

Change agents and the national training system

John Mitchell & Susan Young

core ideas

This paper focuses on the skills and knowledge needed by change agents in the vocational education and training (VET) sector to support the national training system.

Using change agents is one approach to bringing about the changes needed to underpin the demand-driven national training system. For instance, recent research by Reframing the Future (Mitchell, 2003, p.27) indicates that change agents can assist Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) in fundamental activities, such as assisting delivery teams to make the transition to an outcome-focused culture.

While there is a legitimate place for engaging the specialist change agent who is external to the VET organisation, this paper is directed at staff within VET organisations that are or wish to become change agents. These staff will normally be at management level, but sometimes they will be non-management VET practitioners who are commissioned to lead change.

This set of core ideas was prepared by John Mitchell, John Mitchell & Associates, consultant to Reframing the Future and Susan Young, National Project Director, Reframing the Future.

What change management is needed in the national training system?

Scott (1999, p.24) suggests that there are two main types of change which educators must be deft at handling: change within learning programs and change within the organisations that support the learning programs. Scott also finds that program change and organisational change must go hand in hand, for the following reason:

every learning program innovation will generate some need for change in the organisation's administration, resource distribution, staff support procedures and infrastructure (p.107).

While Scott's two types of change are a useful starting point, often the national training system requires change agents to support program change and organisational change across multiple organisations and across whole industries and State and Territory borders. Many of these types of challenges are described in reports on Reframing the Future projects (e.g. Mitchell & Young, 2001; Mitchell, 2002, 2003).

There are numerous definitions of change management in the literature, such as the following from Hayes (2002):

Change management is the process of modifying or transforming organisations in order to maintain or improve their effectiveness (p.22).

It is appropriate for the VET context that this definition focuses on bringing about change within more than one organisation, as increasingly in VET, as noted above, change management is needed across organisations, borders and industries. This need for change management across multiple sites is a direct result of the national training

system – an industry-led system which encourages VET providers to collaborate with other providers and to develop relationships with enterprises and industry representatives.

What is a change agent?

The concept of a change agent has changed a number of times over recent decades. Change agents were prominent in the 1980s and 1990s when organisational development (OD) was fashionable. These change agents were often external specialists who worked with the senior management to bring about planned change. Proponents of planned change see change as an iterative, cyclical process involving diagnosis, action and evaluation, and further action and evaluation (Burnes, 2000, p.274). The transparent, up-front roles of change agents in planned change situations, such as diagnosing, designing and implementing change, are set out by advocates such as French & Bell (1995).

During the 1990s, the proponents of emergent change – who believe that change is a continuous, open-ended and unpredictable process of aligning and re-aligning an organisation to its changing environment (Burnes, 2000, p.280) – tended to play down or ignore the role of the change agent, based on the view that change is not a specialist activity driven by an expert, but an important part of every manager's role (Burnes, 2000, p.297). Burnes suggests that the drawback with this position is that it deflects attention from the specialist skills which are needed to manage change, whether this is being done by a manager or by a change expert (pp.298-299). Burnes finds, from a study of the literature, that:

...the more complex the change process, the more difficult it is to achieve and the greater the need to utilise the skills and experience of a specialist change agent (p.299).

The role for the individual change agent will change depending on the context, but a change agent is required in all situations. Burnes suggests that, whatever approach is taken to change:

... it has to be managed; someone has to take responsibility for ensuring that change takes place. Whether this person is a team leader, facilitator, coach or even a dictator, there is usually one individual who bears the responsibility for being the change agent (p.297).

What skills do change agents need?

Managing change is difficult and change agents require advanced skills. King & Anderson (2002; pp.191-192) find that a base-line range of skills for change agents includes:

1. networking abilities to make constructive contacts and to develop cooperative and productive relationships with a wide variety of individuals and clients;

core ideas

2. data-gathering skills to be able to collect reliable information on apparent organisational challenges;
3. evaluation and integration skills to correctly weigh information and to integrate this information into a coherent picture of the issues warranting intervention;
4. diagnostic and prognosis skills to translate this mass of information into intervention strategies and a proposed plan of action.

Hayes (2002) identifies other skills of change agents as follows:

When managers are acting as change agents they need to be able to communicate, offer leadership, work with teams, confront, negotiate, motivate and effectively manage relationships with others (p.19).

Hayes makes the point that sometimes change agents are less effective than they might be because they fail to recognise the importance of some of these skills or they fail to apply them when required. Adding to Hayes' argument, Scott (1999) argues that if change agents are to apply the knowledge they have, they need some additional personal attributes:

their stance towards change, work and the people who populate it;

their ability to think creatively, reflectively and with focus, especially their ability to 'read and match'

their ability to continuously update what they know and can do, especially through their expertise in the self-management of their career-long learning (p.148).

Buchanan & Boddy (1992, p.27) suggest that the successful change agent needs more than the skills seen in public: the change agent needs to be able to function 'backstage' or behind the scenes, in recruiting and maintaining support and identifying and blocking resistance.

What knowledge do change agents need?

Hayes (2002, pp.18-19) finds that change agents need concepts and theories that fall into two categories:

- diagnostic models of change that focus on identifying *what* it is that needs to be changed.
- process models of change which are concerned with the *how* of change management.

