

**The Transformation Triad:
Creating the Conditions to Scale up Change Capacity**

By

Mary C. Lang

Organizational Change Management Officer

Los Angeles County Office of Education

Introduction

In the age of globalization and rapidly evolving technology, continuous change is the new reality. The end state in change has vanished, leaving only a state of “*What’s next?*” This makes the imperative to scale up organizational change capacity more urgent than ever.

Organizational change capacity is defined here to mean an organization’s ability to simultaneously operate efficiently while evolving effectively.ⁱ The proposed conditions for scaling up an organization’s change capacity are speed, learning, and integration.

These three conditions can be considered *first principles*ⁱⁱ of transformation.

When organizations build around these three first principles, they can enable the understanding, engagement, adoption, and endorsement needed for successful change initiatives. They can also simultaneously lay the foundation to achieve the speed, learning and integration needed to evolve.

A conceptual transformation triad framework, informed by three important trends in organizational change management (Agile approaches, design flexibility, and narrative storytelling) can help.

The triad’s three elements are as follows:

- 1) Mindsets. We review Executive Sponsor roles and propose an Agile Executive Transformation Partner mindset.
- 2) Frameworks. We next discuss planning and propose a Change Values Framework.
- 3) Narratives. Finally, we explore storytelling in change contexts and propose Narratives of New.

Creating scalable change capacity can help leaders gain access to their organization’s full collective creativity. It will take this full collective creativity to develop the unique solutions for whatever wicked change problemsⁱⁱⁱ organizations will face in the never ending state of “*What’s next?*”

The Rule of Three in Change: The Transformation Triad

Organizational change capacity has three primary dimensions: context (resources that facilitate the change process), process (principles of implementing change), and learning (the introspective capacity of an organization) (Soparnot, 2011).

The conceptual transformation triad depicted in Figure 1 can help organizations in two of these dimensions: process and learning.

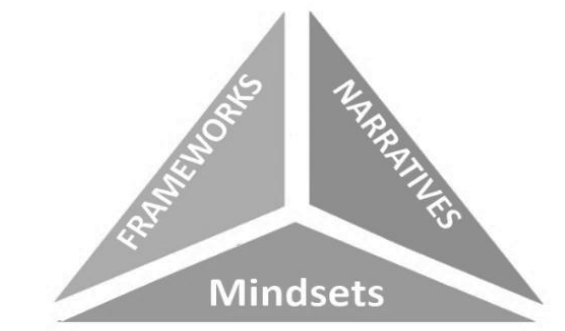


Figure 1: The Transformation Triad (Lang, 2019)

The transformation triad’s elements—how we think about change (mindsets), how we design and build for change (frameworks), and how we talk about change (narratives)—are foundational to the dynamics of organizational change.

The transformation triad is a conceptual lens to help leaders envision how to scale up change capacity to the enterprise level.

This lens views the future of change management from three perspectives^{iv}: the Agile movement (Agile Alliance, 2011), organizational storytelling (Forman, 2013), and social factors in organizational change projects (Lang, 2005).

Agile as a software development approach first took root in 2001, quickly spread to organizational agility in information technology (Weill et al., 2002), then other enterprise functions (McKinsey & Company, 2017, Prosci, 2016) and most recently social change movements (Hicks, 2019).^v

Integrating Agile concepts with change management has included mapping the Agile SCRUM method to existing change management models (Velthuisen, 2015) and studying impacts and adaptations that Agile development and thinking have had on change management (Creasey, 2017, Prosci, 2016).

An Agile mindset can help organizations scale up change capacity where it matters most, in the Executive Sponsors' role in change success.

Mindsets: Sponsor or Activist?

"Agile is the ability to create and respond to change."
~ The Agile Alliance^{vi}

No matter an organization's mission, no matter the product or service it exists to deliver, the measure of organizational effectiveness is universal: to deliver as intended.

Executive Sponsors play the biggest role in change project success (Prosci, 2019), so it makes sense to look for swift, supported ways to improve their effectiveness. Having senior executives adopt an Agile mindset is one swift and supported path. Swift because the levels of collaboration that an Agile mindset can unleash inevitably increase speed, and there is no substitute for speed during rolling change. Supported because the impact of the Agile movement across industries lends credibility to the approach (Brower, 2019).

