A close-up photograph of several hands of different skin tones working together to assemble a structure made of light-colored wooden sticks. The hands are positioned around the sticks, some holding them in place while others appear to be adjusting or connecting them. The background is a plain, light color.

The Nonprofit CEO as a Social Architect & Change Agent

By Stephen Long

To lead successful change, you need to be an ardent change agent and designer of your organization's systems and culture. Here's how.

Transformation efforts fail for many reasons. Usually there's a lack of urgency, or executives underestimate the power of resistance. Perhaps the biggest reason is that CEOs fail to master change-agent skills. Those who successfully lead their organizations are change agents and social architects of their organizations, designing systems for consistently high performance.

Ineffective executives rely on some theoretical model to build systems. Any theory that generalizes across all demographics is inherently flawed. There's not one person on the planet for whom any theory can be applied all the time. Any theory which implies it's *always* true is not only wrong — it's also dangerous!

Effective social architects rely not on theories but on practical application — what works for each individual in each particular moment. They're passionate about human development. They realize that bringing out the best in every person is the best way to align systems to accomplish goals. They've learned that all systems, directly or indirectly, align people.

Seeking Beliefs beneath the Surface

Next time you attend a staff or board meeting, jot down the assumptions about human behavior that underlie what people are saying, doing, and planning. You'll notice a strong relationship between what leaders believe about people and what they decide to do.

Time clocks are a good example. Management relies on time clocks to make sure workers arrive on time and perform the agreed upon work in the time specified. Would you ask your spouse or children to punch a clock? Good parents instill a sense of responsibility and trust in their family relationships, yet leaders often fail to do so in their professional relationships. The belief often is, "The workforce can't be trusted. We have to create a system where we can check that the people we work with aren't screwing us!"

Such mistrustful assumptions are usually formed by experiences *outside* the organization. Many executives generalize a negative experience, which results in cynicism and a culture that doesn't adapt well to change. These executives tend to adopt an authoritarian rather than a democratic leadership style.

Authoritarian executives don't ask or listen. Rather, they dictate, order, and pronounce without obtaining clear and complete feedback, evaluation, or knowledge of how the system is actually working. When they do look for information, it's usually in a form that supports only their point of view. Authoritarian executives believe they know enough. They fail to learn unless forced to do so.

“All executives devise a social architecture that either enhances or limits change.”

Democratic leaders trust and respect the people around them. They're eager to listen. They believe they can continuously learn because their people are an educational resource. Not only do they experience psychic rewards from helping people grow; they realize it's the most efficient way to grow the organization.

Orchestrating Change from behind the Curtain

Successful social architects understand their organizations. They know who says what to whom and what kinds of actions are taking place. They transmit principles of high performance with the following steps:

- **Generate commitment** to the value of change.
- **Present a shared interpretation of organizational events**, teaching people how they're expected to behave.
- **Reward and reinforce behavior** that promotes change.

Social architects don't do these things overtly. Instead, they're behind the curtain, getting people on board by making slight adjustments to the organization's culture.

Making constant but relatively small changes provides *continuity*, helping the organization evolve while remaining true to its principles. The Latin root of "continuity" translates to "hold together." Social architects identify the principles that hold the organization together. They understand what was valued in the past and apply these values to current situations. They move the organization forward while maintaining a sense of its history, defining the relationship between the past and present, and helping people understand where they've been, where they are, and how they got there. That holds the organization together rather than ripping it apart as happens in most change initiatives. Breaking down the organization and then building it back up is a 20th-century approach that's unacceptably expensive in terms of both financial and human capital.

Social architects improve individual performance by creating a culture that embraces change, innovation, and growth. Most change initiatives dismiss and devalue the individual contribution to cultural change. Social architects, in contrast, recognize that long-lasting

Rate Your Change-Agent & Social-Architect Skills

Answer these questions to see what kind of change agent and social architect you are.

