



How Commitment Forms

*What to Expect When Building
Commitment to Organizational Change*

4060 Peachtree Road, Suite 523 Atlanta, GA 30319

www.conneradvisory.com

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As organizations seek to move beyond installation¹ to achieve full realization² of the intended outcomes from major change initiatives, they must shift the mindsets and behaviors of a wide range of people. Generally speaking, these shifts don't happen immediately or automatically; they unfold over time and usually need to be orchestrated and supported by the organization.

For these adjustments to not only occur but also endure over the duration of a change, people must become committed to the change. An individual's degree of commitment to change is reflected in the consistency with which he or she displays new mindsets and behaviors, even in the face of challenges. In this paper, we describe the general process by which people become committed to any new way of operating and apply it to significant changes within organizations. We also address detailed approaches and techniques that leaders can use to help people move through the transitions with greater speed and effectiveness.

Early on when a major organizational change is being introduced, people's *understanding* of what will take place is often thin. Regardless of their initial reactions to the announcement (whether positive or negative), they usually develop a more informed view of the consequences over time, and their *commitment* to the change's intended outcome either becomes stronger or fails to emerge. If commitment does start forming, individuals typically begin to see the need for a collective effort to bring the change to fruition, which fosters *alignment* (a shared view of the necessary interdependence) among those involved. As implementation progresses, problems and opportunities surface additional information and insights that prompt new *learning* about implications that people didn't previously perceive or fully consider. This new learning creates the opening to refine their understanding of the change, which impacts their commitment (in either positive or negative ways), which impacts their alignment, and so forth.

¹ *Installation* refers to the process of announcing a change initiative, setting up new equipment and/or processes, and training employees in their use.

² Initiatives are *realized* when they accomplish the full aim of what was being pursued—when sought-after behaviors are demonstrated in a quality manner and sustained over an appropriate amount of time.

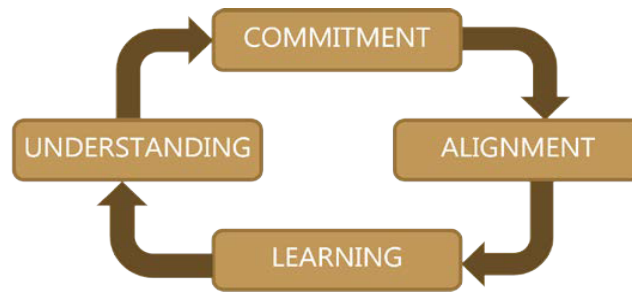


Figure 1. Commitment Cycle

As Figure 1 depicts, this means commitment is part of a larger, cyclical process. The sequence of key milestones is important: Commitment is preceded by understanding and followed by alignment and learning; it isn't the result of a one-and-done binary event where it either forms or doesn't. It's an ongoing organic work in progress that ebbs and flows based on aggregated learnings from accumulated experiences. As such, effective commitment building is a multi-layered, nuanced endeavor that requires an in-depth grasp of its key components.

What follows is a description of how commitment unfolds that can be useful in planning how to foster broader, deeper resolve toward particularly challenging change initiatives—i.e., endeavors that are transformational in nature, where full (not partial) implementation is the standard for success, and the intended outcomes are considered imperative to accomplish. These three criteria constitute a “trifecta” change project.³

CHANGE ROLES AND COMMITMENT

There are four key roles that people fill when organizations engage change. The interactions between these roles affect the development of commitment to an initiative and, consequently, impact its success or failure.

³ For a full description of trifecta change, see *Identifying Difficult Change Initiatives: When Implementation Warrants Special Attention* at www.conneradvisory.com.

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Change Sponsor | Has the power to authorize or legitimize change |
| Change Agent | Facilitates the development and execution of implementation plans |
| Change Target | Must alter something about their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and/or behavior for the change to succeed |
| Change Advocate | Wants to achieve a change but does not possess legitimization power |

Regardless of whether they are formally designated, these roles are always present during change. Each role can be (and often is) played by multiple people, and individuals often inhabit more than one role.

All four roles contribute to change success or failure, and each one has specific mindsets and behaviors that are required to reach realization:

- *Sponsors* must be committed to consistently displaying support for the change through influential communication and the application of meaningful consequences.
- *Agents* must be committed to supporting the sponsors' intent for the change and applying effective approaches to implementation.
- *Targets* must be committed to the new ways of thinking and operating that are required to fully realize the intended outcome.
- *Advocates* must be committed to effectively presenting their perspective to sponsors and others.

As previously stated, these roles overlap. For instance, regardless of what other roles are engaged, everyone is affected by a change, which means everyone is a target. No one is exempt; even sponsors are subject to the multiple layers of learning described in the Commitment Cycle, thereby making them targets of the very initiatives they are advancing.

A low level of commitment among people in any of these roles increases the likelihood that the endeavor will fail to reach its aspirations. Such shortfalls may be as obvious as a sponsor terminating

an endeavor, or they may be subtler, such as apathy or disillusionment among those being impacted. In each case, however, the result is that the outcome of the initiative falls short of what was intended. This is problematic for any significant change, but it is particularly so for trifecta-level endeavors.

DEFINING COMMITMENT

Commitment is powerful, yet little understood. It manifests itself in various ways at various points during the implementation process. Attributes include:

- Investing resources such as time, energy, and money to ensure the desired outcome
- Pursuing the goal constantly over time, even under stress
- Rejecting ideas or action plans that promise short-term benefits but are inconsistent with the overall strategy for the ultimate goal
- Standing fast in the face of adversity and remaining determined and focused in the quest for the desired goal
- Applying creativity, ingenuity, and resourcefulness to resolve issues that would otherwise hinder achieving the goal
- Demonstrating the required mindsets and behaviors consistently, even when not being monitored or observed

Each of these attributes represents a type of investment, be it in terms of time, energy, resources, political capital, and/or reputation. Without meaningful investment, claims of commitment to a change remain mere words, aspirations, or good intentions.

These attributes also highlight why a strong foundation of commitment is so important to the success of organizational change. It is the cement that provides the critical bond between people and realization outcomes. Yet most individuals involved in significant organizational transitions—even

those leading the initiatives—know little about what is required to build commitment and how it can be lost.

The *Stages of Change Commitment* model (Figure 2) illustrates how commitment can be built and sustained.