Nascent research indicates only a small percentage of (studied) organizations are applying Agile on organizational change projects. Most of that small group reside only in technology departments (Creasey, 2017).

Adoption of Agile, as both a process and mindset, across organizational change projects requires courage. A courage gap can arise during change (Reardon, 2007, Morrison, 2014, Kanter R. M., 2011).

Senior leadership can fortify the courage of their leadership teams and accelerate the adoption of an Agile mindset by encouraging their key leadership teams to embrace *Agile Change Activism*.

I define *Agile Change Activism* as a shift from passive sponsorship to active transformation partnership. *Agile Change Activism* involves Executive Transformation Partners who consciously scout opportunities to promote agile thinking and approaches.

Attributes of an Agile Activist include a drive to accelerate delivery (speed), deep empathy for customers and improvement iterations (learning), and a commitment to incessant improvement integration (integration).

Agile Activists spend less time reviewing and approving and more time clearing obstacles, debating, deciding, and helping change teams deliver as intended. Social movements require that their Agile Change Activists answer to the stakeholders (Hicks, 2019).

It is important to keep in mind the distinction between Agile as a mindset and Agile as a behavior depicted in Figure 2 (Hodgson, 2017). When it comes to the goal of scaling up an organization's change capacity, *doing* Agile is important to getting things done and *being* Agile is essential for building capacity and making real progress.

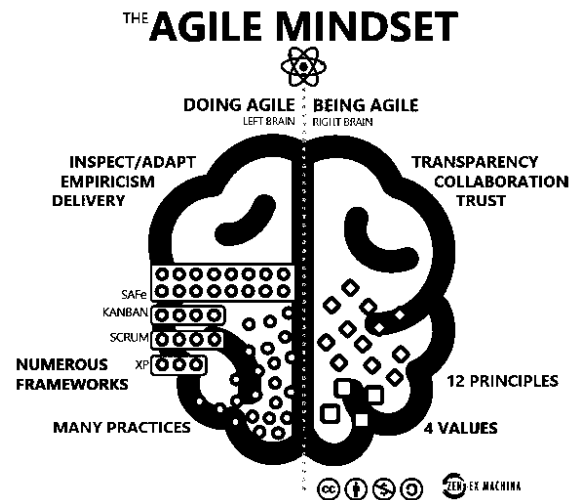


Figure 2: Agile Is a Mindset and Agile Is a Behavior (Hodgson, 2017)

Executive Transformation Partners: Mindsets Matter

While a 70% failure rate is often cited as the standard for change initiatives, there is no way to substantiate that level of failure (Hughes, 2011).

Even if it were possible to establish a generalizable change failure baseline, it would be unhelpful.^{vii}

While a failure baseline is unknowable, the paramount importance of executive sponsorship in successful change initiatives is well known. (Burns, Hughes et al, 2016, Kanter & Martinez, 2019, Prosci, 2019). Therefore we should ask “What does effective executive sponsorship in change look like?”

Executive partnership—characterized by close collaboration, shared goals, and accountability for success and setbacks—is the missing link.

Moving from the traditional role of Executive Sponsor to a true role of Executive Transformation Partner can start with the introduction of an Agile Change Activist mindset for senior leaders.

An Agile Executive Transformation Partner can accelerate transformation success by infusing change initiatives with “light touch leadership.” (Smith & Sidkey, 2009) This can accelerate success by reinforcing focused shared goals, facilitating positive interactions and team dynamics, and developing an expectation of collaboration, experimentation, and innovation.

Mindsets, which form the transformation triad’s foundational element, serve as mental lenses that filter the behavior of leaders.

Mindsets form implicit views of where outcomes come from, and drive behavior. For example, “command and control” mindsets, will drive commanding and controlling behavior.

Mindsets play a powerful role in determining behavior. Mindsets are where we need to start when creating the conditions needed to scale up change capacity.

Researchers have identified four sets of mindsets that can affect leaders’ ability across important dimensions, including how they can successfully navigate change (Gottfredson & Reina, 2020). These four sets of mindsets contrast relative opposites and are paraphrased below:

1. *Growth and Fixed Mindsets*

Growth mindsets support the implicit belief that you can develop your abilities (Dweck, 2006). Fixed mindsets support the implicit belief that intelligence is fixed and cannot really be developed.

