



INTENT SERIES

1. Manage Intent to Deliver on Promises and Minimize Disappointment

If we want to be successful at executing major organizational change, it's important to understand how to *translate aspiration into reality*. *Aspiration* is a vision of what must be—the intended outcome. *Reality* is the value that accrues from putting it in place and sustaining its impact. “Translation,” as used here, is not a metaphor—a conversion must literally take place that turns concepts and ideas into actions and results.

Moving from intentions to results is neither a hit-or-miss process nor a risk-free slam dunk. Regardless of the discipline, any time there is a transition from one state to another, there is a probability that something will be lost in the process. Organizational change has an especially dismal record of achieving desired outcomes. The challenges and obstacles that arise between vision and realization tend to divert intentions to unwanted and even unrecognizable results.

In Search of the Missing Link

As a professional change community, we have not always paid sufficient attention to intent. Our focus has often been more on getting people to adapt to a change than on the change itself. What I mean is, sometimes we are so attentive to issues like resistance and commitment that we fail to see that the people involved are lacking a common understanding of what is being asked of them. I can say this was certainly true for me until a missing part to the change puzzle was revealed.

I have always been a student of patterns, particularly those that influence the outcome of attempts to orchestrate human change. In the early years of my practice, I operated on the basis that the behavior and mindset patterns most relevant to organizational change were the ones that dealt with issues like sponsorship, resistance, commitment, culture, etc. Without a doubt, these factors are essential to executing successful transitions, but I was never satisfied that they were telling the whole story. Any time I was called on to help implement important initiatives, I would properly address the patterns I knew about but, too often, I still saw change efforts fail to realize their promised potential. The result was always the same—unmet promises and frustrated leaders. There had to be something else influencing outcomes beyond the

patterns I was relying on at the time. Finally, something happened that expanded my appreciation for the crucial role intent plays in change success.

Quantum physicists didn't discover "quarks" (an elementary particle of matter) through direct inspection. (They can't be seen.) They were revealed by recognizing that certain experimental outcomes could only be possible if quarks existed. In the same way, at first, I didn't directly perceive an intent pattern that differentiated successful change from unsuccessful change. What I did notice, however, was that certain change successes and failures couldn't be explained unless something of this nature was influencing the outcome. In effect, I saw what wasn't there but I couldn't decipher what should actually fill the gap. Seeing a hole in the constellation of variables left me curious but it didn't bring to light the missing part itself.

It wasn't until I had exposure to an intent specialist that I could actually see what could fill the vacant slot in the formula. I was fortunate to come across the work of someone who had isolated and refined the art of helping people clarify what they really wanted to achieve and how to articulate it so others could understand, relate to, and join the journey. He called himself an *intent architect*. As soon as I saw what he was doing, I realized this was the pattern I had been looking for.

As we explored the implications of his work, we found that what we eventually labeled *intent management* isn't just a pattern—it is an important lens that reveals several patterns beneath it. After much scrutiny, we found that sponsors who are successful with their change endeavors pay as much attention to the change as they do to changing. They are extremely clear about their intention, they seek alignment on it across their leadership team, they communicate it effectively (usually using fewer words, but conveying more meaning), and, finally, they ensure their actions and decisions (and that of other key leaders) are consistent with it throughout the implementation process.

Strategic initiatives are, by nature, complex undertakings. They involve and affect many people in numerous ways. Their intended outcomes may take months, or even years, to fully realize. Usually, only a few people conceive them, but they cannot be brought to fruition without large and often diverse teams. Ultimately, they involve asking people to embrace new ideas, concepts, or practices that may be challenging to accommodate. It's no wonder that the result is often very different from what was expected by the originators of the process.

A vital element to closing the gap is focused attention on intent.

What Is Intent?

Properly positioned, intent is a complete, concise, understandable, and compelling expression of the expectations for an initiative.

