

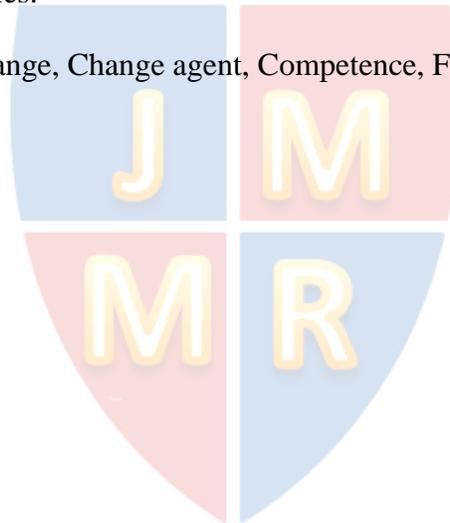
Bozos, yoyos, bimbos, and heroes: The role of focus and competence in defining change agent styles

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ABSTRACT

Succeeding as a change agent goes beyond the desire to lead change efforts. This paper explores how two change agent characteristics, focus and competence, can be used to categorize change agents. Focus is whether the change agent's focal point is on client or change agent needs. Competence is how proficiently the change agent applies change methods. The 2x2 interaction of change agent focus and competence produces four change agent style archetypes, labeled in the paper as bozos, yoyos, bimbos, and heroes. The probable outcomes of the four change agent styles are discussed, as are the related research and managerial implications of categorizing change agent styles.

Keywords: Organizational change, Change agent, Competence, Focus, Client Needs



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INTRODUCTION

A survey of 3,199 executives worldwide revealed that two out of three organization change efforts in global organizations were not considered successful, despite the executives reporting that they spent an average of six months planning the change efforts (Meaney and Pung, 2008). This survey data suggests that being a change agent in today's fast-changing, global environment is challenging and change agents differ in style and approach. This paper examines two important characteristics of change agents: the change agent's primary focus in leading the change effort, i.e. is the change agent focused on the organization's needs or the change agent's needs, and the change agent's competence in the proficient application of general consulting skills, theories, and practices to manage the change process (Cummings and Worley, 2009). These two attributes – focus and competence -- provide a structure to examine different types of change agents and how these different change agent types affect success with clients.

The paper begins with a brief review of the applicable literature on change agent focus and competency before examining the role and the interactions of focus and competence of the change agent on the client organization. A 2x2 typology is developed to explore the possible interactions of these two variables. The resulting four archetypes of change agent styles are labeled borrowing the title of an American Country and Western song, which also provides part of the paper's title: Yoyos, Bozos, Bimbos, and Heroes (Murrah and Jennings, 1988). The paper then explores how each archetypical consulting style affects the change agent and client organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of a change agent is to intervene in a client system to help the client system and rests on allowing the client to make informed choices (Argyris, 1970). Two important characteristics often discussed in the change agency literature are whether the change agent is focused on the needs of the client system or the needs of the change agent (Burke, 2005), and whether the change agent has the requisite competency in intrapersonal self-awareness, interpersonal group development, managing change processes, and understanding those processes in theory and application (Cummings and Worley, 2009).

Change Agent Focus

Focus in this paper refers to whether the change agent's efforts are primarily on the client's needs or the change agent's needs. Most change agents pay attention to both client and change agent needs in varying degrees (Burke, 2005). Focus is which of the two the change agent is most interested in addressing. Focusing on client needs emanates from traditional organization development (OD) values, centering on the "joint commitment to the facilitation of learning and competence in the client" (Hanson and Lubin, 1995:36) and being "committed to help others in improving their abilities to cope effectively with change and conflict" (Benne, 1975:44). A change agent's focus on client needs helps client firm build trust and collaboration, create an open climate dedicated to solving problems, increase the ability of organizational members to practice the emotional intelligence skills of self-awareness and self-management, and improve organizational effectiveness (Cummings and Worley, 2009; Goleman, 1995).