2. *Learning and Performance Mindsets*

Learning mindsets support motivation to increase competence and master new things. Performance mindsets, conversely, support motivation to gain positive reviews and avoid negativity.

3. *Deliberative and Implemental Mindsets*

Deliberative mindsets prime behavior that is receptive to information for optimal decision-making. Implemental mindsets, conversely, avoid new information that may interrupt existing implementations.

4. *Promotion and Prevention Mindsets*

Leaders with a Promotion mindset focus on progress. Leaders with a Prevention mindset, however, are focused on avoiding losses and preventing problems at all costs.

A fifth group, one that I call “Explore and Plan Mindsets,” distinguished by curiosity also exists.

5. *Explore and Plan Mindsets*

The distinguishing outcome of Explore mindsets is discovery, and these mindsets prime curious behavior. Conversely, process is the primary outcome in Plan mindsets. Both a Waterfall mindset (Plan) and an Agile mindset (Explore) belong to this set of mindsets.

A proposed model of an Agile Executive Transformation Partner mindset, drawing from these five sets, is shown in Table 1.

Core Mindset Attributes	Behavioral Benefit	Capacity Caveat
1. Growth	Fosters equal positivity	Equity ≠ Equal
2. Learning	Builds skills	Accountability
3. Deliberative	Improves decisions	Delays
4. Promotion	Focuses courage	Guardrails
5. Exploration	Cultivates creativity	Focus

Table 1 Considering an Agile Executive Transformation Partner Mindset

Another Agile Executive Transformation Partner mindset model can begin with the Heart of Agile imperatives (Figure 3). The first Heart of Agile imperative is to collaborate with others to generate and develop better starting ideas.



Figure 3: The Heart of Agile (Cockburn, 2018)

Once an Agile mindset in Executive Transformation Partners begins to take hold, senior leaders should commit in measurable ways to be guided by that mindset. One measure might be the number of active collaborations Executive Transformation Partners can create on their change initiatives.

When Executive Transformation Partners adopt an Agile mindset, shared leadership with change teams can be ignited. Each party shares responsibility for the success, and setbacks, of initiatives. They can work together to create the conditions of expanded change capacity.

Framework: Change Values

“Unity, not uniformity, must be our aim.”
(Follett, 1918)

There is no shortage of effective, road-tested change management methodologies, practices, and toolkits.^{viii} The Change Values framework is methodology and practice agnostic.

Instead of prescribing a given methodology or toolset, the Change Values Framework works with the Change Response Model to help change teams navigate initiatives. This frees up executive leadership to work toward scaling up enterprise change capacity with the transformation triad lens.

A framework can help staff and leaders focus on the same set of values and objectives. This serves to

activate alignment and direct energy in a unified direction.

Three Levels of Change Planning

Creating conditions for scalable change capacity requires responsive adaptability. This starts at the framework level in change planning.

WHAT	WHY	WHO & WHEN
Framework	Essential guiding structure	Change Leadership Strategic Plan + Ongoing
Model	Simplified system description	Change Team: Pre-launch + Ongoing
Methodology	Practices and tools	All staff. As needed

Figure 4: Three Levels of Change Planning

Of these three change planning levels, it’s possible that only the framework level needs to stay fixed throughout a transformation journey. Choices at the other levels can evolve based on how the team decides to address particular change objectives.

First the Change Values Framework has four core change values that serve as a decision-making framework for the Change Response Model.

Then the Change Response Model uses guiding principles, primary change objectives, and known change challenges (Lang, 2015) to select change management methodologies, practices, and tools to address current needs.

