

## Key Concepts in Processes of Sustainability Transformation

# CHANGE AGENTS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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## DEFINITION

Change agents deliberately enable and put change processes for sustainability into practice. In connection with other people, they widen their own and others' scopes of action to break free from undesired, unsustainable patterns and take the lead in initiating processes for sustainability. The process of breaking free from rigid structures and making a difference usually involves overcoming major barriers, as change agents themselves are embedded within the structures they seek to change. This dilemma relates to the close interplay between structure and agency: agents (we) constantly reproduce societal structures, which again form the basis for our actions. However, as Sewell (1992, p.27) notes, "the same resourceful agency that sustains the reproduction of structures also makes possible their transformation". This also means that individual change agents have agency and power to "influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances" (Bandura 2006, p.16). Overall, change agency is not necessarily limited to individuals, but can also refer to groups, whole organizations or networks, governments and civil society (Van der Heijden & Cramer, 2017).

## CONTEXT

In management research, change agents and related terms became especially popular from the 1980s onwards, as new, more dynamic organizations emerged in more uncertain environments (Caldwell, 2003). Today, the concept is discussed by diverse research streams such as psychology, education, CSR, sustainability, leadership studies, etc. For instance, entrepreneurship literature frames entrepreneurs as change agents, who introduce breakthrough innovations to markets or fundamentally change the way of operating a business. In education studies, change agents are those teachers who are eager to learn and change on the inside and outside (Van der Heijden et al., 2014). Similarly, the concept is also linked to sustainability innovation or leadership. They are often working "against"

dominant, conventional structures and belief systems; the change process towards sustainability usually consists of numerous steps and overcoming multi-faceted barriers. Change agents have diverse roles such as translators, team-builders, role models, catalysts, etc., often paired with a high value-orientation (e.g. Westley, 2013).

## RELEVANCE

In the context of sustainability transformation, the concept is used to describe dedicated individuals that initiate and facilitate progress towards large-scale transformation in complex systems. These "transformative agents" (Westley et al., 2013) require skills including providing vision, raising awareness, recognizing windows of opportunities, developing networks, facilitating knowledge building, mediating between actors and institutions, and facilitating conflict resolution. Further research is necessary to better understand the situations and contexts in which change agents operate. Then, questions can be addressed, which ask, for instance, about the momentum for change or the different types of change agents needed at different times in the change process.

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