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IS YOUR TEAM TRULY READY FOR CHANGE?

Navigate with the Change Compass

HIGHBERG

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The Change Compass

Many change initiatives fail not because of a lack of plans, but because of a lack of belief. The Change Compass offers a renewed way to understand and strengthen readiness for change. Instead of focusing on what people must do, it provides insight into how they experience change across four dimensions: do they believe in it, do they understand it, are they able to do it, and do they feel supported?

The Change Compass makes these four dimensions visible and applicable in practice. With examples from healthcare, education, government, and energy, it illustrates how organizations can make change more human, realistic, and sustainable — not through more communication or training, but by strengthening trust, meaning, and ownership.

1 The Change Compass: A New Approach to Readiness for Change

Why so Many Change Initiatives Fail

Despite decades of change management models, a large share of change initiatives still stagnate. The issue is not a lack of methodology — organizations have more than enough of those — but a one-sided focus on the rational components of change. Many contemporary models emphasize that people must understand (have insight), want (are motivated), and be able (or have the skills) to change. The logic is clear, if employees know what needs to be done and have the right resources, the change should naturally follow.

But practice shows otherwise. Change projects rarely fail because people don't know what to do — they fail because they cannot internally connect to it. What is often missing is attention to the how: the way change leaders connect to the existing meaning-making of people and their emotional willingness to change.

This meaning-making happens not in spreadsheets or plans, but in the daily lived experience of employees. Their perception of the change is shaped by previous experiences, personal values, emotions, and the trust they have in leaders and colleagues. These perceptions color everything: expectations, willingness to move along, and belief in whether the change has a real chance of success.

For high readiness for change, it is essential to ask:

> **Do I believe this change is achievable? Do I believe my leaders have the right intentions, and do I experience them as credible in delivering it?**

If the answer is negative, readiness for change remains low — regardless of how well the plan is written, how well people understand it, or how strong their skills are.

The Foundation of the Change Compass: Believing

The Change Compass distinguishes itself by explicitly focusing on this foundation: belief. Research confirms that the credibility of the messenger is crucial to the success of change (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Davis & Schoorman, 1995; Hardwick et al., 2013). These studies show that the source of a message is at least as important as its content. Kouzes & Posner (2002) even argue that trust in leadership is the foundation for collaboration and change. People follow leaders not only because they have a plan, but because they trust their intentions, integrity, and competence (Van Nistelrooij et al., 2010).

Where trust is lacking, passive behavior, cynicism, or even active resistance may arise. This doesn't always happen because people reject the content of the change, but because the source — the leaders or change team — is not perceived as credible. Belief is therefore not just a psychological phenomenon, but a core component influencing successful change.
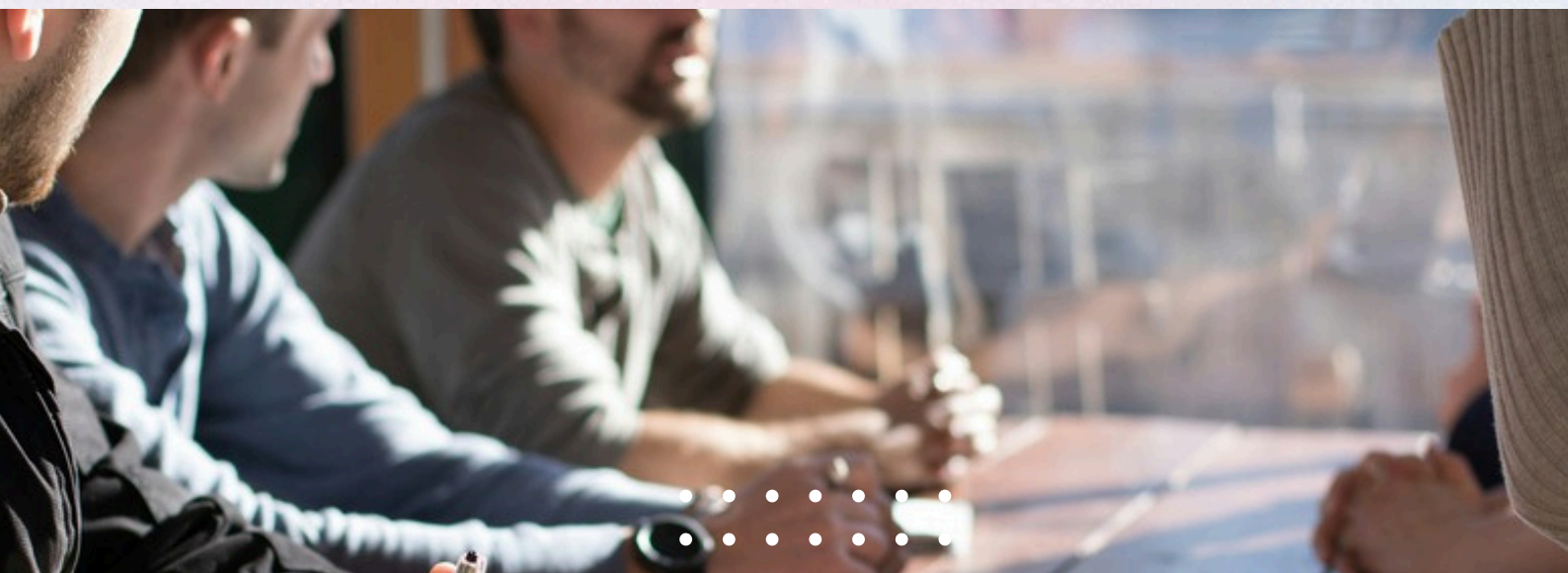
Change Takes Time and Space for Meaning-Making

