

The People Side of Change Management Is Harder

Interview with Tim Creasey ^{1,2}

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Introduction to the interviewee

Tim Creasey is Chief Innovation Officer of Prosci, a global leader in change management. He is a presenter, thought leader and researcher on managing the people side of projects. His work forms the foundation of the largest body of knowledge on change management. Through conference keynotes, presentations, articles and tools, he has advanced the discipline of change management by moving it out of the "soft and fuzzy" realm toward a structured, rigorous approach for value creation and benefit realization. He co-authored the book *Change Management: The People Side of Change* and Prosci's *Change Management Best Practices* (editions from 2001 to present).

¹ This interview was first published in PMR, Project Management Review magazine earlier this year. It is republished here with the permission of PMR. The PM World Journal maintains a cooperative relationship with PMR, periodically republishing works from each other's publications. To see the original interview with Chinese introduction, visit PMR at <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>

² How to cite this interview: PMR (2022). The People Side of Change Management Is Harder: Interview with Tim Creasey; *Project Management Review*; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue VIII, August.

Interview

Part I - The People Side of Change Management

Q1. Why do you think it is important to manage the people side of projects? You've said the soft side of change is actually the harder side of change. Would you please explain it?

Tim Creasey (Creasey): Successful change of any kind has two sides, a technical side and a people side. The technical side is where we design, develop and deliver a solution to meet a need. The people side is where we enable our people to engage, adopt and use the change. The change landscape is littered with examples where the technical side of the change was flawlessly executed, but the people side was neglected. And, as a result, the organization making the change realized little or no value. An example almost everyone can relate to is the installation of a new technology that didn't gain traction – people simply did not use the new technology as expected. Although the buttons worked and the solution was delivered on time, on budget, and to specifications, the organization did not realize any of the expected value. The problem, and the solution, lies in how people in the organization adopt and use the change.

The discipline of project management provides a structured approach to balancing the cost, time, and scope of the technical side of the project. It sequences the tasks and activities necessary to design, develop, and deliver the solution to the organization in a way that meets the design requirements. But flipping the switch, launching the initiative, or installing the technology only gets you partway there. Once the solution goes live, people need to step into a new way of showing up. The change will impact various aspects of their job, including processes, systems, tools, behaviors, and mindsets. Change management is an enabling framework that helps individuals successfully transition from their current state (how they do their job today) to their future state (how they will do their job once the change is in place). While change may occur at the organizational, business unit or project level, change management occurs at the individual level when we engage, prepare, equip, and support individuals through their individual change journeys. Change success is achieved when all the individuals impacted by a change successfully transition from their current to future state.

Change management directly impacts a project's return on investment (ROI). It is important for a project team to understand how much of the project's expected benefits are dependent upon people adopting and using the solution. This describes the people-dependent portion of the project's ROI, and this is the benefit that is at risk if the people side of change is not tended to and left up to chance.

When we leave the people side of change up to chance by not supporting individuals through their change journeys, indifference becomes a risk. Indifference manifests as passive resistance, loss in productivity, lower moral, higher job dissatisfaction, and employee turnover. We ask our people to change how they show up each day, and the right way to treat them is to prepare, equip, and support them through the change they are experiencing. The emerging focus on putting people first and becoming more human-

centric as organizations is directly aligned with the goals and objectives change management has been pursuing for decades.

In terms of the “soft side” of change being harder than the “hard side” of change, imagine a merger or an acquisition. There is significant complexity on the technical side of change: systems and process integration, financial reconciliation, organizational structure realignment, internal and external communications, marketing and brand positioning – the list goes on. But the “harder” side of the change is getting people to work in a new way, and it is the harder side of change because when a person shows up to do their job differently, they are doing that job in the context of their life and their role and everything else that’s going on around them. As a result, the journey to success on the people side of change can be more challenging than even the most technically complex solution.

The good news is that although change is hard and change is continuous, change success is accessible with and through our people when we support our people through their journeys. And this is the function of change management.

Part II – Major Obstacles to Change Management

Q2. What are the major obstacles to change management? And how should we overcome these obstacles?

Creasey: Change success is put at risk when the people side of change is ignored and left up to chance. Often, people confuse communications with change management. Simply communicating to people about a change before pushing out a new solution will not build sufficient adoption and proficient usage. If the change is people-dependent, it is unlikely that the new solution will deliver the expected results.