Conversely, change agents can focus on meeting their individual needs for economic gain, power, or other self-interests. Individual needs can include economic and utilitarian needs such as employment and earning a living, or psychological needs such as power needs, and ego fulfillment. Change agents need to avoid sacrificing their well-being or integrity in efforts to address client needs to ensure survival (Shepard, 1975). However, the need for self-preservation is a distal issue in most change agent and client situations.

The focus of the change agent on client needs or on change agent needs is not an issue of ethicality in and of itself. Unethical behavior – including and not limited to misrepresentation, conflict of interest, and technical ineptness (White and Rhodeback, 1992) – is possible under either focus. The sole question of focus is which needs are focused on first – the client needs or the change agent needs.

Competence

Competence refers to the change agent's overall ability to proficiently employ and deploy the proper consulting techniques when needed and where needed. Competence differs from intelligence or scholastic preparation in that it parallels expertise as the pragmatic application of knowledge, skills and abilities (Nonaka, 1994). Competence is more than knowing techniques, more than the a cognitive understanding of consulting principles, and includes the affective element of consulting and understanding client and change agent feelings and being open to empathic detection of others' feelings (Block, 2000). The cognitive understanding of consulting principles, including and not limited to behavioral science knowledge used to address organizational issues by intervening in organization processes, is key to most discussions of change agency (Beckhard, 1969; Beer, 1980; Burke, 1982; French, 1969). The affective element of consulting builds on the cognitive understanding and extends it by combining explicit behavioral science knowledge with "profound knowledge" – an intimate understanding of the underlying system and the sources of variation within that system coupled with psychological understanding and other, broader theories (Deming, 1993:96).

The above stresses that cognitively understanding a principal or a planned intervention is a necessary and insufficient measure of competence. A pragmatic understanding of how to apply the principal or intervention in a world of dollars and cents, and winners and losers, and how the client will react to these stimuli is also needed. Higher levels of competence can be characterized by understanding and applying the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities at an almost automatic or embedded level of proficiency where a significant portion of the knowledge has become both tacit and embedded (Nonaka, 1994; Grannovetter, 1985). The competent change agent may apply the theoretical understanding with significant conscious focus and his or her use of change tools may appear to be second-nature. Less-competent change agents with limited theoretical understanding or limited experience working with client systems in real-time, may rely on procedural knowledge, which often results in a perceived unfamiliarity and clumsiness.

The above discussion suggests that focus and competence are important change agent characteristics. A typology of change agent styles can be produced by dichotomizing focus as either primarily focused on the client or on the change agent and competence as either low or high. The archetype titles are borrowed from a country song titled: "Yoyos, Bozos, Bimbos, and Heroes" (Murrah and Jennings, 1988). The 2x2 matrix and four titled archetypes are depicted in Figure 1 (Appendix) and discussed in the following section.

CHANGE AGENT STYLE ARCHETYPES

The previous discussion and Figure 1 (Appendix) developed the idea that change agent styles may be viewed across four archetypes based on the interaction of focus and competence. The four archetype styles are titled yoyos, bozos, bimbos, and heroes. The following section describes each archetype and offers examples based on a community visioning project. The community visioning project was a region-wide effort to develop long-term plans for the development of a five-county area to encourage economic development and improved quality of life (Wilson, 2008). The examples are offered to illustrate the archetypes and not as empirical support. The examples are drawn from personal observation of the regional visioning process.

