



# Change Management: Craft or Science?

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## **Introduction**

Is change management more of a craft implemented by organizational artists or a repeatable methodology driven by scientific principles? Why is this question even important?

Many executives and managers see change management as a craft where performance improvement is driven by a change leader's unique management skills. The common expectation seems to be that a change leader will efficiently perform a variety of demanding functions required to drive change. These may include conducting and interpreting of organizational assessments, developing learning experiences, and designing measurement and reward systems. All of these are techniques used by the change leader to drive organizational performance improvement.

While it is clear that some change leaders really are "artists" who consistently produce desired performance improvements no matter what the environment, in most organizations there are very few such people and they are usually heavily loaded. Consequently, organizational leadership often must choose between delaying a change effort waiting for their "super-star artists" or risk relying on less successful or unproven personnel to drive the desired change. This introduces considerable uncertainty for an organization's leadership. Will their change manager deliver the change or not? If leadership can't rely on achieving desired performance improvements, it seems natural to shy away from attempting even minor changes.

Fortunately, recent scientific breakthroughs make organizational change, and the resulting performance improvements, highly systematic and predictable. Most importantly, these breakthroughs make organizational change much less dependent on a select few "artists" since change can now be managed much as organizations manage standard production processes. As a result, change is easier, more consistently achieved, and under direct management control. This increases leadership's confidence and willingness to tackle the significant changes required for more far-reaching performance improvements.

The difference is between hoping that an organization will achieve high performance and knowing exactly when and how the desirable performance improvements will be achieved.



## Change Management as Craft

Wikipedia defines a craft as a “family of artistic practices that traditionally are defined by their relationship to functional or utilitarian [areas and are] practiced by independent artists working alone or in small groups.”

Why has change management been likened to the craft industry?

Change management has, in one form or another, been around for a long time – probably since the beginning of the industrial revolution. During that time it has developed a wealth of conventional wisdoms. For example, many training courses are built on long accepted educational research and standardized beliefs about adult learning. Similarly, many change initiatives start with organizational assessments or gap analyses that are based on long-established problem solving techniques. Given these and other “standard practices,” most current practitioners believe they are already using science as the foundation for their change efforts.

However, upon closer examination, both the traditional “science” and the conventional wisdoms are problematic. Much of the science is based on social science studies of individual learnings and organizational responses, with little underlying hard data. While there have been educational and organizational theorists since Plato, and thousands of studies of adult learning and change, it has been hard to truly understand how people learn or organizations behave in the “real world.” In addition, conventional wisdoms such as assessments and financial incentives have been widely used because they acquired social acceptance during the industrial revolution, which was significantly different from the environments of most companies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The foundation of change management may appear solid, but it is actually quite shaky.

As a result of this unreliable foundation, most change initiatives are, at best unpredictable and, at worst potentially hazardous. How can a management team confidently lead a change when the process of making the change is so uncertain? As a Vice-President of a Biotechnology firm put it: “When I kick off a performance improvement initiative, I have no clue what is ultimately going to happen, and I really don’t like that feeling.”

## The Science of Change Management

In contrast, recent advances in four areas of research and the emergence of a new technology are making change management predictable, efficient and consistently effective. By combining work on positive deviance, fair process, neuroscience and mass customization into a single change model, and delivering change guidance through persuasive technology, it is possible to ensure that 98% of personnel in an organization embrace each change initiative. In other words, change management is no



longer art, but instead is now largely science which gives almost any organization the power to make significant changes without need of a “super-star artist.”

Here is the model that has evolved from the science:

### *Set-the-Bar*

In order to manage change effectively, the organization has to develop a compelling image of the desired end result of the change. Research on positive deviance tells us that the people who consistently and systematically outperform others (the organization’s “positive deviants”):

- *Always* have these compelling images
- Are easily identified
- Exist in all job categories in all organizations
- Can be interviewed using simple, reliable techniques that gather their “wisdom” quickly and effectively

The science on positive deviance is extremely consistent. By leveraging their positive deviants, almost any organization can consistently and easily develop the powerful images required to drive change.

### *Motivate Change*

People must be motivated to change. The science of fair process and the neuroscience of positive visualization make motivation highly predictable too.

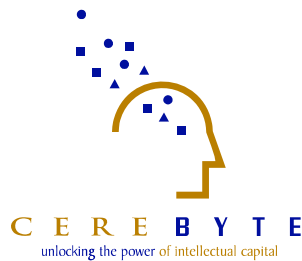
More specifically, by presenting the positive deviant’s powerful images of success in a way that generates a sense of respect and dignity in the organization (fair process), people tend to embrace the change. In fact, they feel deeply honored that the organization so completely believes in their ability. In turn, when people visualize themselves as functioning at the same levels of positive deviants, neuroscience research has shown that there is a release of neurotransmitters that drive a consistent increase in willingness and ability to learn something new.

Motivation, that has long been more an art form than a predictable process, is now highly predictable. By creating the right conditions, almost all participants show significantly increased motivation.

### *Sustain Change*

The craft of change management is particularly ineffective at sustaining a performance improvement. Because so much of craft change management is about personal relationships, when the person is no longer present, change efforts consistently falter.

In contrast, the neuroscience principle of “neurons that fire together wire together” and the emergence of persuasive technology provide capabilities that consistently and systematically sustain a change



effort. The key to getting neurons to permanently wire together in support of a new business capability is intensive, repetitive practice. The positive deviants tell us the nature and frequency of this practice. Persuasive technology ensures that people actually practice.

Persuasive technology, which is defined as technology that “changes what people and do,” is specifically designed to provide people with the prompts and support required to achieve the levels of practice required for complete internalization of a change. Features like weekly prompts, continuous status reporting to management and other standard features in persuasive technology drive participants to practice enough to achieve the positive deviant level of performance.

Thus, sustainability of a change is now grounded in science and technology and is completely predictable.

### ***Scaling Change***

The craft of change management problems with sustainability become significantly more acute when hundreds or thousands of people must change to improve performance. How can a crafts person possibly touch these large numbers since change is all due to the individual contact?

Here too recent scientific advances solve the scaling problem. In particular, the integration of the principles of mass customization into persuasive technology provides a scientific methodology for touching many more people, more efficiently than previously thought possible. Mass customization is an organizing system that enables a central organization to mass produce the energy and materials for a change, while treating everyone uniquely, thereby increasing personal motivation.

When embedded in persuasive technology, mass customization guides large numbers of users to consistently and systematically embrace the positive deviant images of extraordinary performance.

### **Comfort with the Craft**

If the science of change management has advanced so far then why are so few companies using it? The most obvious answers are that the people responsible for change management:

- Don't know about the scientific advances
- Know about the science but are skeptical of it as yet another management fad
- Are themselves practitioners of the craft and are hesitant to acknowledge that their methods are antiquated and no longer state-of-the-art

Regardless of the reasons for staying with the craft of change management, the underlying science is now very solid and increasingly in the mainstream. Consequently, organizations that are using these capabilities are reaping a significant competitive advantage with little or no risk. There is an old adage



that “there is no such thing as a free lunch,” but taking a scientific approach to change management comes about as close as possible.

## Summary

Every executive we know talks about how their world is changing, how change is constant, and how their organization needs to continuously improve performance to succeed. In the past, the change processes executives had available to them were, at best, ad hoc. This undermined their confidence in the ability to change and forced reliance on a select few change management “artists.” Now, leaders can quickly, predictably and cost-effectively create organizational changes every time. This empowers executives to tackle more complex and sweeping changes that meet increasingly intense competitive demands.