

High-impact practitioners are a rare find.

Leaders responsible for navigating transitions need access to proven resources who can help guide them through the pitfalls of implementing major initiatives.

Ultimately, our effectiveness of change practitioners is based on how we are perceived by those we advise (**clients**). Generally, we are viewed in one of three ways:

- **Inept**—demonstrating little value; should be avoided at all cost
- **Adequate**—providing acceptable value; can be relied on to get the basic job done on tactical assignments
- **High-Impact Resource**—delivering implementation assistance to strategically imperative endeavors; proven to be invaluable in reaching full realization of the goals. A high-impact resource is:
 - Depended upon when the stakes are high; seen as vital to critically important initiatives (strategic)
 - Not easily disregarded or replaced; opinions are respected and sought after (invaluable)

I have no hard evidence to support the following estimation, but after more than four decades of training, coaching, and mentoring thousands of change practitioners around the globe and listening to an equal number of executives comment on the facilitation they receive, I believe the general breakdown on these categories is as follows:

- Approximately 25% of the individuals in change practitioner roles are viewed by their clients as inept
- Roughly 65% are considered adequate
- Around 10% are thought of as high-impact

Two Levels of Value

In this blog, my focus is on differentiating adequate from high-impact practitioners, so I won't comment much on those in the inept category except to say that they are not only detrimental to the clients they ineffectively support and the projects they bungle, but are also a liability to the entire change profession. In my view, they should either elevate their skills or find another way of making a living.

The good news is that, by a wide margin, clients think change facilitators provide either adequate or high-impact value. This is a true success story given that we are a young profession of less than 50 years. There is an important difference, however: although both adequate and high-impact practitioners create benefit for their clients, the perceived value each delivers is markedly different.

The vast majority of change professionals are seen as adequate—that is, delivering perfectly acceptable results. Some may be viewed on the low end of the satisfactory performance scale, barely hanging on to their “adequate” designation. Nonetheless, they deliver enough of what is expected to provide useful support of intended outcomes. “Adequate”

practitioners at the upper end of proficiency ratings provide significant assistance, but are not considered both strategic and invaluable.

It is clearly preferable for as many practitioners as possible to be on the top end of the adequate continuum, but anywhere within this designation represents a degree of positive contribution to an organization's need for change assistance. I want to be very clear that I am not promoting a pejorative view toward change professionals who are seen by their clients as delivering adequate value.

That said, high-impact practitioners are viewed in a very different light. Those thought of as both strategic and invaluable typically share six common attributes. They are generally regarded as:

1. Having spent an extended period working in their area of specialization
2. Having exceptional knowledge and skill relevant to their specialty
3. Having a demonstrated record of delivering on assigned responsibilities
4. Being aware of, and attentive to, the broader organizational context outside their area of specialty
5. Providing unique perspectives to critical situations that surface valuable insights
6. Boldly bringing viewpoints/ideas/recommendations forward, at times even in the absence of support for doing so

Any of these descriptors is cause for distinction but leaders who can find a resource with all six are extremely fortunate. It is the basis for an exceptional client/practitioner relationship.

The operative term here is "exceptional." By definition, the majority of professionals in our field don't consistently engage in this kind of working relationship. Most either lack the necessary predisposition themselves or they support leaders who can't/won't play their part.

It's difficult to pinpoint the precise percentage of practitioners viewed this way. I estimated around ten percent, but it could be no more than five percent or possibly as high as fifteen percent. One thing is clear—it's a relatively small number. Rather than interpreting this as a problem to be fixed, however, it is best to think of it as a dilemma to be managed.

It isn't reasonable to expect everyone to be above average so our challenge isn't to try to elevate all or even most practitioners to an uncommon level of impact (mathematically impossible). Instead, we should support the relatively few in our field who have the predisposition for this kind of influence and who want to better prepare themselves in this regard. We need to take a sober look at the realities that set high-impact practitioners apart from others and provide guidance for those who want to either secure this status or strengthen their foothold on it.