Belief alone is not enough. People need time and space to make sense of what is changing. Information is constantly processed and filtered: Is this sincere? What does it mean for me? How are others responding? Is it safe to engage? (Van Nistelrooij, 2021).

Meaning-making is not a single moment but a process in which employees gradually relate to what change personally means for them and how it affects their work and collaboration. Dialogue is crucial: employees need to share experiences, examples, and reassurance that they are not alone. Facilitated conversations and involving others who also experience change support collective meaning-making — which increases readiness for change.

Readiness for Change: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Intentions

Armenakis, Harris and Mossholder (1993) define readiness for change as the attitudes, beliefs, and intentions of employees regarding the necessity of change and the organization's ability to implement it successfully. This makes it clear that readiness is not just about knowledge or skills but is primarily shaped by perceptions and feelings.

These perceptions vary per individual and are internal. To understand readiness, perceptions must be made explicit. The Change Compass offers a structured way to do so: it makes perceptions visible and discussable, allowing change leaders to act on differences in attitude and belief.

Many change initiatives fail because the focus rests too heavily on rolling out plans without considering employees' pace of meaning-making — leading to "acceleration without movement." The Change Compass breaks this pattern by starting with readiness, shifting the question from "what should we do?" to "how do people feel about this change, and what is needed to positively strengthen that attitude?"
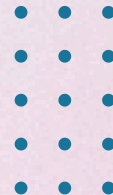
The Change Compass as a Diagnostic Tool and Guide

The Change Compass makes employee perceptions explicit and discussable, while exploring what each individual needs. It functions both as:

- Diagnosis: providing insight into how employees experience the change

- Guide: offering direction for interventions that increase readiness for change

By engaging in collective dialogue throughout the change journey, hesitation gains a legitimate place. The Compass emphasizes a process that is always in motion: how does this person relate to the change?
Using the Compass creates space for collective meaning-making and provides clearer direction. It makes change processes more human, realistic, and effective, offering a renewed approach to readiness for change.

2 The Origin and Functioning of the Compass

Four Axes for Personal Change

For nearly twenty years, Highberg has used the Change Compass to create change with broad support. The instrument is popular because it is simple and universally applicable across contexts. It consists of four axes — believing, understanding, being able, and receiving support — which together strengthen willingness. By steering on willingness, the intended change outcome is achieved with greater buy-in.
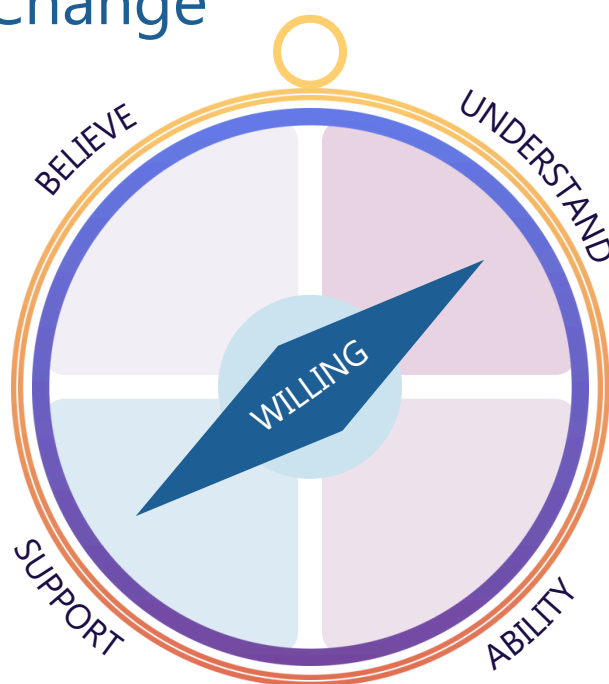
● Willing

People's willingness depends on: attractiveness of the change, others' opinions, their own capabilities, expected effort, and the meaning attached to it. This applies to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is powerful but difficult to expect in organizational changes initiated by upper management.