Yoyos: Yoyo change agents are characterized as primarily focused on the change agent's needs and lower levels of change agent competency. This type of change agent may envision organization development from a utilitarian perspective as a means to gain expert power without the necessary competence (French and Raven, 1959). Yoyo change agents earn the yoyo moniker because they will move in and out of the change agent role to meet their own agenda. Yoyo change agents may be entrepreneurs who see consulting as a means to an end. A mass-produced example of the yoyo archetype change agent may be the freshly-minted MBAs employed by large consulting companies who are dispatched to client firms with little competence and only the expectation that they will increase company billing over time (Mintzberg, 2004). The yoyo change agent may see the change agent role as a means to control a conversation (Block, 2001a). One example is the area director of a state agency who positioned himself as a change agent in the above-described regional visioning effort to denounce any efforts to alter the status quo within the environmental community, including efforts to increase or decrease environmental regulations, recycling efforts, or community information programs, that would affect the state agency he headed.

Bimbos: Bimbo archetype change agents are "hired guns" in the true sense of the Wild West metaphor. The Bimbo change agent possesses extensive competence with the necessary change agent knowledge, skills, and abilities. The focus is not necessarily malevolent; it is simply not consciously focused on maintaining OD values of helping others to improve their own capacity (Benne, 1975). Bimbos change agents can be employed by organizations in expert or helping hand roles (Schein, 1999). Their relationship with the client firm is a simple *quid pro quo* transactional relationship: The change agent provides x and the client system pays y. The transactional relationship is not long-term oriented, nor does it assume or preclude repeat transactions. The transaction is based on the bimbo change agent possessing expert knowledge, skills, and abilities in areas the client organization needs assistance. Some bimbo change agents will create a dependency situation with the client (Schein, 1999), or focus on "installing" change rather than engaging the client firm in the change process (Block, 2000). Other bimbo change agents deliver a needed product or process to the client, get paid, and move on.

The transactional nature of the Bimbo archetype change agent requires a more marketing-oriented practice. The Bimbo change agent may rebrand competencies repeatedly to meet shifting marketing needs. The same knowledge marketed to facilitate total quality programs may be re-marketed as customer service interventions, and then re-marketed as employee empowerment programs. Bimbo change agents may pass through multiple reincarnations, with changes in practice name, logo, and market positioning. Larger consulting firms may create new practice areas or consulting groups to meet the changing market needs, and move Bimbo archetype change agents from one specialization to another as modular building blocks.

The regional visioning effort described earlier also included a change agent who fit within the Bimbo archetype. The change agent was employed as an expert in regional visioning and had an extensive portfolio in that field. The change agent had re-positioned his practice from an earlier problem-solving focus to efforts that parallel appreciative inquiry techniques. Appreciative inquiry is a positivist approach that seeks to improve organizations by building on what is good and positive about the organization (Ludema, Cooperrider, and Barrett, 2001). He demonstrated competence in directing large group visioning efforts and melding together a variety of community opinions, providing expert knowledge and data processing services that served as helping hands. However, his approach did not transfer competence to the client organization and tended to elongate timeframes rather than shorten them, which runs counter to most appreciative inquiry models that stress rapid turnaround cycles (Ludema, et al, 2001). Normal appreciative inquiry efforts attempt to produce fruit from low-lying trees in a few days or weeks (Watkins and Mohr, 2001). The regional visioning effort extended through two years of data gathering.

Bozos: The Bozo change agent cares about the client organization, and may serve the change effort as a set of “helping hands” (Schein, 1999), despite a lack of expert knowledge, skills, and abilities. However, this initial, benevolent first appearance may be deceptive. The Bozo change agent’s lack of competence as a change agent may harm the client system because the Bozo change agent may improperly use interventions, not maintain confidentiality of sensitive data, and not consciously recognize a personal bias and/or agenda. The naiveté of the Bozo change agent becomes particularly problematic if the Bozo change agent falls under the spell of the Yoyo or Bimbo archetype change agent, who may use the Bozo change agent to promote an agenda not focused on client needs. Bozo change agents may be particularly drawn to not-for-profit firms, religious organizations, and organizations promoting other altruistic agendas in a well-intentioned effort to help. The Bozo change agent lacks the competence to understand how to help these organizations, despite their good intentions, and may inadvertently cause harm.

