

Role Models and Change

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There are a lot of factors that contribute to successful change in an organization. Research tells us that role models are one of the most influential. There are a number of potential role models in any organization. Those we think of most readily are the traditional leaders - the CEO, other executives, managers and supervisors. These are the people expected to provide leadership; whose job it is to mentor and set an example.

According to the Prosci research study, *Best Practices in Change Management* (2000) the single greatest contributor to a successful change project is effective executive sponsorship. When they visibly and consistently support the change initiative, executive sponsors become highly effective role models for everyone in the organization as do Managers who "walk the talk" by supporting the change both publicly and privately. Supervisors, who remain accessible and responsive throughout the change process, providing both guidance and support, are strong role models as well.

Just as positive reinforcement is a significant contributor to behavioral change, so too are consistent role models. While the leadership of an organization may become role models by virtue of their function, people will also look to and model their behavior on self selected role models. And people in different areas of an organization will choose different role models depending upon what traits, experience and skills they value. One of the challenges facing management when a significant change is imminent is identifying the key role models in various departments and at various levels in the organization. Experienced change agents will recognize the value of recruiting these peer role models and will actively solicit their support for the change initiative. Experienced change agents know that these self selected role models are often more influential than the hierarchical role models, making their support critical to the success of the change project.

The keys facts to remember about role models and change are:

1. Role models contribute significantly to behavioral change
2. Leaders in an organization are role models by default (positive or negative!)
3. Effective executive sponsorship is the #1 factor for a successful change project
4. Self selected role models are often more influential than leadership
5. All role models at all levels of the organization must speak to and model desired behaviors consistently to bring about change