- _____ **Do you make a conscious effort** to create a culture that rewards creativity, risk-taking, and continual change?
- _____ **Do you trust** your co-workers?
- _____ **Do your co-workers** trust you?
- _____ **Does your change strategy** focus on making small changes constantly rather than one huge change now and then?
- _____ **Do you put a large portion of your energy** into collaborating with people and groups outside your organization?
- _____ **Are people in your organization excited** about opportunities rather than resistant?
- _____ **Do you make sure that you and others in your organization** receive education and training in many subjects, including an understanding of change strategies?
- _____ **Do you use storytelling to tie your organization's past** (its history, founding, and heroic figures) to the present and future?
- _____ **Is diversity** (inclusion and respect for people of many different cultures, ages, and backgrounds) a high priority for you?
- _____ **Do your staff and board members find change invigorating** rather than painful?

Your Score: Count the number of times you answered "yes." 9-10, excellent; 7-8, good; 5-6, needs improvement; 0-4, it's definitely time to change your ways!



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change starts by helping people understand how they work best and what they can do to advance the organization's values.

Some executives rely on rules as a form of control, others seek consensus over compliance, while others use discussion as a basis for decisions. Executives don't fit nicely into a box. No executive is a purebred — everyone is a mutt — and they adopt leadership strategies from here, there, and everywhere. They use what works for them rather than conforming to a particular theory.

Any change in the management process, organizational structure, and leadership style must support the desired end — change. Words, symbols, communication, and training don't go far enough. Beliefs must be changed in order for actions to change. It's not just altering the organizational mission. It's not just altering the organizational chart. It's not just changing human resource systems. Social architects engineer the political and cultural forces that drive the entire organizational system. They take full advantage of the opportunity. They don't delegate this responsibility. Social architects personally drive this process more than any other because beliefs drive the organization.

In an effort to achieve organizational evolution, 20th-century executives attempted to create harmony and cohesiveness throughout the organization. Instead of reaching cohesion, at best they created massive groupthink by facilitating a sense of tribalism and survivalism. People came away with the belief that "our human group is superior to others."

This approach led to overload and burnout. Employees became cynical and lost trust in leadership. Change initiatives were received with skepticism.

In contrast, 21st-century change agents are performance oriented. They focus on generating value for their stakeholders by creating effective solutions and collaborating with many different groups outside the organization.

“The goal is to define the relationship between past and present.”

The Change Challenge

Here are more articles to help you cope with the rapids of change (NonprofitWorld.org/members):

Creating a Climate for Innovation (Vol. 29, No. 4)

Nested at the Heart: A New Approach to Nonprofit Leadership (Vol. 29, No. 6)

Change or Perish (Vol. 30, No. 5)

Cultural Competence: What Does It Mean for You? (Vol. 26, No. 5)

Tools for Improving Your Board's Diversity (Vol. 25, No. 5)

How to Build a Framework for Strategic Alliances: A Framework of Trust (Vol. 26, No. 6)

Leading the Transformation of Boards (Vol. 22, No. 2)

“A sense of continuity holds the organization together rather than ripping it apart as happens in most change initiatives.”

Managing Interdependent Relationships


Hierarchy matters less now than in the 20th century because of two primary factors:

1. Diversity has become a fact of organizational life. More than ever before, the workforce is an amalgam of people with different goals, motivations, values, background, personality, communication styles, and beliefs.

2. Interdependence exists in a greater degree throughout organizations. Interdependence occurs when two or more people have power over one another because they depend on each other to accomplish their own personal objectives. As opposed to 20th-century organizations, power is now derived from developing cooperative relationships with superiors, peers, subordinates, and external stakeholders such as suppliers and clients. The greater the *dependence* found within multiple relationships, the greater the *interdependence* and hence the greater the power one garners throughout the organizational system.

The old organizational chart was a series of boxes showing who reported to whom. But in what organization do people influence only those in the boxes connected to them? The modern organizational chart is based on reality, in which everyone is interconnected, not just with those inside the organization but with a multitude of others outside organizational walls.

Raising the Organization to Its Highest Level

An organization will rise only to the level of its leader's competency. Leaders who are successful change agents and social architects design systems that let individuals express their talents to the fullest degree possible. All others will wash away in the turbulence of white water. 

“Principles are stable, whereas practices can, should, and will change.”

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