



ECLC Executive Brief

Empowering Frontline Managers to Lead Change

The Executive Council for Leading Change (ECLC) assembled a roundtable of seasoned executives to dig into the topic of Empowering Frontline Managers to Lead Change.

Empowering frontline managers to lead change is a strategic necessity for organizations that want to remain competitive in today's fast-paced business environment. Frontline managers occupy a pivotal position, bridging the gap between high-level strategic intentions and ground-level operational realities. This executive brief dives into the critical role of frontline managers in leading change initiatives while offering actionable strategies for senior change leaders to secure their buy-in, leverage their insights, and provide the ongoing support they need to succeed. By doing so, senior executives who are leading change can more effectively implement change efforts, across all levels of their organization.

Date of Roundtable **June 6th, 2024**

Roundtable Participants

Led by **Brittany Gunter**
Chapter Lead of ECLC



Annette Mychael

People, Process
and Change Lead
GroupM



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Director of Change Management,
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Key Questions Answered

- ? It's well-known that **gaining the support of frontline and middle managers** is crucial for successful change initiatives. What strategies have you implemented to secure their buy-in and commitment from the outset?
- ? Frontline leaders offer a unique perspective from the trenches that often provides insights overlooked during large-scale transformations. How do you **leverage their on-the-ground insights** to inform and improve your change initiatives?
- ? Ongoing support is essential for frontline managers during change initiatives. What **support systems or programs** have you put in place to empower them?

5 Key Strategies That Empower Frontline Managers to Lead Change

Use Titles

Just like **certain job titles command more respect** than others, frontline managers often care about how their contributions to change initiatives are seen throughout the larger organization. By labeling participants of change network groups “influencers” or “change orchestrators”, the prestige of what they are doing becomes a point of pride. **Creating a sense of job security** around their expanded role also matters, by highlighting how they are contributing to essential, cross-department initiatives.

Contextualize Change

One of the main benefits of bringing frontline managers to the table is that it **gives them the context they need** to understand why certain business decisions are being made. By bridging this divide, frontline managers can ask the questions they need to then contextualize change for their teams while senior change leaders can explore which messages resonate at this level of the organization or within a certain department. This also helps to **eliminate the feeling of “us vs. them”** that frontline managers often feel. Change isn’t being imposed on them; they are an active, contributing part of the change.

Provide Training

It’s important to avoid the assumption that frontline managers already have all the skills they need to lead change. That’s where senior change leaders can step in, to not only educate frontline managers about upcoming changes but also **educate them on how to lead change effectively**.

Clarify Expectations

Ensuring frontline managers **understand their precise responsibilities and integrating these within their existing roles** eliminates the potential conflict between tasks assigned by their immediate supervisors and those from senior change leaders. It’s vital that senior change leaders communicate regularly with these supervisors, apprising them of their team members’ contributions to change initiatives, thereby painting a comprehensive image of this employee’s contribution to the workplace.

Meet Regularly

By **meeting on a regular basis**, senior executives can ensure that frontline managers are kept engaged by their role as change champions. This also reinforces the notion that organizational change isn’t project-based (with a fixed beginning and endpoint) but rather a constant need to adapt to ever-evolving markets and realities.

3 Traits of Frontline Managers that are Also Change Champions

Influential

Frontline managers must have enough **sway and visibility within their own department** to be effective change leaders. By asking teams to nominate frontline managers to change network groups, senior executives can work with influential managers and then build on their leadership skills, thereby creating win-win situations for all involved.

Seniority

Frontline managers must have **enough seniority to be seen as an authority and leader yet sufficiently connected to daily operations** to offer practical perspectives. Finding the right level of seniority is crucial when selecting new change champions.

Enthusiasm

Apathy stifles dialogue. Change leaders may not find frontline managers that always agree with their views on a change initiative but the goal of involving frontline managers is to explore potential blindspots and create a great overall picture together of what is needed as well as the potential impacts of a change initiative. It's important to find frontline managers who **actively and meaningfully engage in discussions**.

4 Common Challenges Faced

Participation bias

As organizations grow, **the challenge of achieving full participation in surveys increases**, which frequently results in a disproportionate representation of extreme opinions. This skew also does not accurately reflect the collective employee sentiment. Transitioning surveys from frequently disregarded emails to platforms or softwares employees engage with regularly can enhance both response rates and the diversity of perspectives collected.

The complexity of large-scale changes

Large-scale changes often involve a lot of complex or abstract ideas. **Asking straightforward questions that dive into abstract concepts** like the evolution of workplace culture is challenging. A lot of time must be spent assessing how clear a question is and how easily it can be answered by workers that have other responsibilities on their mind.

Cognitive load

Recognizing the cognitive load on teams during times of change is crucial. Even well-understood and seemingly simple changes can be demanding. Change leaders should factor in the time and energy it takes to lead these transitions to fruition.

Navigating resistance to change

Few individuals relish change, at home or at work. Change leaders often have experience dealing with resistance to change within the workplace but it might be a novel challenge for frontline managers. It is crucial for senior executives to **mentor and support frontline managers that encounter any resistance to change**. That way, frontline managers are less likely to internalize the resistance they encounter but to understand it as a reflection of an individual's feelings towards the change itself.

5 Notable Quotes from the Roundtable



Give your frontline managers visibility into the change metrics they need, so that they can be seen as leaders with insider information by their team or department.



Karlene Joseph
Vice President | Technology Portfolio Management & Transformation Change Management | **Paramount Global**



It's important to not only educate frontline managers about upcoming corporate changes but also to give them the resources they need to lead the change within their teams. We can't assume they know how to lead change



Vanessa Hammett
Change Communications Lead | **Mars**



People inherently have a hard time accepting change. That's why it's important to support change agents and reassure them that, when there's a lot of noise or negativity around a change, it's not their fault and it's not personal.



Jenifer Chung
Vice President, Business Operations & Strategic Planning | **Northwestern Mutual**



Ask for feedback on the most frequented platforms within your organization, as emails can often be overlooked and ignored.



Ciprian Porutiu
SVP, Strategic Initiatives | **Marsh McLennan**



Create resources for managers, by managers. By sharing peer-to-peer knowledge, best practices become easier to adopt and fully implement.



Barbara Roos
Director of Change Management, Sales Excellence | **Intel**

Conclusion

By empowering frontline managers to lead change, organizations can tap into a wealth of on-the-ground insights, foster a culture of continuous improvement, and build a more resilient workforce. The strategies and insights discussed in this brief — from securing buy-in to providing ongoing support — highlight the importance of investing in frontline managers as pivotal change agents. As senior change leaders navigate the complexities of change, recognizing and enhancing the unique contributions of these change agents is key, in driving sustainable transformation and achieving long-term success.



The Executive Council for Leading Change

The Executive Council for Leading Change (ECLC) is a global organization that brings executives together to redefine the landscape of organizational change and transformation. Our council's aim is to advance strategic leadership expertise in the realm of corporate change by connecting visionary leaders. It's a place where leaders responsible for significant change initiatives can collaborate, plan, and create practical solutions for intricate challenges in leading large organizations through major shifts.

In a world where change is constant, we recognize its crucial role in driving business success.

ECLC's mission is to create a community where leaders can excel in guiding their organizations through these dynamic times.

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