The regional visioning effort attracted several Bozo archetype change agents in the local community who were drawn by the positive future agenda of the visioning effort. Most found themselves following directions scripted by the visioning effort leadership and/or the visioning expert of how to engage the community and became “helping hands” (Schein, 1999). Others created opportunities for the visioning effort leadership by consciously or unconsciously promoting their own agenda of exclusion or inclusion of community participants and/or future possibilities for the community because of their lack of competence in focusing on client needs.

Heroes: The Hero change agent is primarily focused on the client needs and is competent in change agent skills. The Hero change agent is characterized by focusing on client needs primarily before change agent needs, and knows how challenging that focus can be. The client may not always be right, and the client is always the client. The Hero change agent is a hero by providing the client system honest, open, and truthful feedback and observation that allows the client firm to assess itself and freely choose what interventions are appropriate (Schutz, 1994), not because the Hero change agent rescues the client. Knowledge of specific interventions is an important part of the Hero change agent’s competency. The combination of competence in letting the client firm control its own destiny coupled with being client-focused are significantly more valuable to the client firm than the hero being an expert or helping hands. The Hero change agent helps the client system to collaboratively create desired change (Schein, 1999).

Being a Hero change agent may be costly for the change agent. Focusing on client needs increases the change agent vulnerability, especially in politically-charged situations (Block, 2000). The vulnerability is further increased by the Hero change agent employing his or her competence – and professional reputation – and ceding control over organizational outcomes to the client (Block, 2000). Hero change agents may be more likely to be the scapegoat for others' failures or shortcomings, and may face loss of the client relationship as the client firm recovers from the change effort and may need "to bury the survivors" to regain political harmony (Sherman and Garland, 2007). Continued employment of the Hero change agent may be too painful a reminder of change process conflicts or the pre-change organization.

Several individuals were Hero change agents in the regional visioning effort. These change agents attempted to focus on the client's needs while using their various sources of expertise to aid the visioning effort. However, the extended time frame promulgated by the visioning consulting and funding issues raised the personal costs of applying well-honed competence to a point that many Hero change agents stepped away from the regional change effort before it concluded in 2012. One newspaper account noted that more than 3,000 individuals were involved early on in the process and the numbers had dramatically decreased when the visioning effort leadership asked for new leaders to take over (Savage, 2012).

DISCUSSION

The archetypes offered above are intended to promote discussion of change agent focus and how that focus interacts with change agent competence. The archetypes and examples offered are not intended as a judgment of any individual. The development of the four archetypes suggests a number of discussion points and implications for researchers and managers.

The desire to help clients is not enough: The focus to meet client firm needs is necessary and insufficient to serve the client firm well. Competence in understanding the necessary change agent knowledge, skills, and abilities, including understanding oneself, are critical to successful change (Cummings and Worley, 2009; Rogers, 1961). The Yoyo and Bozo archetype change agents lack competence, and can be dangerous as their incompetency may lead clients into unwise territory.

Two different change agent styles can supply competent guidance, and both can work: Both Bimbo and Hero change agents are capable of being competent change agents. Both change agent types may be helpful at different points in a change effort and/or in an organization's life cycle, and both are capable of providing necessary technical competence to the client organization. However, the cost calculus differs between the two; the Bimbo archetype change agent primarily focuses on the technical system, while the Hero may be more likely to focus on the technical and social organization systems (Cummings, 1978). The accompanying lack of interpersonal intensity with the Bimbo archetype change agent may be desirable to an organization seeking change at a superficial level or needing to purchase only expert services or helping hands. The level of change intervention is a client choice (Harrison, 2005). The implicit costs of Hero archetype change agents include the costs of addressing the messy interpersonal and organizational issues that may arise by focusing on the underlying issues and not superficial symptoms. Understanding the depth of the intervention and whether the change agent is being asked to address more than superficial issues is a critical contracting discussion (Block, 2000).