Change agents need to know about different diagnostic models for change, such as those that focus on how environmental changes affect the organisation, and those that focus on the alignment of the different internal components of an organisation.

Change agents need to know about alternative process models of change, so they can manage different kinds of

change such as incremental (small, continuous adjustments) or discontinuous (episodic) change. Possibly the most famous process model of change is Lewin's (1951) three stage model – unfreeze behaviour, move to a new level and then refreeze behaviour.

Hayes also finds that change agents need to be familiar with a range of different types of interventions that they can use to secure a desired change and to decide which intervention strategy is appropriate:

Change managers also need to have some basis for deciding which interventions to use in specific circumstances, taking account of such contingencies as the pace of change, the power of the stakeholders to resist, and so forth (p.19).

Knowledge about resistance to change is especially important for the change agent, because resistance to change is normal and to be expected. For instance, King & Anderson (2002, pp. 208-210) identify three psychological processes which commonly underpin resistance:

- change is an unknown and therefore presents a threat to those affected by it;
- change challenges the status quo and may be resisted because of powerful vested interests in maintaining the current equilibrium position;
- change often means extra workloads for those affected by it.

Change agents also need to know that change in education and training is highly subjective, according to Scott (1999), with a combination of values and individual motivations 'driving the way each initiative unfolds, right from the first moment a change idea is mentioned (p.24)'.

Buchanan & Boddy (1992) add that managing change is a creative activity, extending beyond the application of formulae:

Expertise does not simply involve the mechanical deployment of diagnostic tools, competences and stereotyped solutions, but involves also the innovative and opportunistic exploitation of other dimensions of the organisational context (p.123).

What are the limitations of change agents?

Individual change agents are not the only means for bringing about change in a VET organisation or across organisations or an industry. Other ways to bring about change range, on the one hand, from senior managers being directive or 'top-down' in their approach, to on the other hand, all staff being invited to direct change as individuals or in teams, 'bottom-up'.

The choice of change strategy will be influenced by factors such as the external environment, the cultures of the organisations involved and whether skilled individuals

are available to act as change agents. Burnes (2000, p.473) suggests that, for large change projects, all of the members of the change management team can be considered change agents, although he distinguishes between change agents and change specialists, both of whom can contribute to projects.

In some VET contexts, individual change agents may be ineffectual, for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the change agent may not be accepted as legitimate by the personnel involved in the change process. Sometimes the change agent and his or her patrons may misinterpret what type and amount of change is feasible. And sometimes the type of change needed may be beyond the capability of the nominated change agent.

This paper emphasises the complexities of the change agent role, so novice change agents may need to be given a number of opportunities to perform the role, to become increasingly proficient. They could also benefit from additional professional development opportunities, including receiving coaching and mentoring from experienced change agents.

What can change agents achieve in the national training system?

In appropriate settings, skilled and knowledgeable change agents can help to achieve a vibrant VET national training system by performing a range of functions:

- assisting their own organisation to review its structures and cultures to adjust to a demand-driven VET system;
- assisting providers from a range of RTOs to manage the introduction of a new Training Package, especially where those providers may resist the new approaches or be unused to working collaboratively;
- assisting providers and industry to collaborate not just in the delivery of training and assessment but also in the analysis of industry training trends and future directions.

Each of these types of change activities is invariably complex, involving a mix of technical and human dimensions.

However, the effective management of each of these types of activities is essential for the growth of the national training system.

To enhance the vitality of the national training system, Reframing the Future is committed to supporting a range of change management approaches, including helping to build the capacity of individual change agents within the VET sector. This capacity-building will ensure that change agents possess a suite of skills and a store of knowledge, as well as the confidence and ability to exercise their professional judgement.

References

- Buchanan, D.A. & Boddy, D. (1992), *The Expertise of the Change Agent*, Prentice Hall, London
- Burnes, B. (2000), *Managing Change. A Strategic Approach to Organisational Dynamics*. Pitman Publishing, London
- Cummings T.G. and Worley, C.G. (1997), *Organisation Development and Change*, 6th Ed., South Western, Ohio
- French, W.L. & Bell, C.H. (1995), *Organization Development* (4th edition), Prentice Hall, New Jersey
- Hayes, J. (2002), *The Theory and Practice of Change Management*, Palgrave, Wiltshire
- King & Anderson, 2002, *Managing Innovation and Change*, Thomson Learning, Australia
- Lewin, K. (1951), *Field Theory in Social Science*, Harper & Rowe, New York
- Mitchell, J.G. (2002), *The Never-ending Quest*, ANTA, Melbourne
- Mitchell, J.G. (2003), *Strategy-making in Turbulent Times*, ANTA, Melbourne
- Mitchell, J.G. & Young, S. (2001), *High-skilled High-performing VET*, ANTA, Melbourne
- Scott, G. (1999), *Change Matters: Making a Difference in Education and Training*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards



For more information, contact

Reframing the Future

PO Box 425 Elizabeth SA 5112

Telephone 08 8207 9655

Fax 08 8207 9708

<http://reframingthefuture.net>

core ideas