Willingness can be stimulated, but ultimately depends on the value the individual attaches to the change, the effort it requires, and the visibility and frequency of the change (Nadler et al., 1979). Understanding employees' willingness — and their perceived possibilities and limitations — is essential.

Recognizing free will is also crucial: the freedom to not move with a change. A "no" is not failure; it opens the door to dialogue and respectful collaboration with those who are ready.

Willingness forms the needle of the compass and is influenced by all four axes. There is no fixed sequence; readiness is dynamic and subjective. However, belief should always be explored first — for example, training (understanding) is ineffective if belief hasn't been established.

Believe

Believing in and trusting others reduces uncertainty, increases involvement, improves knowledge-sharing, and raises satisfaction (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Trust arises when technical competence and social reliability are perceived (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995; Hardwick et al., 2013).

Research shows that trust in management is a fragile foundation: it can be strengthened or damaged depending on how change is implemented and communicated (Lines et al., 2005). Lack of transparency undermines belief. Saksvik (2009) notes that employees respond negatively when they perceive threats to autonomy, safety, or trust.

Understand

Clarity, insight, and knowledge about the why of change improve employees' understanding (Slijkhuis, 2012). Research (Elving & Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2005) shows that insufficient communication about the content and goals of change leads to uncertainty and resistance.

Understanding is about explaining why change is needed, what it accomplishes, and addressing concerns. It is closely linked to building belief.

Meaning-making is also a process of awareness (Prochaska et al., 2019). Understanding increases psychological ownership of both the problem and the solution.
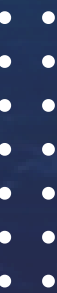
Support

Research shows that change is often associated with negative outcomes: increased workload, job insecurity, reduced control, and stress (Fedor et al., 2006).

Support plays a crucial role in managing these reactions. Proactive behavior — taking initiative to improve current circumstances — is reinforced by supportive leaders (Bindl & Parker, 2017; Yadav & Rangnekar, 2015). Support from direct supervisors also reduces stress and prevents overload (CBS, 2017) and supports change efforts (Kotter, 1996).

Lack of support leads to frustration, resistance, and disengagement (Choi, 2011). Leaders' openness, sharing of experiences, empathy, and rituals that foster connection all enhance trust (Goleman, 2000; Ni et al., 2023).

Ability

Ability refers to self-efficacy — belief in one's own knowledge and skills to implement change (Bandura, 2007). It concerns both actual capability and self-perception. Effective learning involves cycles of experience, reflection, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Training and simulations increase self-efficacy and support successful change (Iqbal & Dastgeer, 2017).

3 Practical Application of the Change Compass

From Model to Practice

Highberg applies the Change Compass across sectors — healthcare, government, education, and energy. Its strength is its flexibility: based on universal principles of readiness for change, it works for reflection, diagnosis, strategy, and monitoring.

From twelve analyzed case studies, four primary applications emerged:

1 As a **reflection tool** to open conversation

2 As a **diagnostic tool** to identify friction

3 As a **strategic compass** to guide interventions

4 As a **learning and monitoring tool** to track progress

Together, they show how the Compass connects thinking and doing in change.

1 Opening conversation: the Compass as a mirror

Organizations use the Compass to raise awareness of change readiness. It makes abstract concepts tangible and provides a shared language.

Example: A healthcare leadership day used the Compass physically laid out in a room, letting leaders position themselves and reflect.

"It gave words to what we already felt but never expressed."

A nurse association used it to depolarize.

"It created real dialogue instead of debate."

2 Making tensions visible: the Compass as a diagnosis

The Compass uncovers patterns that typically remain hidden. A university of applied sciences used it to reveal trust issues underlying strategic discussions.

"We discovered we weren't discussing strategy but trust — it changed everything."

3 Guiding change: the Compass as a strategic tool

In a major energy-sector merger, the Compass helped leaders identify perception gaps. Instead of more communication, they focused on a shared story and visible leadership.

"It helped us do not more, but the right things."

4 Learning and embedding: the Compass as a monitoring tool

A government agency used the Compass quarterly to track a culture change, improving trust and ownership.

"Reflecting every three months made the change belong to all of us."

What Does it Deliver?

Classic models (Kotter, ADKAR, Metselaar & Cozijnsen) focus on understanding, wanting, and being able. In practice, simply following a plan is not enough: people need trust, time, and personal meaning.
The Change Compass bridges theory and practice by translating abstract concepts into concrete tools. It supports meaningful conversations, reveals tensions, and guides targeted interventions.

The result: more ownership and genuine belief in the change:

" We started with a methodology but discovered the change started with ourselves. "

Want to Know More? Contact Our Advisors

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