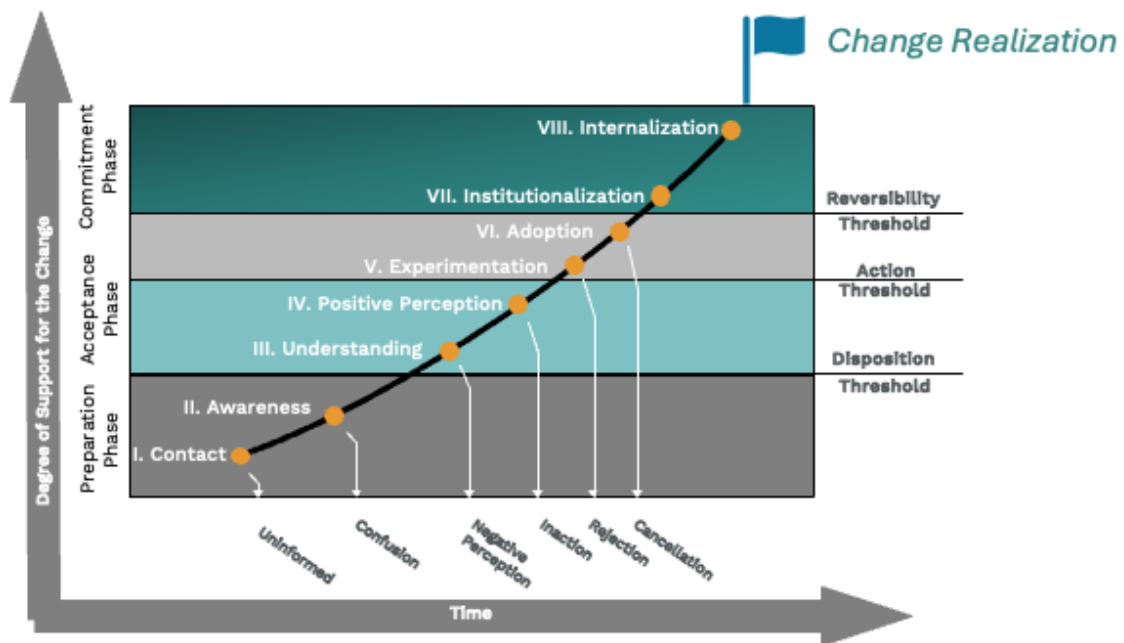


Figure 2. Stages of Change Commitment

The vertical axis represents the degree of support for the new mindsets and behaviors, and the horizontal axis indicates the passage of time. The model consists of three developmental phases—*Preparation*, *Acceptance*, and *Commitment*—and the stages unique to each phase. Each stage represents a critical juncture in the development of commitment to change, and movement through the stages is affected by a person’s perception of the change.

As the graph illustrates, learning more about the change and what it will require doesn’t guarantee increased commitment. A negative perception may stall or reverse progress (depicted by downward arrows), while a positive perception may advance progress (represented by moving to the next stage).

The next section of this paper describes each of the phases and their stages, as well as approaches to helping people move through the sequence.⁴ Bear in mind that graphics can never fully tell the story of human behavior. The purpose of a model is to simplify what might otherwise be an overwhelming array of convoluted dynamics and nuanced influences. Such is the case here. Although commitment building isn't as linear as the illustration suggests, the model offers valuable insight into the sequential nature of how commitment evolves (or doesn't).

THE PHASES AND STAGES OF COMMITMENT

Preparation Phase

The Preparation Phase lays the foundation for the development of either support for or resistance to the change. There are two stages in the Preparation Phase: Contact and Awareness.

Stage I: Contact

The process that may or may not ultimately result in commitment to an organizational change forming begins when people in any of the four change roles (sponsors, agents, targets, and advocates) pass through the Contact Stage. This stage marks individuals' first encounter with the fact that a change has taken or is taking place.

For example, if an organization decides to alter its fundraising strategy, it could be because the CEO (the sponsor) encountered a weak financial statement and responded by sponsoring a shift in approach to revenue generation. After learning of the decision from the CEO, the director of development (agent) uses a staff meeting to first inform his/her team (targets) that a different method for approaching donors and funders will be pursued going forward. Both the sponsor-agent and agent-target conversations represent initial contact.

There is a wide range of methods for delivering the first communications about a change: Emails, staff meetings, personal contact, and other mechanisms are all viable options. Regardless of the

⁴ A summary of these descriptions and tactics can be found in the Appendix.

approach, this first stage aims to ultimately raise *awareness* that a change has occurred or is forthcoming.

However, contact efforts don't always produce the intended result. Sponsors and agents are often frustrated when, after several meetings and email announcements about an initiative, some targets either continue to be underinformed about a change or react with total surprise when it begins to affect them. Separating contact efforts from actual awareness of change highlights the danger in assuming that one automatically leads to the other.

Tactics for Making Contact that Lead to Awareness

Using multiple announcement mechanisms and repeating the message frequently in a variety of ways is the most effective way to turn contact into awareness. Such mechanisms may include:

- Emails
- Text messages
- Organization-wide presentations
- Staff meetings
- Posters
- Videos
- Collaboration platform messages

Outcomes of the Contact Stage

- a) *Awareness* — which advances the preparation process, or
- b) *Unawareness* — in which no preparation for commitment will occur

Stage II: Awareness

In Stage II, employees know that a change is being considered or implemented. Initial communications about the change have reached the desired audiences and conveyed the message adequately.

This awareness, however, does not mean that employees understand what the message is intended to communicate or accurately grasp how the change will affect them. They may or may not have

what leaders deem a correct picture of the scope, nature, depth, implications, or even the basic intent of the change. Nonetheless, an understanding has been formulated.

An executive, for instance, may realize that he or she must lead people through a major shift in field operations but not fully understand the requirements of effectively sponsoring the change. An agent may recognize that he or she is being asked to apply a new methodology for executing the initiative but not have a clear picture of the personal implications. And targets may perceive that a change is coming without knowing the specific ways they will need to alter their mindsets and behaviors.

Before individuals can progress toward acceptance, awareness must develop into an understanding of the change's implications (no matter how accurate or complete this view is).

Tactics for Raising Awareness that Lead to Understanding

The key to raising awareness so that people gain the intended understanding of the implications of a change is capturing people's attention. This can be done through:

- Acknowledging the various frames of reference that exist
- Providing sufficient details
- Using multiple points of contact (e.g., electronic communications, in-person meetings, virtual discussions, internal sharing platforms)
- Leveraging credible sources
- Offering engaging activities/materials such as Q&A sessions with sponsors, frequent updates on progress, and videos of success stories in the words of staff

Outcomes of the Awareness Stage

- a) *Understanding* — which advances the preparation process to the Acceptance Phase, or
- b) *Confusion* — which reduces or precludes change preparation

Acceptance Phase

The Acceptance Phase marks passage over the critical Disposition Threshold, where people shift from viewing the change as something abstract or theoretical to recognizing it has personal significance for them. This revised perspective enables them to make more relevant decisions about accepting or not accepting their part in the change.