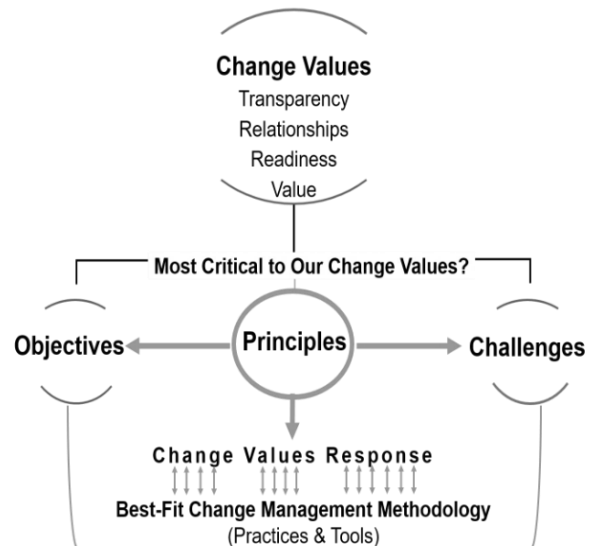


Figure 5: Framework (Values) Model (Response) Methodology (Change Management) (Lang, 2019)

The Change Values Framework and the Change Response Model are simple to understand and apply. To put the framework and model into action requires only two things, values and rhythm.

1) Values. Executives and change teams must agree to unify around a set of core change values. Figure 5^{ix} provides four recommended values.

2) Rhythm. The change team must then establish a rhythm for convening to ask, reflect on, debate, and decide on the framework's four clarifying questions.

The Four Clarifying Value Questions

These questions can guide the team's decisions on what specific change management methodologies and practices will best fit their context.^x

- a) Today, what is our most critical change objective; why is this most pressing right now?
- b) Currently, what is the most critical principle we need to apply to achieve this objective?
- c) Near term, what challenges are we most likely to face addressing this objective?
- d) What response will be most aligned with our change values?

This is an ongoing process. Change teams need not use only one methodology, practice, technique, or toolset—change doesn't work that way.

There may be concern from an enterprise perspective about the repeatability of a proposed change framework that encourages change personnel to vary their methodology and practices from one change initiative to the next.

The argument for using the Change Values Framework and the accompanying Change Response Model to regularly iterate methodologies and practices, comes down to three words: Serial or scalable?

Leaders need to differentiate between serial change management and scalable change capacity. Repeatability does not necessarily equal scalability. Scalability leads to sustainability.

A limitation of the quest to apply a single structured change management methodology is the "wag the dog" dilemma. An unintended consequence of an attachment to a single structured change

management method is that energy is diverted from important matters (e.g., an organization's the change values) while thrusting unimportant matters to center stage (i.e., methods, practices, and tools). Do we want to perfect the newsletter or do we want to deliver value?

Engaging in serial change management episodes will not add up to scalable change capacity. Lurching from one disconnected change to the next is not the goal. Flexing to bring creative new solutions to each new change is the goal. Accelerating, learning, and integrating to expand change capacity across all initiatives is the goal. Enabling real transformation is the goal.

Narratives of New: Talk, Trust, and Travel

"Narratives drive human behavior."^{xi}

~Dr. Robert J. Shiller
2013 Nobel Laureate

Now let's turn our attention to the role that narrative can play in creating the conditions of scalable change capacity.

It is well established that humans crave narrative and that narrative can drive behavior, even behavior that can alter world events (Shiller, 2017). Creating overarching narratives can help to scale up change capacity by aligning change initiative objectives with executive leadership's strategy.

The linear "change curve" metaphor continues to give way to a more apt network metaphor where change spreads like a complex contagion (Boyd, 2013). This makes narrative the connective tissue between executives, change teams, and others as change spreads from person to person, tribe to tribe, with narrative stories as the carrier.

Grassroots efforts are like campfires where stories and narratives get everyone talking about shared hopes and goals. This helps build trust among colleagues. This then propels change narratives to travel throughout the organization.

Narratives built on authentic stories bring meaning to topics that goes deeper and lives longer in the

human psyche than most any other form of communication (Forman, 2013).

Narrative stories can represent, analyze, and evoke change (Beech et al, 2009). Narrative can even define what constitutes change (Brown et al, 2009). Organizational change can be encoded and shared through narratives (Brown & Humphreys, 2003).

Narratives of New refers to those narratives that continuously spread those campfire stories. These are narratives that hold an explicit new view of change and transformation throughout an organization.

Executive Transformation Partner Narratives

Building change *Narratives of New* starts with leaders modeling enterprise collaboration. This begins with senior leadership personally partnering with individual change initiatives.

Three building blocks that can help Agile Executive Transformation Partners build *Narratives of New* are alignment accounts, traction tales, and momentum moments depicted in Figure 6. These building blocks can help in three ways.

