

## High-Impact vs. Adequate Practitioners

A number of aspects distinguish change practitioners who are seen by their clients as having high impact from those viewed as delivering adequate value. Here are a few examples:

### Different Scorecards

Professional change agents who fall in the adequate category often operate on the belief that they have to maximize their effectiveness with all those with whom they come in contact. It is common to hear them say something like *“I have to succeed in my role irrespective of who my client is, what group I’m assigned to work with, who my boss is, or the skill level of others on my team I’m to collaborate with. Whoever I interact with on a day-to-day basis, my job is to facilitate change, regardless of the hand I’m dealt.”*

Such a statement accurately describes the performance pressure many practitioners are under but that pressure does not necessarily result in the outcomes it is intended to generate. The ability to succeed at getting the job done, regardless of who you are interacting with, depends on how “success” and “getting the job done” are defined.

When performance benchmarks are calibrated toward adequate practitioners, these terms mean accomplishing enough to meet basic expectations on relatively tactical aspects of a project. If performance standards are set at the high-impact level, the terms mean the practitioner is being assigned to an extremely important initiative, and his or her counsel will be favorably regarded.

Adequate practitioners can and do accomplish a great deal; however, the political weight they carry with their clients is typically limited. When assigned to help with projects of a tactical nature, they generally can deliver the assistance expected. If asked to serve on high visibility, critically important undertakings, three things generally happen:

- The influence they have is usually felt more around the peripheral issues that arise
- Their views are frequently discounted
- Their recommendations are often diluted or ignored.

High-impact practitioners exercise greater leverage because leaders depend on them to help realize the goals of vitally important initiatives. Additionally, they have garnered so much esteem that their observations and suggestions are taken seriously, even (particularly) when running counter to prevailing opinion.

These two levels of practitioner capability reflect very different expectations and responsibilities each practitioner has for delivering value. Worthy achievements can occur through either level of practitioner involvement, but one has far greater consequences for the client and practitioner than the other.

### Different Levels of Genuineness

While internal support specialists or external consultants thought of as adequate often busy themselves with second-guessing what others want said or done, those seen as strategic and invaluable tend to step forward with as much authenticity as they have to offer. In doing so, they intentionally bring into play “how they show up” as part of the value they apply to their leadership responsibilities. Most of them pursue this path because they have reached a point in their careers where they believe it is *who they are*, not what is in their change-related approaches or mechanisms that ultimately determines the degree to which positive outcomes can be attained.

## **Different Appetites for Learning**

A pattern I've noticed is that practitioners who have spent a considerable amount of their professional tenure being perceived as "inept" or "adequate" aren't likely to advance much in terms of how they are viewed unless they are near the boundary between categories. For example, someone at the top of the adequate range may already display some aspects of the high-impact category, which makes it easier for him or her to transition to the next level.

There are several implications to this; one important one has to do with learning. I've noticed that adequate practitioners who aren't near the upper boundary of their designation tend to plateau as far as developing their capabilities is concerned. They may or may not continue reading books and attending conferences related to managing change, but little of what they are exposed to is actually incorporated into their practice.

This is an observation, not an indictment. As I said earlier, when adequate practitioners support leaders with needs at that level, it can be a productive match and solid value can be provided. The adequate practitioners who do continue their learning and go on to absorb and apply new approaches and tools to their work are, however, typically the same ones who are at the upper end of their designation and tend to be advancing to the next level.

Based on what I've seen, high-impact practitioners continue learning and growing and seem to never stop seeking new aspects to their craft. They are more inclined to interpret their role as a calling rather than a job, and engage in an unending pursuit of mastery...always incorporating additional perspectives and insights into their work. In this sense, they are not confined by an upper limit to their development. They seem to be perpetually on the lookout for ways to add value to the clients they serve. By being on an unending quest for more and deeper bits of wisdom, they further strengthen their foothold on providing value. As a result, high-impact change professionals are considered critically important support to key initiatives, which makes them hard to replace.

