

# Developing roles in change processes – A case study from a public sector organisation

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## Abstract

Even though change is recognized to be of utmost importance in today's organisations, there exists no common understanding of change roles. The relationship between change roles and program and project roles seems not to be clear, although many changes are organized by projects. The paper presents a case study of a transformation of a public organisation. In an action research approach together with representatives of the case study company relevant roles for the change were developed and established.

The paper analyzes different change roles and project and program roles in literature and identifies shortcomings, presents the change roles developed in the case study, reflects the necessity for an explicit definition and differentiation of change, program and project roles for the fulfilment of a transformation, and it analyzes the benefits and disadvantages of the application of multi-role assignments in changes.

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*Keywords:* Change; Change management; Change roles; Project roles; Program roles

## 1. Introduction

Changes are of increasing importance in today's turbulent environment to remain competitive. Changes are socially complex endeavours, and there is still a high rate of failure (Aiken and Keller, 2009). Specific organisational structures such as roles, communication structures and organisational rules help to deal with this complexity. Changes are performed by projects and programs (Biedenbach and Söderholm, 2008; Bresnen, 2006; Gareis, 2010; Pellegrinelli, 1997, 2002).

Differentiated change types have been identified (By, 2005; Gareis, 2010; Heitger and Doujak, 2008) which require different management. Levy and Merry (1986) distinguish first and second order changes, where they consider second order changes as more radical than first

order changes. One second order change type is transformation, which is fundamental as most or all identity dimensions of an organisation are changed. The focus is on redesigning the organisation and on strengthening (new) core competences (Gareis, 2010). In this paper a case study of the change type transformation is presented. The objectives of the paper are to present and discuss the change roles which have been developed in an action research approach within a change of a public sector organisation.

Thus the paper

- analyzes different change roles and project and program roles in literature and identifies shortcomings,
- presents the change roles developed in the case study,
- reflects the necessity for an explicit definition and differentiation of change, program and project roles for the fulfilment of a transformation, and
- analyzes the benefits and disadvantages of the application of multi-role assignments in changes.

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## 2. Methodology

The research methodology applied is based on action research (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). A cyclic research approach was followed, where the definitions of change roles were based on the literature review and experiences of the authors have been further developed during the change process of the case study organisation.

The researchers were working with hypotheses, models and interventions. The research was characterized by the spiral of action research cycle, i.e. by planning, acting, observing, and reflecting as outlined by Lewin (Altrichter et al., 2002). A multi-method approach was applied, including literature review, documentation analysis, interviews, workshops, and observation by participation.

An analysis of documents of the case study organisation as well as 15 interviews with representatives from different organisation units were performed. Based on the gathered information the researchers developed hypotheses about the status of the organisation and the demand for change. Together with representatives of the case study organisation the change processes, the change roles and the communication structures were designed. Once a month, the researchers together with representatives of the change organisation reflected the status of the change, and decided whether the applied change processes, roles and communications were appropriate or had to be further developed. The data collection for the case study was performed between January and December 2009, although the researchers have close connections with the case study organisation since 2007.

The researchers were working as a team of two. They also reflected the assumptions and findings with other researchers of the research project “Changes & Projects” of the PROEJKTMANAGEMENT GROUP of the WU Wien.

## 3. Change roles

Different approaches and definitions of relevant change roles exist in literature, in different change models change

roles are mentioned. The change roles have been more and more differentiated during the years. Lippitt et al. (1958) only point to the role of the change agent, while other literatures differentiate further roles (Beckhard and Pritchard, 1992; Klewes and Langen, 2008; Kotter, 1996; Lee and Krayner, 2003; Newton, 2007). Important roles are change owner, change manager, change agent, and change team. In the literature change roles are partly labelled differently. Table 1 gives an overview on relevant change roles in literature.

### 3.1. Change owner

The importance of top management participation in changes is broadly discussed in the literature. Top management has a central role, as they analyse the actual situation in the company, the attitude of the personnel towards the change, define the vision for the future state, organise for communication (Beckhard and Harris, 1987; Beckhard and Pritchard, 1992). Lee and Krayner (2003) outline the role of upper management as change owner to assign the change manager, create the vision and the criteria for successful change, and communicates this to the organisation, approve the design plan, and control that the change objectives and their implementation is in alignment with the company’s strategy and the change vision and to provides tangible rewards, according to the level of success.

### 3.2. Change manager

Kotter (1996) describes the change manager, which he calls change leader, as the role who creates the sense of urgency, through allowing financial losses, setting revenue or income targets so high that they cannot be reached, develops a vision and strategy and communicates it, generates and communicates short term wins, and consolidates gains and further change demand, and establishes the guiding coalition and people who implement the change.

Lee and Krayner (2003) see the change manager as a central integration role that has to ensure that all changes are embedded in the organisation and the organisation is fully

Table 1  
Comparison of change roles.

Role	Lippitt et al. (1958)	Beckhard and Pritchard (1992)	Kotter (1996)	Lee and Krayner (2003)	Newton (2007)	Klewes and Langen (2008)
Change owner		Top management		Upper management	Change sponsor and steering committee	Top management
Change manager	Change agent	Transition manager	Change leader	Change manager	Change manager	Change project manager
Change agent				Employee representatives and supervisors on steering committee	Change agent	Multipliers
Change team		Effectiveness and transition teams	Guiding coalition	Change steering committee	Change team	Change project team
Other roles		Change liaison, study teams, contributors			Communication manager	Consultant, change controlling team

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