First, alignment accounts can confirm change initiative alignment with organizational strategic goals to build trust.

Second, traction tales encourage active listening to identify key issues. This can prompt broader talk about the right issues, not just “change chatter.”

Last, momentum moments allow leaders to check in personally on the issues that need their attention to propel momentum on these issues.

Transformational outcomes require risk taking and the full personal participation of leaders. Participating in the most challenging democratic activities, includes leading others and transforming organizations (Cunningham, 2000).

Simple visuals like the pyramid in Figure 6 can serve as reminders to leaders to keep the scaling up conversations going.



Figure 6: *Narratives of New Scaling Pyramid* (Lang, 2016)

The importance of leaders directly interacting with staff in creating the conditions of scalable change capacity cannot be overstated. Again, the “*Sponsor or Activist?*” question emerges. The fundamental difference between the two roles is personal interaction, risk, and courage.

Developing *narratives of new* alignment, new traction, and new momentum requires that leaders interact directly with staff. This interaction must go deeper than what is customary in traditional Executive Sponsorship.

This means leaders need to pay particular attention to how they show up and be present. One good blueprint can be found in the Heart of Agile mindset depicted in Figure 3 (Cockburn, 2018). Cockburn has outlined four groups of action that can improve collaboration outcomes.

These collaboration boosting actions are 1) Lift Others, 2) Increase Safety, 3) Get Results, and 4) Add Energy. Think about the power of meetings where the senior executives are expected to show up and be present in service to lifting up staff and increasing psychological safety.

Cockburn created lists of actions leaders can take to improve collaboration (Cockburn, 2016). These are readily available to any leader looking to hone their Agile partnership skills.

Figure 7 contains examples of how leadership behavior can boost collaboration in standard interactions to bring the best ideas forward.

Narratives of New Can Boost Collaboration	
Interaction Platform	Ways to Build Narratives of New
Change Team Project Updates	Design Outcome Conversations: Does our training deliver clarity, competence, and confidence? Can the team share stories about these?
Executive Team Debriefs	Alignment Amplification Conversations: Where are the points of intersection between change initiatives and organizational strategy? What stories connect the two?
Traditional Town Halls	Socialization Strategy Sharing: What can we do better in our organizational listening? How do we know when we are being heard?

Figure 7: How Agile Executive Transformation Partners Can Build Narratives of New

Staff Change Team Narratives

In addition to Executive Transformation Partners, outliers and middle managers can develop change Narratives of New.

Organizational pioneers, those people who are future focused, can be both outliers and middle management.

These pioneers are present in all organizations and can be found in tribes made up of rebels (Gino, 2016), positive deviants (Rosenberg, 2013), and stalwart middle managers (Kanter, 2004).

Through grassroots conversations, narratives can blaze their way contagion-like across organizations.

Middle managers hold great potential for effective partnerships with senior executives to create and respond to change (Kanter, 2004).

Just as senior executives can use established platforms to build change Narratives of New, Figure 8 depicts how staff can use existing coalition building as springboards to build their own Narratives of New.

Narratives of New Can Strengthen Coalitions	
Interaction Platform	Ways to Build Narratives of New
Build consensus by stepping out of the usual chains of command. (Kanter, 2004)	Attitude & Altitude Spanning: Span both chain of command and expertise domains. How do different departments (attitude) and different leader levels (altitude) view the change?
Gather top-level support by giving higher-ups compelling presentations to persuade their constituencies (Kanter, 2004).	Foresight Conversations: How do our change initiatives, organizational strategy, and our sector's future all converge? What signals can we see that may predict that convergence?

Figure 8: How Staff Change Teams Can Build Narratives of New

Leadership pioneers as far back as one hundred years ago have understood that personal activism, an early description of modeling behavior, is required of leadership (Follett, 1918).

Everything starts with a conversation. Dialogue is where modeling the personal commitment and agile activism for successful change begins.

Caution: Courage Needed

“Leadership shows up most at points of freedom.”
-Dr. Paul Woodruff
University of Texas, Austin

Organizational change success relies in large part on the courage of senior executives (Reardon, 2007, Morrison, 2014, Kanter, 2011).