## **Different Supporters**

There is an interesting paradox related to the number of clients who find value in working with adequate vs. high-impact practitioners. Because there are more tactical than strategic initiatives to pursue and adequate practitioners lean toward keeping people consoled (if not placated), they are often the ones with the largest following. High-impact change facilitators are more specialized, which means they are extremely influential but usually with a limited number of people (typically higher in the organization) and around fewer, more critical issues.

Adequate change agents avoid discomfort so they play to larger crowds. High-impact change agents are catalysts and provocateurs assigned to high-stake endeavors and tend to be more challenging to work with. They are seen as adding tremendous value, but primarily by a smaller group of people who appreciate the benefits of the creative tension they foster.

## **Different Expectations**

Practitioners should be clear about the level of clout they want and expect from themselves and what others are holding them accountable for demonstrating. Being seen as adequate means performing one's duties in a satisfactory manner; the stakes are modest for most endeavors, and the level of influence is relatively limited. As long as this profile and their assigned responsibilities are a good match, there's not a problem.

When people relate to a practitioner as strategic and invaluable, much more is required; all six of the criteria for high impact mentioned in the first post (attributes) must be met at the same

time. While the demands are high, the benefits for being seen this way are equally plentiful (e.g., being drawn into situations crucial to the organization's viability and growth, receiving heightened respect for views expressed and decisions made, making more money).

## **Different Responses**

There are clear advantages to being thought of as an invaluable strategic internal support specialist or external consultant. This designation, however, comes with a hefty cost of additional effort and risk.

For example, high-impact practitioners must come to terms with the fact that, when it is time to bring forward who they really are, one size doesn't fit all. Clients will respond to their authenticity in certain ways. Think of it as chemistry, destiny, fate, how the stars line up, or whatever frame of reference works for you. The reality is that some people positively resonate with practitioners who are true to themselves and some do not.

Atypical practitioners who display uncommon attributes can achieve phenomenal change results for people who value them for operating this way. High-impact change facilitators are rare, as are the leaders who deeply value their particular style of directness and authenticity. High-impact assets can have a positive influence on all kinds of people, but their greatest contribution occurs when they are matched with clients who truly appreciate the uniqueness of what they have to offer.

## **Different Relationships**

Practitioners perceived as strategic and invaluable tend not to invest much energy attempting to present a façade so they will be well received by all. Instead, they focus their attention on those who are instinctively drawn to them and are open to being influenced by their true nature. They do so not to feed their egos, but because these are the ones on whom they can have the greatest impact. They operate on the premise that, in the end, deeper influence with fewer people around critical issues will outperform moderate influence with many people regarding peripheral concerns.

It is important to note that, just because clients deeply value practitioners at the level of who they truly are, it doesn't always mean they relate to them as being overly friendly or that their interactions are always comfortable exchanges. In fact, it isn't unusual for high-impact facilitators to be characterized as challenging taskmasters and/or promoting extremely tough standards for their clients to live up to. The fact that a client values what a practitioner can accomplish by bringing forward the full weight of his or her core does not mean the client always "enjoys" interactions with that person.

When in the high-impact zone, the leader/practitioner relationship is based on a mutual commitment to realize the goals of the change and not on ensuring communications are always kept in the comfort zone. Therefore, success for high-impact change professionals is less about selling themselves (i.e., projecting an image acceptable to everyone) and more about establishing working relationships with clients who naturally respond to the practitioner's authenticity. It is about "matching" for a good fit, rather than "forcing" an artificial harmony that relies on pretense instead of genuineness (e.g., leaders who politely listen to observations and recommendations but don't take much action).

Can practitioners accomplish a degree of success with clients who don't value who they really are? Absolutely. Can they achieve their full potential as highly valuable resources? Not likely. Change agents who are seen as both strategic and invaluable assets make up only a small fraction (approximately ten percent) of the total practitioner community, yet they account for a disproportionate amount of the value clients associate with the change facilitation profession. It

is incumbent upon those already in the category and those who aspire to be at that level one day to understand the distinctions between the adequate and high-impact practice of this craft. Only with clarity about the boundaries that separate the two can practitioners pursue the upper tier successfully.