When we look at the research, sponsors play a significant role in change success. In all 11 of Prosci’s benchmarking studies over the last two decades, active and visible sponsorship was identified as the number one contributor to successful change, and the top obstacle to successful change was identified as ineffective sponsorship. Senior leaders play a critical role in making decisions about the technical side of the project and in fulfilling the active role of sponsors. The research indicates there are three primary sponsor roles, which we refer to as the “ABC’s of Sponsorship” - active and visible participation throughout the effort; building a coalition of support; and communicating directly. When sponsors do not step into these roles, the people in the organization take notice and support for the change wanes while obstacles emerge.

Based on our research, other obstacles include not using a structured approach to address the people side of change, and not having a dedicated resource focused on driving adoption and usage (the people side of change). To quote one of our study participants, “If it’s not someone’s job, it’s no one’s job.” In other words, if no one is dedicated and focused on specific adoption enablement tactics with change management, it will likely be neglected.

Another obstacle to change success is not having an effective partnership between the

technical project team and the change practitioner managing the people side of change. There needs to be an effective partnership for collaboration and engagement between the technical and people side of change. This is especially true as change becomes more iterative and adaptive by necessity in response to the global pandemic. The faster pace of change requires the people side and technical side to move together in lockstep.

Part III - Reasons for Resistance to Change

Q3. In your opinion, how should we deal with people's resistance to change? Before that, we'd better talk about why people are resistant to change first, shall we?

Creasey: It is important to begin by understanding not all resistance is the same. Some resistance comes from a failure to support a person through the change journey they are on. Change management can proactively help mitigate this type of resistance and help us respond when this type of resistance does occur. Some resistance, however, does not come from a breakdown in the journey, but rather from an informed disagreement with the change and the direction. We call this "constructive resistance" and it is important to hear, capture, and act on it early.

When considering resistance that results from an organization failing to support people through their own change journeys, the Prosci ADKAR model is a useful tool. It helps us to better understand why people resist a particular change. ADKAR describes the five building blocks of successful change as Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. Resistance can occur when any of these building blocks is missing. For example, a lack of awareness of the need for change would result in someone not being able to say, "I understand why this change is happening." In our research, this is the most common source of resistance among employees — no one made a compelling case for the reason for the change. If someone does not have the desire to make the change, they will not make the personal decision to adopt the change. A lack of knowledge or ability can also create resistance. An example is a physician who is fearful of a new tablet-based application supporting electronic health records. Even a fear of lack of knowledge or ability can trigger resistance. When reinforcement is not in place, people will revert to the old way of doing things which can sometimes look like resistance.

In terms of dealing with resistance, Prosci approaches resistance in two ways. Resistance prevention occurs when we apply good change management practices and principles. When a person feels prepared, equipped, and supported through a change, resistance goes down. When they see their senior leader fulfilling their role of sponsor and their direct manager advocating for the change, resistance goes down. The other side of resistance is resistance response, which happens when we are in a change and experience resistance. Prosci research suggests people managers are in the best position to identify and address resistance because of their proximity to employees and the change. Sponsors also play a role in addressing systemic resistance when it occurs during the life of a project.

Change is hard. It is our natural, physiological, and psychological tendency to go back to what we know. It takes effort to make a change and even more effort to stick with the

change, whether that change is happening at home, or within the work environment. Understanding and utilizing the building blocks of successful change enables us to support our people through their own change journeys. It is the right way to treat our people. Research also shows us we are six times more likely to achieve change success if we do an excellent job managing the people side of change.

Part IV - How to Build Flexible Change Management Plan

Q4. How should we carry out change management in the case of incomplete project information?

Creasey: The first phase of Prosci's methodology, Prepare Approach, identifies activities that align the change management strategy to the change. Even with incomplete information, many of these activities can be executed. The Process phase begins with defining success, including the project objectives and organizational benefits, and by identifying the impacted groups. Understanding likely impacts sets the stage for better understanding and empathy. Defining the change management approach involves understanding the risk, anticipated resistance, critical roles, resource allocation, and the road map and timeline for the change so the people side can be mapped into the technical side.

My Prosci colleague, Lisa Kempton, wrote a great blog on how to start managing change when the change is unclear. This is especially relevant today because the horizons of success have shortened, and change has become iterative and adaptive by necessity. The consequences of starting late include time-intensive rework due to misalignment between the change management plan and project plan, not effectively positioning change management, and having the people side components ignored by the project team. This results in limited and ineffective change management activities and ultimately more resistance and less engagement by employees.

Even if there is incomplete project information, we often know the reason for the change and can articulate the desired outcome of the change. Communication around these aspects can begin to build initial awareness and desire. We can analyze the organizational climate and its reaction to the change and document common risk areas for resistance to understand the system we are stepping into. We can begin working with stakeholders to build a more complete picture. Because the solution is not solidified, this is a great opportunity to involve stakeholders in building the solution. The change management team can begin to map ADKAR milestones to the high-level technical milestones and begin coordinating and aligning the people side and technical side of the change. A high-level flexible change management plan can be put in place.