Courage is essential during times of change. Times of uncertainty test a leader’s ability to influence staff to calibrate and balance effort.

Unleashing collective creativity requires that people feel comfortable to make the connections they need to make, knowing they will receive the

necessary cover from their leaders when making change gets challenging, which it inevitably will.

People need psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), and specifically in change management contexts, people need to feel free to improvise.

Dr. Stephen Leybourne (2006, p. 93) offers this advice:

“...employees have to be encouraged to step outside their comfort zone (and) attempt to achieve outcomes without following documented procedures. This requires willingness on the part of the organization for this to happen, an understanding that learning from failure is as valid as learning from success, and a move away from a ‘scapegoat’ mentality.”

Conclusion

“Innovations have scaled when their impact grows to match the level of need” (Deiglmeier, 2018).

Continuous change is the new reality. The end state in change has vanished, leaving only a state of *what’s next?* The imperative to scale up change capacity is more urgent than ever. At the same time, change innovations may never fully scale up to match the level of need, because the level of need for transformation will forever increase.

The conceptual Change Values Framework, and transformation triad, can help leaders build up from the first principles of speed, learning and integration, for transformation.



Figure 9 The Transformation Triad helps to lay the foundation to scale up change capacity

The framework requires no new investment beyond senior leadership’s interest, courage, and commitment. A commitment to meaningful partnerships across the enterprise with all staff on a shared journey of change and transformation.

We live in urgent times that call upon senior executives to actively create the conditions of scalable change capacity. Growing this capacity can unleash the collective creativity organizations will need to address today’s wicked problems and tomorrow’s challenges yet unknown.

Working from the first principles of organizational transformation, leaders now have an envisioning lens through which they can glimpse solutions and begin to answer that call.

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ⁱ The concept of organizational change capacity has grown into its own subset of study within the organizational change management discipline (Heckmann N., 2016, Judge, 2009).

ⁱⁱ First Principle Thinking & Logical Reasoning with Elon Musk, Lee Kuan Yew, Larry Ellison
https://youtu.be/C_OX9KmlZVQ
 The Most Powerful Way to Think | First Principles
<https://youtu.be/HZRDUZulKg4>

ⁱⁱⁱ Change and significant transformations are characterized by “wicked problems” with changing requirements, and unforeseen consequences to solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

^{iv} The Transformation Triad conceptual lens is in the tradition of dialogic organization development (Bushe & Marshak, 2015), and informed by work on human networks which captures the essence of organizational change management, including, social network analysis (Jennings, 1947); network analysis and social capital (Burt, 1980); dynamic network analysis (Carley, 1984), human network impacts on change (Granovetter, 1973), and complex contagion (Boyd, 2013).

^v A quick and clear resource for understanding how to apply Agile is Sutherland’s book, *Scrum: The Art of Doing Twice the Work in Half the Time* (Sutherland, 2014).

^{vi} Agile Alliance. 2011. *What is Agile?*
<https://www.agilealliance.org/agile101/>

^{vii} For a good discussion debunking the oft quoted (though never substantiated) change initiative failure rate of 70% listen to Heather Stagl’s “Change Agent’s Dilemma” podcast, interview with Jennifer Frahm, located here:
<https://www.enclaria.com/2014/01/21/interview-debunking-the-70-failure-rate-of-change-initiatives/>

^{viii} Organizational change management methodologies and toolkits are plentiful. Five popular and effective ones are listed here, there are more; this is not intended as an exhaustive list:

1) Prosci’s ADKAR (Individual); 2) Kotter’s 8-step Process for Change Acceleration (Organizational); 3) LaMarsh’s Managed Change Process (Cultural); 4) ACMP’s Standard (Procedural); and, 5) Human Systems Dynamics Institute’s Adaptive Action Process (Navigational).

^{ix} One set of universal change objectives, principles and challenges to build out the Change Response Model that accompanies the Change Values Framework can be found in (Lang M. , 2015).

^x Multiple change management practices can work in different circumstances and can also be combined and adapted. The important thing is to first agree upon a tightly focused set of change values, objectives, guiding change principles, and known challenges to guide the debates and decisions of the four Change Value Response questions.

^{xi} <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2018/01/26/a-nobel-prize-winning-economist-explains-how-ideas-go-viral/#4530d8b01995>