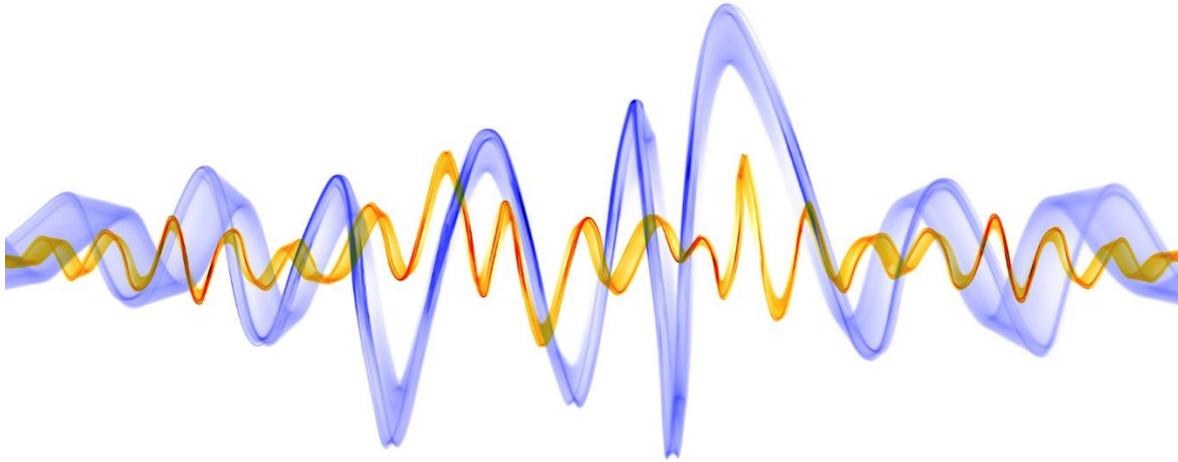


## The Role of Provocateur



As professional change facilitators, we take on many roles when performing our duties: SME, educator, counselor, philosopher, etc. In my opinion, one that is among the most important in our profession, but not used nearly as much as it should be, is the role of **provocateur**. Unlike an “agitator” who intentionally stirs up trouble or a “pacifier” who seeks tranquility at all cost, the provocateur (as I’m using the term) focuses on helping clients come to terms with, recognize, acknowledge, and take action on the “sticky issues” they would rather avoid.

If negative issues go unattended long enough, they can become the gunk everyone knows lies beneath the surface of conversations and actions, but which everyone ignores, by mutual (and usually unspoken) consent. By not speaking openly about them, the issues can be conveniently tucked away out of sight, allowing people to pretend the difficulties aren’t important, or worse, that they don’t exist.

When significant transitions hit, and the ripples of implications begin to spread, the resulting churn tends to dislodge these buried unpleasanties, making it much more difficult to keep up the sham. Despite the obviousness of their existence, without something to spur transparency and explicitness, many people will continue as if the elephant isn’t in the room. One of the roles high-impact change practitioners have is to be that catalyst.

The change agent provocateur sees his or her function as that of encouraging people to openly address and effectively resolve the sensitive political and emotional dynamics that can be the source of great discomfort to discuss, but which are vital to attend to in order to reach full realization of the goals. He or she must never, however, unilaterally decide what issues to open up or who should be involved in the dialogues.

High-impact change professionals establish explicit contracts early on with **clients** so there is a clear understanding regarding how issues of this nature will be raised by the practitioner and reviewed with the sponsor. Whether there is any further pursuit of the situation, and whom it might involve, is entirely at the sponsor's discretion, but the agreement between them should stipulate that it is the change agent's obligation to raise the tough (sticky) issues.

More specifically, when serving as the provocateur, the practitioner's job is to:

- surface any concern that might jeopardize accomplishment of the goals, which people appear to be avoiding,
- ensure the sponsor has the proper information to make an informed choice about what to do, and
- provide any guidance and facilitation that may be needed to support the sponsor's decision.

Many professional change agents who are viewed as **adequate** by their clients are hesitant, if not outright reluctant, to take on this function. As a result, critical discussions that could influence realization of the change goals either don't take place, or they do, but with insufficient candor. Are we as practitioners grounded enough in our **character** and **presence** to embrace the provocateur's stance when it is needed?