related Change Leadership Snapshots

- (more to come)

#### Learning more & references used above

- Argyris, C. (1994). Good communication that blocks learning. *Harvard Business Review*, 72(4), 77-85. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
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- Senge, P. M. (1996b). Rethinking leadership in the learning organization. *Systems Thinker*, 7(1), 1-7. Retrieved from <http://www.systemsinsync.com/pdfs/RethinkingLead3B92D3.pdf>