To better assess a change, people in this phase ask questions, pose challenges, and seek additional information. As straightforward as this may seem, sometimes leaders wrongly interpret these queries as resistance. It is true that some individuals pose endless questions as part of an opposition strategy. However, these are often people who have already drawn negative conclusions about the initiative, not those expanding their perspective to form an opinion. The exploration taking place within the Acceptance Phase is investigative, not defiant in nature.

There are two stages of the Acceptance Phase: Understanding and Positive Perception.

Stage III: Understanding

Earlier we described understanding as a prerequisite to commitment. People can hold a meaningful conviction about something only to the degree they believe they understand the situation at hand.⁵

In Stage III, people begin to understand the nature and intent of the change and what it may mean for them. As they learn more about the initiative and the role(s) they are likely to play, they begin to see how it will affect their work and how it will touch them personally. These insights enable them to make an initial judgment about the change. They will continue to move toward (or away from) commitment as they discover and assess new information that they consider credible.

⁵ It's important to note that we are describing "perceived" understanding, meaning it has little to do with the objective accuracy of the information being relied on to form the opinion. Someone can believe they understand trifecta intentions and requirements even though the basis for that viewpoint is partially or completely false. Commitment doesn't depend on verifiably correct information; it hinges on one's confidence in whatever information has been accepted as relevant and trustworthy.

Each person's view about a change is influenced by his or her own cognitive and emotional filter systems—the unique set of lenses that a person uses to interpret the world. These biases are developed through prior exposure to information and/or previous experience. As a result, people can vary widely in their responses to a new initiative. This is why the same change, communicated the same way at the same time, can be viewed as favorable by some and harmful by others.

Furthermore, change of any significance is usually multifaceted and may produce both positive and negative reactions within a person at the same time. For example, a target may have an adverse view of a new organizational policy regarding relocation every four years but also see benefits in the level of job security he or she would experience. At the end of the day, people combine these optimistic and pessimistic viewpoints and land on an overall judgment that a change is largely either good, bad, or a mixture of both. Notably, once a good/bad judgement is made, it's difficult to unseat.

In an ideal world, the positive aspects of a change would be seen as so clearly overshadowing any advantages offered by other courses of action that people would naturally gravitate toward commitment with little hesitation. Unfortunately, this is not what usually happens. The pluses secured by advancing a change are often seen as only marginally more positive than what is proposed by other options, and/or the change's negatives are considered only slightly less troublesome than the alternatives. With some endeavors, the path forward comes with such serious impediments that individuals reach an overall positive perception of the change only because all the other choices appear worse (i.e., selecting the least dirty shirt to wear).

For instance, leaders may face a difficult decision to lay off a large number of people from their organization. While they may view this as a challenging and costly move, executives could develop a positive perception if they believe maintaining the existing overhead run rate poses an existential threat to the organization.

What all this means is that when people are formulating their understanding of a change, they are engaged in a complex process, fraught with junctures where conclusions can pull them toward or away from commitment. Progress up the Commitment Curve is more likely if leaders actively strive to influence positive interpretations of their initiatives rather than passively hope for the best.

Tactics for Promoting Understanding that Lead to Positive Perceptions

Applying the following tactics can help members of an organization deepen their understanding of an impending or active initiative so that they are better prepared to make an informed (and hopefully positive) assessment of the change:

- Involving targets in the process of planning how the change will be formulated and/or implemented
- Creating an environment that encourages the exploration of organizational and personal implications of the change and any emotions that are felt as a result of such exploration
- Clarifying misperceptions
- Providing the most accurate and complete information possible
- Fostering two-way communication, especially between sponsors and targets
- Offering information tailored to an individual (or a team), for instance in one-on-one conversations

Outcomes of the Understanding Stage

- a) *Positive perception* — a favorable view of the change,⁶ or
- b) *Negative perception* — an unfavorable view of the change

Stage IV: Positive Perception

At this stage of the process, people have formed an opinion of the change that is predominantly favorable. However, there are many things we view in a positive light that don't stir us to action. In other words, developing a positive perception of a specific change is an important milestone on the road to commitment, but it is rarely sufficient for motivating an individual to experiment with, much

⁶ As described in Stage IV, a positive perception does not necessarily mean that people like the change, but rather that they see it as the best available course of action.

less adopt, a change. Once positive perceptions are formed, sponsors must foster the conditions that encourage action.

An organization experienced this challenge recently when they rolled out a new technology platform. After years of hearing complaints from staff and managers about their archaic and cumbersome email system, this organization's executive team decided to invest in a state-of-the-art platform that was vastly more powerful and user-friendly than the existing one. Enterprise-wide surveys showed overwhelming enthusiasm for the new system, especially after a period of education and training on how it worked and what it could do.

When the new email system went "live," the executive sponsors of the initiative left the old one in place. The rationale for this was to give users the opportunity to become familiar with the new technology and migrate their work to it over several months. Sponsors assumed that once staff had some exposure to the new system, they would like it so much that they would quickly adopt it. However, user data from the initial ninety days showed that only a small fraction of the organization had even logged on to the new email system, much less used it regularly. Again, this was despite widespread dissatisfaction with the legacy technology and continued support for the new.

The sponsors came to realize that they had made the erroneous assumption that positive perceptions of the change and negative perceptions of the status quo would be sufficient to motivate individuals to experiment with and ultimately embrace the new system. What they didn't account for was that in addition to liking the idea of a new email system, people needed conditions in place that would encourage an actual shift in their behavior. Despite having an attractive new option, employees chose to stick with what they had because it was familiar and less risky than trying to learn how to use the new system. More to the point, the existing system remained accessible, making it simply easier to maintain the status quo than to accommodate change. Old habits (even onerous ones) are hard to break, especially when workers are under pressure to deliver a certain output and/or do not face consequences for not shifting their behavior.

Once the sponsors grasped what was happening, they recalibrated their approach by launching a new phase of the rollout that included reminding users of how the existing technology was failing to meet

their expressed needs and revisiting the benefits of the newer technology at the individual, team, and organizational levels. Executive sponsors then modeled the shift by only using the new system in the execution of their day-to-day duties, and they encouraged others within the organization who were experimenting with the new functionality to share their experiences. Finally, they reiterated why the current system would no longer be a viable option and, most importantly, set a specific near-term date when the old system would be shut off.

