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by dr marc levy

# Helping hands

## promote successful change

### Right thinking

The evidence shows that change management efforts frequently go awry. We've found that using a mnemonic, the HANDS of change – Hardwiring, Ability, Narrative, Desire and Support – can help our project teams to address what's required for success. This article explores a case study to show how the helping HANDS of change function in practice.

Most change efforts are not done well. Research on failure rates back this up. As one observer put it, the discipline of change management '... has been in existence for over half a century. Yet despite the huge investment ... in tools, training, and thousands of books (over 83,000 on Amazon), most studies still show a 60-70% failure rate for ... change projects – a statistic that has stayed constant from the 1970's to the present' (Ashkenas, 2013).

We've found that an approach that we call HANDS can be an effective way to engage executive teams in planning for a significant change.

HANDS is an acronym: Hardwiring, Ability, Narrative, Desire and Support, with each element representing a digit.

This article shows how HANDS works with reference to a case study, which is actually an amalgam of a number of similar projects.

In recent years, we have helped several rapidly growing organisations with a change relating to their 'CEO plus two' group, the direct reports to a CEO's direct reports. In many of our clients, these CEO plus two roles have risen considerably in importance. Facing greater scrutiny and complexity, the executive team, the CEO plus one layer, has had to become more strategic and less engrossed in operational details. They simply no longer have the bandwidth to do what they once did. This inevitable evolution leaves a void for the CEO plus two group to fill.

### Hardwiring

Metaphorically, the function of the fingers reinforces the role of each element in the HANDS framework. Hardwiring refers to the processes and systems that are the circuitry of an organisation. Just as the thumb is critical for grasping objects, without hardwiring, change efforts can fail to grip.

The organisations that are the foundations of the case presented in this article operate in highly regulated industries. Delegations of authority are an important part of their 'hardwiring'. In our case, the organisation adjusted delegations to empower level two decision makers, including delegations relating to talent acquisition and expenditure limits.

Perhaps wary of CEO plus one level managers drifting back into their recently vacated remits, the CEO initiated a process to develop a 'compact' between the executive team and their direct reports that reinforced the changes. She also put in place new portfolio-based management committees to give CEO plus two level managers greater visibility of and engagement with top level decision making.

To reflect the CEO plus two managers' new responsibilities, the organisation also implemented a mid-cycle review of their goals and priorities and the links between these and performance evaluation and the bonus algorithm.

## Ability

Ability is the skill and capacity to effect and/or participate in the change of those impacted by it. Just as the index finger is the most dexterous, ability is pivotal to change efforts.

The organisation committed to a large scale formal management development program with a local business school and all CEO plus two managers were invited to participate. They also ran sessions with the executive team to transfer knowledge from executives to managers about how to make decisions – particularly cross-cutting decisions (De Smet, Lackey, & Weiss, 2017) – under different scenarios.

The organisation developed a capability matrix, covering the attributes required of senior leaders; assessed the CEO plus two level managers against these attributes; and put in place individual development plans where necessary to accelerate managers' development.

## Narrative

Narrative is the rationale for the change in storyline form.

In our case, the CEO plus two managers needed to know why they were being asked to do more. Many of them were

already pressed and felt that they were executing to plans that had already been agreed. Where did this new idea come from, that they needed to step up and into some of their bosses' work? What were they going to get out of it? One could anticipate the resistance if the rationale was anything but compelling, perhaps even the raising of a middle finger (metaphorically of course).

Change in the case we are exploring was inevitable: the organisation's operating model was about to break. The CEO plus one level executives were stressed out and cracks (and attendant risks) were beginning to open up. The narrative, presented consistently by the CEO and the CEO plus one level executives, centred on three factors: the logic and inevitability of the change; that the change would be managed comprehensively; and that there were opportunities for the CEO plus two level managers.

## Desire

Desire refers to whether those involved in and/or impacted by the change are 'up for it'.

The ring finger is symbolic of commitment in some cultures. Successful change initiatives need to foster the desire that is frequently a pre-condition for commitment.

In our case, there were considerable opportunities for the CEO plus two level managers, including career development, and – in many cases – promotion and better remuneration. The organisation reviewed positions and pay where the changes to the scope of roles was significant enough to warrant doing so, and they revisited job titles to give greater status to managers taking on bigger jobs.

Perhaps more important than all of that, they elevated the change to the standing of a strategic initiative, sponsored by the entire executive team. Everyone in the organisation knew it was one of the most important things the organisation was working on. People got it and they wanted to be a part of it.

## Support

Support is the extent to which an organisation follows up and follows through on the change. The pinky finger is the least often utilised of the five digits. This is reminiscent of a lack of ongoing

support provided for change management initiatives. We've learnt that significant change requires consistent and persistent support.

The CEO plus one level executives were asked to commit to role modelling the changes required. The CEO made it clear that she expected executives to 'get out of the way' of their CEO plus two level managers; to more actively coach and provide feedback to their reports; and to adopt a more consistent cadence of development-focused, one on one meetings with their managers.

The CEO also made the change a mandatory agenda item for executive team meetings for a period of six months, to maintain visibility and momentum.

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That change management is challenging is axiomatic; but with helping HANDS it needn't be quite so daunting.

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## References

Ashkenas, R. (2013). *Change management needs to change*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2013/04/change-management-needs-to-cha>

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want to know more?

If you would like to discuss this article in more detail, please contact **Dr Marc Levy**: [marc@rightlane.com.au](mailto:marc@rightlane.com.au)

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We work alongside clients who do great work within the sectors they operate, and we are excited to be involved in creating outcomes that truly make a difference.

We are an ethical consulting firm with a strong belief in the work we do, and with a passion to give back to the broader community with the skills and expertise available within our walls.

Right Lane was established in 1997 to help private, not for profit and public sector clients to clarify and accelerate their future plans. Over the past 22 years, we have helped the executive teams and boards of around 300 organisations to define and adapt their direction and strategy, identify and clarify their priorities, align their efforts with their aspirations, get their major projects started and finished, and measure and improve their performance.



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