Part V – How to Build Resilience in Change Management

Q6. In the ever-changing and complex VUCA world, how do you believe resilience should be built?

Creasey: Through my work with organizational leaders over the past two years, I

identified several conditions shaping the future of work that must be incorporated into future plans and strategies: involuntary digital transformation, instantaneous work experiment, iterative and adaptive by necessity, shifting success horizons, “that’s the way we’ve always done it” (TTWWADI) laughable, paradoxical humanity infusion in 2D, people side cannot be unseen, same storm different boats, forced prioritization, and de facto resilience.

The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated to us that our organizations and our people are far more resilient than we ever would have predicted. Organizational agility and change management form the foundation for resilience. Agile organizations anticipate and plan for changes and make fast decisions. They effectively initiate change efforts and manage risk. They rapidly develop and deploy new capabilities. Importantly, they have imbedded change management capabilities to support changes that are iterative and adaptive by nature.

Q7. Agility is a core competency for change management, right?

Creasey: Yes, agility is essential for organizations moving ahead and navigating a post-pandemic future. I began speaking about agility in 2015. During that time, I did a Google image search on agility. Funny enough, the first three pages were filled with photos of dogs running through obstacle courses. Ultimately, I looked to this dictionary definition: “the power of moving quickly and easily, nimbleness”. I also discovered several definitions of agility from various business sources that each provided an aspect of agility. By synthesizing these definitions, I recognized the core characteristics of organizational agility include aspects of speed and how quickly we can change, attunement, and how well we are paying attention to the right things to understand what changes are coming. Resilience and the ability to continue forward when facing obstacles is another aspect of agility. Agile organizations are also able to change faster in not only competition but also in market forces and technological transformation. Agility is ingrained in the fabric and DNA of the organization. It is not something that can be rented, but it is truly part of who we are as an organization. It is something that can be deployed with intent around projects and initiatives, and also employed when it is required to overcome a market shift or dynamic that is unforeseen. Agility is growing the muscle to achieve more than we set out to when we put time effort and energy into change.

Agility occurs in the organization at three levels: organizational, project and individual. At the organizational level, agility is an embedded core competency to overachieve when we set out on a change. It exists in all corners of the organization and is part of how everyone sees themselves. At the project level, agility is about how quickly we can move from envisioning a new way of being to bringing that new way to life. There are many aspects of this kind of agility. Individual agility is a personal attribute, and it relates to our own tenacity, resilience, and perseverance. Mindset is a big piece of individual agility.

Part VI - Qualities of Change Leaders

Q8. To facilitate change management, what kind of leadership style do you recommend? In other words, what are the top qualities of a change leader?

Creasey: One of the most important qualities of a change leader today is to be “multi-lingual” and I don’t mean two spoken languages. I mean the many languages of organizational and change success needed right now. Today’s change velocity is unlike anything we’ve seen. The changes are bigger, faster, more important, more complex, more disruptive. And, each organization is shifting from responding to a global pandemic to evolving into their future selves – some more quickly than others.

To deal with and prepare for this velocity of change, organizations are working to build change capabilities: “muscle” in specific disciplines that support change execution. The result is a change ecosystem that includes contemporary disciplines like project management, continuous improvement, Agile, Organizational Development and change management. Leading organizations have taken the next step and moved their change ecosystem under one umbrella to create a change-enabling system that is focused on successful change implementation and outcomes. The successful leaders of tomorrow will be those who can “speak” these various languages of organizational performance and improvement.

The most effective change leaders are those who can activate and harness the power of a change-enabling system. They know how to break down silos, facilitate collaboration and teamwork, integrate initiatives, and build a shared understanding and common purpose. These change leaders bring a tremendous amount of value to an organization in terms of change execution, innovation, and future readiness.

The other quality I would mention for the effective change leader going forward would be the ability to ask great questions. Curiosity and learning will be critical given the current change landscape. Leaders need to not only maintain their “power of wonder” to explore the various opportunities and challenges they encounter, but also encourage and enable their people to continue asking and answering and re-asking and re-answering key change questions. My favorite quote for 2020 was “ancora imparo”, which means in Italian “Yet, I am still learning.” Adopting a mindset of “Yet, I am still learning” is essential for leaders to navigate the shifting landscape.

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About the Interviewer



Spring

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Spring (English name), Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for *Project Management Review* (PMR) Magazine and website. She has interviewed over sixty top experts in the field of project management. Before joining PMR, she once worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in training centers in Beijing. Beginning in January 2020, Spring also serves as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

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