Following these actions, tracking data showed a sharp rise in log-ons and use of available support services for the new email system. Over the next three months, usage of the new system grew at an increasing pace as staff and their managers had a chance to “play” with the new functionality the technology provided and got more comfortable using the system.

While this example focuses on a technology shift, it illustrates the fact that positive perceptions are necessary but insufficient for individuals or teams to move further up the commitment curve toward any shifts in mindsets or behaviors. Conditions need to be fostered that encourage action.

Tactics for Increasing Positive Perceptions that Lead to Experimentation

There are a number of ways to help people progress from merely perceiving a change in a positive light to “trying it out.” Examples include:

- Encouraging two-way communication to deepen trust and understanding of implications
- Clearly articulating the personal and organizational cost and/or consequences of not changing
- Communicating the anticipated benefits from the target’s perspective
- Reframing negative implications to be less burdensome than maintaining the status quo

Outcomes of the Positive Perception Stage

- a) *Experimentation* — an initial trial of the new ways of thinking and behaving, or
- b) *Inaction* — failure to translate a favorable view into tangible action

Commitment Phase

The Commitment Phase marks passage over the Action Threshold. Here is where the positive perceptions from the Acceptance Phase start taking the form of mindsets and behaviors that meaningfully impact change implementation. This critical juncture determines whether favorable impressions evolve into meaningful action or remain ineffectual rhetoric that contributes very little to fully realizing the change.

There are numerous situations in which people say they view a change positively but, for a variety of reasons, don't act on their proclamations. For example: If asked, many people would agree that recycling is a good thing and may even express willingness to engage in the practice. However, when it comes time to consistently separate their garbage, many fail to follow through.

Experimentation is the first of four stages (along with Adoption, Institutionalization, and Internalization) where actionable commitment toward trifecta realization starts to be exhibited.

Stage V: Experimentation

In Stage V, individuals engage with and test the reality of what is unfolding. This is the first time people actually try out the change and acquire some firsthand experience seeing how it affects their work and impacts others in the organization.

It is here that the earliest signs of commitment begin to emerge. By no means does this reflect a deep allegiance to the intended outcomes, but exploring what the new endeavor entails and its ensuing implications does require a degree of commitment to act, even if in a tentative and/or cursory manner.

As is the case with all experiments, no one knows what the outcome might be. Some experimentation might reveal unforeseen advantages while other trials may uncover unanticipated problems. Consequently, people may come out of this stage with a deeper conviction that the initiative's success is imperative, or they may emerge believing that the project is not worth the costs or disadvantages it generates. Often, both positive and negative impressions surface.

Because some negative surprises are inevitable, a degree of pessimism is unavoidable during significant change. Nevertheless, confidence tends to increase as a result of resolving such problems, so open discussion of concerns, fears and trepidations usually advance the chances of resolving problems, promoting ownership, and building commitment to action. As apprehensions are at least addressed, if not mitigated, commitment to the change is more likely to progress to the Adoption Stage.

Tactics for Fostering Experimentation that Leads to Adoption

Promoting experimentation means creating the conditions for people to take action in service of the change. People who see a change as positive but don't take action often lack one or more of the following: 1) an environment in which they can try the new behavior without risking negative repercussions; 2) certain necessary skills or knowledge; 3) time, energy, or adaptation capacity to properly engage the new behavior; or 4) adequate support from their sponsor to try out the change. Therefore, to encourage people to move beyond simply holding a positive view of the change and to actually begin engaging with the new mindsets and behaviors, sponsors might consider:

- Setting up conditional implementation, a pilot, or a test environment
- Fostering the development of needed knowledge skills
- Setting clear priorities to ensure adaptation capacity and resources are available
- Creating an environment that encourages curiosity
- Establishing meaningful positive/negative consequences geared toward exploring the unfamiliar
- Ensuring leaders are role models for experimentation
- Expressing a value for learning from experience and making adjustments as needed

Outcomes of the Experimentation Stage

- a) *Adoption* — individuals engage in longer-term exploration of change implications, or
- b) *Rejection* — individuals no longer explore what the change means, or they go through the motions of experimenting to appease leadership but no longer have a favorable view of the change

Stage VI: Adoption

Stage VI is reached after individuals have successfully navigated the initial tryout period. The dynamics here are similar to those in Experimentation, as both stages serve as test periods for people to assess the costs and benefits of the change for themselves. These trial periods often reveal logistic, economic, or political benefits or problems with the new way of operating that wouldn't have surfaced without engaging the new mindsets and behaviors on an extended basis.

That said, there are some important differences between these two stages. Experimentation focuses on the initial human and technical impact of an initiative, while adoption centers more on in-depth, longer-term dynamics resulting from the change. Experimentation asks, "Will this change work?" Adoption asks, "Does this change align with my values and/or our organization's identity?" The shift is from "Can we do it?" to "Should we move forward with it?"

Although the time and resources necessary to reach Adoption are considerable, individuals going through this stage of the Commitment Curve are still evaluating the change. Some typical factors that lead people to take a positive or negative stance on advancing a change beyond the Adoption Stage are:

- New logistical, political, or economic problems or opportunities are identified during Adoption.
- The initial rationale for the change becomes more pronounced or is resolved.
- The organization's strategic goals shift, either deprioritizing the change outcomes or making them more important than ever.

- People see a clear alignment with the initiative’s success or failure and their own success or failure.

Based on what they learn as they continue to test out the new mindsets and behaviors, people reinforce, adjust, or revise their own conclusions about whether the change should proceed, be stopped, or undergo significant alteration.

Tactics for Encouraging Adoption that Lead to Institutionalization

To effectively move through Adoption and into Institutionalization and/or Internalization, activities engaged during the Experimentation Stage should be expanded and intensified. This may take the form of sponsors:

- Resolving problems and leveraging opportunities identified during Experimentation
- Creating an environment that values exploring long-range implications of change beyond initial engagement
- Encouraging people to look beyond “Can it work?” and ask “Should we do it?”
- Providing ongoing change-related coaching, feedback, reinforcement, and modeling
- Identifying effective measures and tracking change progress and results

Outcomes of the Adoption Stage

- Institutionalization* — individuals conform to the new way of operating, or
- Internalization* — individuals embrace the new way operating, or
- Cancellation* — the change experiment is ended

Stage VII: Institutionalization

Adoption (Stage VI) can be a launching pad for progressing to either Institutionalization (Stage VII) or Internalization (Stage VIII). Alternatively, Institutionalization can serve as a stepping stone to Internalization.