Being a Hero has costs for the change agent: The title “Hero” conjures up powerful and positive images of someone who has courage and will save the client. However, maintaining a client focus and continually developing and honing change agent competence is a marketplace replete with Yoyo, Bozo, and Bimbo archetype change agents has challenges, costs, and dangers. The Hero archetype change agent is more likely to trigger strong reactions to organizational change because he or she is willing to engage the client on a collaborative basis and ask hard questions (Block, 2000; Schein, 1999). The political costs of engaging the client at this less-superficial and more-intent level are higher (Pedirrit, 2000). The Hero archetype change agent faces the risk of becoming a lightning rod for those seeking to find a scapegoat for the pain and loss that accompanies successful and unsuccessful change efforts. This may occur if change efforts are used to overwhelm rather than overcome resistance to change. The political whiplash that results when the overwhelming forces dissipate creates a need to identify and punish scapegoats, especially the responsible change agents (Sherman and Garland, 2007). The double-edged sword is that Hero archetype change agents require a client focus and competence in the knowledge, skills, and abilities of being a change agent, and can do good work by using that skill. However, faltering in any way from the focus on client needs or not fully employing the necessary competence may result in the Hero archetype change agent being held to a higher standard and paying a greater cost for errors than change agents that fit the other archetypes.

Research Implications

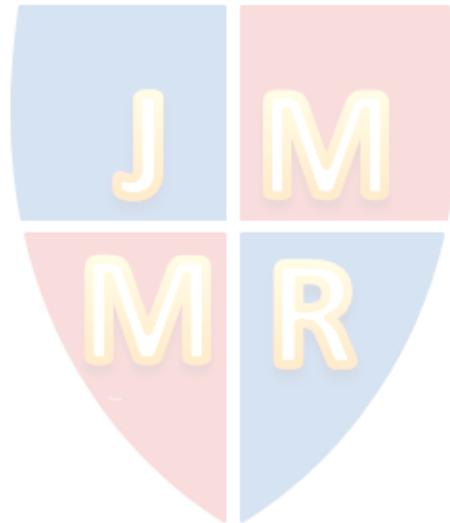
The typology offered is based on observation of the regional visioning effort and other change agent efforts over more than thirty-five years of involvement in management and organization dynamics. The typology was inductively determined based on those observations and the regional change effort provided a set of examples. The model has not been tested for reliability, validity, or generalizability (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). Additional research is needed to examine the viability of this model in describing change agent styles and to determine if the model is valid and generalizable.

Managerial Implications

One size does not fit all. Organizations may need to use a combination of archetypes to fully effect organizational change. Yoyo and Bozo archetype change agents may be present within the managerial corps or internal change agent sources of any organization. The competent guidance available from helping hands or expert Bimbo archetype change agents may be critical to completing organization change efforts. And, the combination of focus and competence available from Hero archetype change agents may be needed to make more challenging change efforts work. The critical issue is for organization leaders and the change agents to be conscious of which type of change agent is needed, wanted, and available. That consciousness enables organization leaders to better manage change agent relationships. The regional visioning effort used throughout this paper had participants in all roles. An implicit understanding of the archetypes and the interplay among these archetypes may have aided the visioning effort leadership in the many hours worked to manage this effort. A potential future research step may be development of criteria for managers to evaluate potential change agent focus and competency to determine if the change agent is appropriate for the task at hand.

SUMMARY

This paper explored the implications of different combinations of focus and competence on consulting practice. Four archetypical change agent styles were developed and implications of each, as well as overall implications, were considered. The paper is offered as a place to continue existing discussions on change agent roles and responsibilities. The key for those managing change agents within client systems is to understand the differences in change agent styles exist, and being able to differentiate among the Yoyos, Bozos, Bimbos, and Heroes is critical.



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APPENDIX

Figure 1
Change Agent Style Archetypes Based on Focus and Competence

		Competence	
		Low	High
Focus	Change Agent	Yoyos	Bimbos
	Client	Bozos	Heroes