The transition from Stage VI to Stage VII or VIII marks the point at which people no longer view the change as tentative or subject to potential reversal or cancellation. In fact, this is when what was once a change initiative requiring substantial effort to implement has become part of the organizational routine. Rather than being seen as a deviation from the norm, the new technologies, responsibilities, policies, procedures, mindsets, behaviors, and so on are now considered standard operating procedures.

Whether the movement is from VI to VII or *through* VII to VIII, the shift is a significant one. The threshold that's crossed here is that of Reversibility; there is no turning back. Indeed, the endeavor is no longer a change; it has become the new status quo. As such, any effort to make substantive modification to it actually represents a change to the new "established way we do things around here."

With trifecta change, this "point of no return" can proceed in two ways. Institutionalization is the first, and it is a very powerful form of commitment. This is when organizational systems are put in place to ensure that what was a change is now how things are, regardless of how people might feel about it. Directives, positive and negative consequences, cultural expectations, monitoring mechanisms, and other means are employed to bolster the new norm and make it difficult to pursue alternative routes.

What drives institutionalization isn't the desire to win "hearts and souls;" it's to safeguard the intended outcomes of the endeavor without regard to whether people support the change or not. Institutionalized commitment doesn't preclude people from agreeing with the change decision; it's just not its primary objective.

This form of commitment is both powerful (it works) and legitimate (there are times when it is warranted), but it comes as a double-edged sword. Although institutionalization can suffice to achieve certain change goals, there are some potential downsides.

For example, compliance-driven initiatives can be difficult to undo. Even if the original reasons for sanctioning the change become null or leaders no longer believe it's worth the price to continue

forcing the change, the momentum of an organizational system can maintain the new way of operating well beyond its usefulness. Ending or significantly altering an institutionalized pattern embedded in the fabric of an organization is possible, but it can be extremely difficult and costly.

Also, if a change has been institutionalized, many people only comply due to organizational mandates and the related rewards and punishments. They are acquiescing because the costs of not doing so are too high. This leads many people to mimic the called-for behavior without embracing the desired intent. They learn to say and do the “right” things, but because their *mindsets* (beliefs and assumptions) aren’t aligned with the intended outcomes, full realization of the envisioned result isn’t likely.

It’s worth recognizing that the success of a change doesn’t always depend on the targets’ personal investment. Some projects require only that people “do as they are told.” However, as the magnitude, pace, and complexity of the change escalates, there is usually a corresponding increase in the need for genuine support from the workforce being affected. Institutionalized change, as potent as it is, tends to secure compliance rather than the genuine determination and ingenuity needed for full realization. For that to occur, generally speaking, the commitment should be internalized.

Tactics When Institutionalization Is the Final Objective

To optimize compliance-driven change, sponsors should consider:

- Confirming that “bodies, not souls,” will be sufficient to accomplish the intended outcome
- Resolving problems and leveraging opportunities that surfaced during adoption
- Establishing tightly controlled monitoring systems to keep a close watch on compliance
- Ensuring positive and negative consequences that are meaningful to those being affected are in place
- Being prepared to escalate the consequences as people become used to their administration

- Bracing for the potential of minimum standards becoming the norm, low morale, increased conflict, covert behavior, and passive-aggressive actions

Tactics When Institutionalization Is a Stepping Stone to Internalization

To facilitate people advancing from Institutionalization to Internalization, sponsors should consider:

- Applying the same suggestions listed under “Tactics When Institutionalization Is the Final Objective” but employing them in a manner that doesn’t undermine later movement to Internalization (e.g., avoiding the use of negative consequences that create more unhappiness than people can put behind them later)
- Stating from the onset that:
 - *Nothing short of full realization is acceptable, and this outcome isn’t possible without a critical mass of deep, genuine support.*
 - *Every effort will be made to enroll people in seeing the critical need for the change. However, due to various circumstances, it is necessary to engage the change immediately and fully, even if that has to be done without everyone perceiving the need for doing so.*
 - *The plan is to install the change ASAP, but to do so in a way that allows for a more gradual enrollment which will hopefully foster subsequent realization buy-in.*

Stage VIII: Internalization

The “point of no return” that occurs when people move beyond Adoption is reflected in either compliance-focused commitment driven by influences outside a person (Stage VII), introspective-focused commitment propelled by a person’s beliefs and desires being aligned with those of the organizational change (Stage VIII), or both.

Institutionalization is the highest level of commitment that can be achieved *by an organization*. Internalization is more powerful, but it only comes about by *individuals* making that choice themselves. While an enterprise can legislate the institutionalization of a change very quickly,

internalization typically develops more gradually, as employees gain experience with the new way of operating, find ways to refine and improve it, and adjust to its long-range impact and requirements. Dynamics of this nature take more time to become a natural part of the organization's culture and day-to-day expectations.

Internalization is a form of “profound commitment”:⁷

- It runs deep—People consider reaching the stated objectives not only as an organizational responsibility but as a personal pledge.
- It's durable—They remain steadfast and focused in the face of considerable challenges, limitations, and hardships.
- It's authentic—They embody the dedication they ask others to demonstrate, serving as role models in exhibiting the mindsets and behaviors needed to ensure change success.
- It's contagious—They demonstrate personal conviction so credibly and consistently that it tends to cultivate commitment in others.

At this stage, where personal commitment is at its strongest, people “own” the change and demonstrate a high level of personal responsibility for its success. Regardless of their role (sponsor, agent, target or advocate), they promote the new way of operating, constantly look for ways to strengthen its impact, protect it from those who would undermine it, and do whatever they can to ensure its success. For example, targets who come to own a change often can't be distinguished from sponsors, agents, and advocates in their devotion to the endeavor and their ability to persuade others to support the change effort.

To better understand the difference between Institutionalization and Internalization, consider the difference between compliance with speed limits and adherence to seatbelt laws. For many people, speed limits are institutionalized. It is primarily the threat of receiving a ticket that prevents them

⁷ To learn more about profound commitment, see *Senior Leadership's Commitment to Critical Organizational Change* at www.conneradvisory.com.

from exceeding posted speed limits by too much. In contrast, most people have internalized the commitment to wear seatbelts. Though there are annoying car alarms if they forget, and in many states the driver can be fined if people in their car aren't wearing seatbelts (institutionalization), the majority of people buckle up and encourage others in their vehicle to do so because they feel safer wearing a seatbelt and believe it is in everyone's best interest to engage in this behavior.

Enthusiasm, high-energy investment, and persistence characterize internalized commitment. The actions of those who support a change at this level typically go well beyond what could be prompted by any organizational mandate.

Not all endeavors require this level of dedication, but when change seeks transformational results, full realization is nonnegotiable, and successful implementation is an absolute imperative, nothing short of internalized commitment will suffice. Undertakings of this magnitude won't engender internalization from everyone, so implementation success depends on having enough of the right people located in enough of the right positions demonstrating enough internalized commitment to reach realization. Without achieving this "critical mass" of support, trifecta change intentions are likely to fall short of expectations.

Tactics to Foster Internalization

While Internalization is unique to each individual, there are actions an organization can take to encourage it. These include:

- Recognizing individuals' goals and values, and structuring reward systems such that individuals achieve their own goals by helping the organization achieve its goals
- Reinforcing internalized behavior by reminding people why the change was engaged and giving them opportunities to discuss change-related shifts in thoughts, feelings, and values
- Consistently demonstrating commitment through leadership modeling

- Applying structured approaches to shift culture⁸

IMPLICATIONS FOR BUILDING COMMITMENT TO CHANGE

The Commitment Curve model offers many implications for those involved in designing and implementing significant changes within their organizations. Among the more crucial lessons to be applied are as follows.

1. Human reactions to change are influenced by both emotional and cognitive factors.

Logic would suggest that people review the facts of a situation (as they see them) and then develop their views. However, what we actually tend to do is quickly fashion opinions based on our initial emotional reactions and then (typically unconsciously) filter for information to support our suppositions. Put another way, we don't just lead with our hearts when we formulate judgments; we enlist our heads to defend our original conclusions.

Once beliefs start to crystallize, it's difficult to avoid valuing information that reinforces our emerging view and discounting information that runs contrary to that perspective. It's possible to counter this inclination, but for most people, not without great effort.

This reflexive tendency to decide first and then bolster with biased data is prevalent among people and, therefore, common within organizations. As a result, it has significant bearing on how people advance (or don't) through the Commitment Curve. For example, the movement from Awareness to Understanding has a major impact on how the rest of the stages unfold. Once someone starts to form an opinion, it affects whether they land on a positive or negative perception, which influences how they progress through the remaining steps and whether they ultimately reach the needed level of

⁸ To learn more about the interplay between organizational culture and organizational change, see *Organizational Culture and Its Impact on Change in the Civil Society Sector* at www.conneradvisory.com.

commitment for the initiative to succeed. For this reason, it's crucial that leaders pay proper attention to how a change is first introduced to those being affected.

Even though our emotions tend to take the lead when forming opinions, we are also influenced by facts—at least as we see them. Sometimes this creates a conflict when our hearts want to go one way but our heads pull us in the opposite direction. This split can produce confusion, mixed signals, and ambiguous communication for all involved. For instance, people can logically believe they buy into a new approach, only to find that once they engage in the required behaviors, there are consequences (such as changing relationships with coworkers) they aren't emotionally prepared to deal with.

Executives responsible for organizational change should learn to handle both the emotional and cognitive aspects of commitment. They must distinguish between deteriorating commitment and the mixed messages people sometimes convey when their heads have accepted the change but their hearts are still struggling.

2. Building commitment requires developing strategies that consider who needs to become committed and what level of commitment is needed.

Executives often devote considerable time, money, and energy to making the right decision about what should be changed but then underinvest in building commitment to that decision. When initiatives are big, complex, and critically important, it's too risky to leave serious dedication and tenacity to chance.

Profound commitment can't be dictated, but it can be encouraged. A well-thought-out strategy will increase the probability that people gradually develop a deep conviction to fully realize an endeavor's intended outcomes.

Strategies for building commitment should be aimed at the change's primary targets, but they can't stop there. Initiating sponsors (those at the top of the organization) must develop plans to ensure there is a cascading network of committed sustaining sponsors (leaders below) who fully support reaching the intended outcomes.

Of course, not all change projects call for the same level of commitment from everyone. Some require only that people try a change (Experimentation). Other initiatives need a longer testing period (Adoption). For many endeavors, the intent of the effort won't be realized unless the change becomes formally sanctioned (Institutionalization). If the long-range goals of a change demand exceptionally high levels of support from staff at all levels, maximum commitment (Internalization) may be necessary. As part of building a commitment strategy, it's important to understand what levels of commitment are needed from which constituencies.

3. Commitment requires enrollment.

Ensuring that the proper levels of commitment to a given change are in place are the responsibility of the sponsor(s) of that effort. When pursuing trifecta changes (transformational in nature, realization-centric, imperative to accomplish), these levels of commitment should not be left to chance; the process of building them should be carefully and thoughtfully orchestrated.

Commitment-building begins with Contact (Stage I) when the change is announced. At a minimum, such an announcement should address the following questions:

- **Why** the status quo is no longer feasible — *What's at stake if we do not change?*
- **What** will be substantively different after implementation — *What does successful realization look like, and how will we measure its achievement?*
- **How** the intent of the change will be achieved — *What actions will be undertaken to first install and then subsequently realize the desired outcomes of the change?*
- **When** the change will be executed — *What is the urgency of this change endeavor, and how does it stack up relative to other organizational priorities?*
- **Who** will be impacted — *Who will be required to shift their mindsets and behaviors in order to achieve the objectives of the change?*

Even when well executed, communications of this nature often accomplish little more than making people aware of the change and its rationale (Stage II). Establishing a meaningful understanding of

the endeavor takes more than well-crafted and well-delivered communications; it requires conducting a thoughtful, ongoing enrollment process.

Enrollment is a set of activities that allows individuals and their leaders to thoroughly explore the change and its implications by creating opportunities to share and discuss questions, concerns, ideas, enthusiasm, resistance, etc. without judgment or consequences. Often, these activities take the form of one-on-one conversations and team meetings. Such discussions allow leaders to share their understanding of the change and how they personally relate to its realization. They also make time to “localize” the endeavor, identifying what shifts will occur in how the team performs its work and exploring the “head and heart” implications of the change at the individual level.

The key to making these enrollment activities effective is creating a deeper understanding of (and hopefully commitment to) realizing the change. To accomplish this, leaders should:

- Encourage a robust dialogue within their team about the required shift, not a monologue aimed at “selling” others on the change
- Foster a climate that supports straight talk—e.g., bringing forward questions, doubts, and fears as well as what aspects of the change are exciting and beneficial
- Promote the norm that openness and candor are obligations, not just opportunities
- Address questions and concerns with honest and as-complete-as-possible responses
- Promise to share more complete answers to questions as soon as relevant information is available, as well as to escalate concerns (as needed) for response
- Recognize that some degree of struggle is inherent in coming to terms with significant change and that, therefore, understanding and commitment unfold and strengthen over time
- Appreciate that the pace of accepting change differs from individual to individual and calls for patience, calm, and a nonjudgmental demeanor from leadership in the face of this struggle.

Done well, these enrollment activities require time and effort, yet the payoff can be dramatic. By engaging their teams in this manner on an ongoing basis, leaders foster the conditions that encourage curiosity and critical thinking, which, in turn, opens the possibility for deeper levels of commitment.

4. There are no shortcuts to strong commitment.

While the real-world process of forming commitment isn't as linear as the Commitment Curve model might suggest, there is a sequential nature to how it unfolds. Understanding, for example, must follow Awareness. People can't form much of a perception of a change if they lack information about its justification and ultimate intent.

Obviously, sponsors can attempt to bypass stages (e.g., proclaiming that a change has already been institutionalized). With this approach, the announcement is made, behavior is dictated, and the intended compliance may or may not materialize depending on how people respond. The philosophical question about whether such an approach is "right or wrong" is worth pondering, but the practical question is our focus here: Does this approach foster what an initiative requires to be successfully implemented? If the organization is pursuing an incremental change, compliance-centric tactics might be sufficient. If a paradigm leap is being attempted, however, profound, enduring commitment will be needed to fuel the engines of change.

Shortcuts to deep commitment simply don't exist. Each stage in the process depends on the successful completion of prior stages. To move to the highest levels of commitment, implementation plans as well as sponsor, agent, and target behaviors must be consistent with the sequential stages of the Commitment Curve.

5. Commitment is expensive; don't order it if you can't or won't pay for it.

All leaders desire strong support for the changes they engage, but few fully understand what is entailed in gaining that kind of buy-in. Many who do understand the time and effort required balk at

allocating the necessary resources. They want fervent, durable support but aren't willing to pay the price to acquire it.

Unwavering commitment to reaching full realization of intended outcomes is an absolute imperative for critically important initiatives (aka trifecta changes). Generating such a powerful asset, however, comes with a commensurate price tag. Peripheral attention and marginal resources won't be enough.

6. Either build commitment or prepare for the consequences.

Although building strong commitment to critical changes is important, there are times that logistical, political, or economic issues make the cost of generating such conviction too high. If achieving the desired level of commitment isn't likely or is too burdensome to attempt, leaders should prepare for inevitable resistance.

Too often sponsors and/or agents decide not to invest in building target commitment and are then surprised by and unprepared for the resulting pushback. There's always a choice: Either do what's necessary to build support among those affected or brace for the inevitable overt and/or covert opposition that will arise. Without a plan for effectively responding to resistance, realization of the change could wind up in jeopardy.

7. Be careful what you build commitment to.

The perspectives on building commitment described in this paper can have a powerful impact on the level of resolve that's generated to realize a change. Although individuals have the ultimate choice regarding what they will commit to and whether they will shift their behaviors and mindsets, leaders orchestrating trifecta change have both a fiduciary and an ethical responsibility for carefully selecting what they ask people to commit to.

From a purely practical perspective, being discerning about building commitment is good stewardship of organizational resources. Once people are committed to a new way of operating, it takes significant effort to modify mindsets and behaviors in a new direction. It is therefore critical to make sure that the changes leaders ask people to make are the right ones.

From an ethical perspective, those who use power, influence, and consequences to dramatically shift how people think, feel, and/or operate should be attentive to the moral, social, political, and economic implications. They have an obligation to ensure that they are directing everyone's efforts to initiatives that bring value to the organization, to the workforce affected, and to the recipients of the organization's mission.

CONCLUSION

The essence of commitment is the application of one's mindset and actions toward accomplishing a specific change outcome. As we have described using the Commitment Curve model, it develops through a predictable series of stages (from Contact to Institutionalization and Internalization), each providing the foundation for the next. The lines separating the stages aren't always clear, and movement within and between stages isn't as binary and linear as the Commitment Curve sequence might suggest, but progression toward greater commitment generally follows a predictable path, and understanding that path is key to realizing transformative change.

Importantly, advancing toward greater commitment isn't guaranteed. **Contacting** people about a change may or may not increase their **awareness** of it; which may or may not produce the desired **understanding**; which may or may not result in a **positive perception**; which may or may not foster **experimentation**; which may or may not lead to **adoption**; which may or may not prompt **institutionalization**; which may or may not translate to into **internalization**. To increase the odds of reaching realization, careful implementation planning is imperative.

When progress does occur, it is usually the result of several successful developments. First, people adjust their heads and hearts. Even if the two aren't always in sync, what people are feeling and learning gradually cements their positive perception of the change. Second, leaders (sponsors) engage affected stakeholders (i.e., targets, agents and advocates) to address questions, concerns, and issues. Importantly, the leaders conduct this process of enrolling—not just “informing”—people continuously from the time they announce the change throughout implementation. Finally, and perhaps most straightforwardly, people process the change and its implications through the

Commitment Cycle: deepening their understanding of the required changes, recommitting to adopting the new ways of thinking and operating, strengthening their alignment with others, and remaining attentive to new information and insights that emerge throughout implementation.

Conner Advisory will continue to monitor and study the factors that are aiding or impeding the progress of INGO leaders and their organizations as they adapt to—and hopefully thrive in—this unprecedented environment of change and disruption. We invite you to download our other research papers and follow future insights on our website, conneradvisory.com.

APPENDIX

| Stage | Goal | Inhibitors | Tactics | Success Indicators |
|---------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Contact | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place information about the change into a place where people are likely to see and hear it. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ineffective information dissemination | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Selecting announcement mechanisms such as memos, emails, voice mails, presentations, staff meetings, and posters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information was made available and was viewed/heard by participants. |
| Awareness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that people know a change is in process or will be coming. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information overload Individual predisposition to pay attention | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gaining attention through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple contacts Credible sources Engaging activities/materials | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals can name and briefly describe the change that is or will be taking place. |
| Understanding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable people to create an accurate picture of the likely organizational and personal impact of the change. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear of asking questions Insufficient information to allow exploration of implications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing involvement in planning Creating an environment that promotes exploring organizational and personal implications and emotions Enabling two-way communication Offering personalized information | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals can accurately explain, in their own words, the general scope, nature, and intent of the change and how it will affect them personally. |
| Positive Perception | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide an accurate picture of the organizational and personal costs, benefits, and alternatives that persuasively communicate the advantages of moving forward with the change. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of trust in the reliability of information and/or the source of the information Unrealistic understanding of alternatives Insufficient information to enable effective choices Leaders who lack credibility Changes that don't bring any benefit to the individual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intentionally designing and communicating costs and benefits from the recipient's perspective Establishing, reinforcing, or recovering leadership's credibility Reframing negative implications to be less burdensome Clearly articulating the cost and/or consequences of not changing Using two-way communication to deepen trust and understanding of | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals can clearly articulate the personal and organizational costs and benefits of the change. Individuals perceive net positive personal benefits. Leaders perceive a net positive result for themselves and for the organization. |

| Stage | Goal | Inhibitors | Tactics | Success Indicators |
|-----------------|---|---|---|--|
| Experimentation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage people to try the new way of doing things and see if it works. Enable individuals and the organization to answer, "Can we do it?" in a short-term test. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity and resource constraints that limit ability to experiment Lack of tools, environment, or skills to practice new ways of operating Fear of making mistakes/looking stupid Lack of confidence in information received and/or the source of the information (including low leadership credibility) | implications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Setting up conditional implementation, pilot, or test environment Developing needed skills Setting clear priorities to ensure capacity and resources are available Establishing meaningful consequences and encouragement Modeling desired behaviors Learning from experience and making adjustments as needed Establishing, reinforcing, or recovering leadership's credibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals take initial steps to pilot or otherwise test the new behaviors/mindsets, investing enough resources to see if it works. |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage people to engage in a sustained effort to test the new way of doing things. Enable individuals and the organization to answer, "Does it work and does it fit who I am?" in a longer-term test. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unresolved problems and challenges leading to frustration Insufficient investment of resources to ensure a long-term try Lack of feedback on progress | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resolution of initial problems identified during experimentation Ongoing opportunities to surface issues and problems, with resources dedicated to resolving them Continued coaching, feedback, modeling, and reinforcement Effective measures and tracking of progress and results Establishing, reinforcing, or recovering leadership's credibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals give sustained effort to testing the change in realistic settings. Problems, if they exist, are assessed, and, if possible, solved. Useful information is gathered to make decisions about moving to institutionalization. |

| Stage | Goal | Inhibitors | Tactics | Success Indicators |
|-----------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Institutionalization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure consistent, sustained operation in alignment with the change. • Embed the new way of operating into the organization's systems and standards. • Replace formal sponsorship with effective management. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational systems and processes that don't support the new ways of operating • Leaders who don't effectively support or manage the new approaches • Inconsistent application of consequences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectively realign systems (e.g., performance management) and processes around the new way of operating • Ensure that leaders are doing their part to consistently support the new "standard", including establishing, communicating, and applying positive and negative consequences • Successfully resolve all significant problems surfaced during adoption | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A critical mass of people throughout the organization is consistently applying the new ways of thinking and behaving. • New employees are learning the updated way of doing things as the norm. |
| Internalization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a high level of congruence between individual and organizational goals, interests, and values. • Move from formal sponsorship to individual responsibility and accountability supported by management reinforcement. • Create and sustain a true mindset shift. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of congruence between individual and organizational interests • Lack of alignment between individual mindset (beliefs and assumptions) and the required behaviors • Erosion of commitment due to disillusionment or frustration • Deeply rooted culture that's not supportive of new mindset | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand individual goals and values, and structure reward systems such that individuals achieve their own goals by helping the organization achieve its goals • Reinforce internalized behavior through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Leadership modeling – Reminders of why this change was engaged – Opportunities to discuss personal shifts in thoughts, feelings and values related to the change • Applying structured approaches to shift culture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People have shifted their mindsets to be supportive of the new way of operating—as a result, they consistently behave in the desired ways with little or no prompting. • People find the new ways of operating intrinsically rewarding. • Leaders and managers model the new behavior; employees actively engage in efforts to continuously improve the new approaches. |

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ed Boswell

Ed is cofounder and CEO of Conner Advisory, a consulting firm established for the sole purpose of supporting leaders who are pursuing *changes that matter*. In this capacity, he collaborates with leaders from a diverse set of humanitarian and development organizations to successfully implement their most urgent and pressing priorities. His current and former clients include leaders from World Vision International, BRAC, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Plan International, ChildFund International, SOS Children's Villages, and FHI360, as well as associations such as the International Civil Society Centre and InterAction that support the global NGO community.

Prior to starting Conner Advisory, Ed was a partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), where he headed up the U.S. People and Organization consulting practice. In this role, Ed was responsible for leading a team of more than 400 practitioners who helped clients execute large-scale strategic projects. Before that, he served as President and Chief Executive Officer of The Forum Corporation, where he advised senior business leaders involved in major change initiatives.

A recognized leader in the field of strategy execution, Ed co-authored *Strategic Speed: Mobilize People, Accelerate Execution* (Harvard Business Press, 2010), which provides a blueprint for leaders who are executing transformational change in their organizations. Ed earned his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. While at Penn, he also attended The Wharton School where he received a certificate in Business Administration.

Ed is currently a strategic advisor to the NeuroLeadership Institute, an international organization that applies the insights of brain science to organizational performance, change execution, and leadership development.

Daryl Conner

Daryl is co-founder and Chairman of Conner Advisory, a consulting firm providing change execution support to civil society organizations that are advancing the quality of the human experience and who find themselves facing transformations beyond their capacity to successfully execute. Conner Advisory serves INGO and non-profit leaders addressing some of the world's most intractable and critical challenges of our day, including homelessness, hunger, medical crises, and healthcare. Representative clients include: Habitat for Humanity, Doctors without Borders, Pact, and YWCA.

During his 50 years of practice, Daryl has educated and advised strategic leaders and seasoned change practitioners in many of the world's most successful organizations. His focus has always been on helping them both understand and address the challenges and opportunities they face during transformational change.

Daryl's work is built on a strong foundation of research, extensive consulting experience, and a master's degree in psychology. He has authored two books—*Managing at the Speed of Change* (Random House, 1993) and *Leading at the Edge of Chaos* (John Wiley & Sons, 1998)—and more than 250 publications, including journal and magazine articles, monographs, book chapters, and videos. In recent years, his newer published work has been made available through blogs, essays, and white papers ([Advisory Research](#), [Raising Your Game Blog](#), [Essays on the Mastery Path](#), and [Change Thinking](#)).

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