- **It is complete.** The full view of what will be delivered is in one place, and a context is established so people have an anchor to which all elements of the change can be related. This provides an important unifying effect for targets.
- **It is concise.** Everyone can be continually aware of the intent at all times. Once the intent becomes too convoluted for people to remember, their decisions and actions begin to diverge from it.
- **It is understandable.** It can be easily communicated to and comprehended by all involved in executing the strategy.
- **It is compelling.** People feel drawn to the value it will create for themselves and the organization.

When change is successful, it is typically because the initiating sponsor and his or her leadership team have established intent. Once their intent statement is formulated, they then convey what is expected to happen. When properly formulated and communicated, an intent declaration drives the implementation process, guides decisions, and answers questions.

Becoming grounded and unified on intent involves much more than finding words the senior team can agree on. The language used to articulate intent is merely a starting point. Team members must connect with the true purpose at a much deeper level. Ultimately, they must deeply commit to realizing what the intent stands for. This requires movement in five distinct areas:

- From words, to shared meaning
- From meaning, to believing in the possibility being created
- From believing, to aligning with that vision as a team
- From aligning, to committing resources and funding it
- From committing, to staking their personal reputations on delivering what was promised

All of these things—words, meaning, belief, alignment, commitment, and staking reputation—must exist in parallel.

- The *words* consist of the language used to articulate what realization of the desired outcome looks like.
- The *meaning* is the interpretation people have of the words used.
- *Belief* refers to how plausible people perceive the endeavor to be, given the human, technical, and financial resources available as well as the challenges and pitfalls that lie ahead.
- *Alignment* is the united and visible political stance taken in support of the desired outcome.
- *Commitment* requires that people’s internal beliefs and overt actions reflect an imperative to attain the true purpose of the initiative—not just its installed appearance.
- *Risking* reputation means the stakes are extremely personal; the leaders have made not just an organizational declaration to themselves and to key constituencies, but a personal promise that, “while on my watch, this *will* succeed.”

Certainly, members of the senior team have responsibility for ensuring their intent is effectively communicated to everyone involved, but they cannot do it all themselves. That’s the added complication. The key messages have to go through layers of other people without losing their impact. This is a vital part of enrolling all those who will be affected, but it is particularly important that the people selected as sustaining sponsors and the agents responsible for building and carrying out the plan of execution resonate with the intent.

Is *complete, concise, understandable, and compelling* intent a constraint or a straitjacket for implementation teams? Will they be frustrated by its rigidity? Usually, it’s quite to the contrary. When managed properly, intent enables people to engage in executing strategy and leveraging their creativity while remaining confident that they will produce the expected results.



2. The Path of Intent Management

In my last post, I said that, as practitioners, we sometimes devote more time getting people to change than we spend on the change itself, and that having a complete, concise, understandable, and compelling statement of intent is critically important to achieving change success. I'd like to say more here about managing the intent process.

When important projects are not orchestrated effectively, they sometimes melt down or never get off the ground. More often, what happens is that *installation* occurs, but not *realization*. In other words, something is put into place, but it doesn't attain the hoped-for result.

A solution reaches its promised end state when it fully achieves the ultimate desired outcome. Only then does an organization realize the value of its investment in a solution. Realization is about accomplishing what was originally agreed to when the money was allocated to build or buy the solution. Like installation, realization involves identifiable, quantifiable indicators of success. Unlike installation, however, it also has subjective, though still measurable, aspects—the taste, feel, and smell of the solution's desired effect. To some people, these aspects sound too “soft” to be meaningful, but they are actually essential to the *experience* of what the situation or environment will be like when the aspirations are reached.

To achieve realization, people must demonstrate the sought-after mindsets and behaviors in a quality manner and sustain them over the appropriate amount of time. Therefore, intent management takes into account not only objective goals, but also the experience of working within the new environment created by the change. When intent management is successful, mindsets, behavior, quality, and durability converge to produce the sought-after result.

A Line of Sight

Intent management progresses from clarity (aligning on a precise and explicit purpose) to expression (impeccably communicating the purpose) to integrity (staying true to the original goal).

Intent *clarity* is our starting point. Clarity means starting with the end in mind. Many people limit their thinking to how the future will be different from today. Their jumping off point is how things are now (i.e., where the problems and challenges exist). The current state is what they must change from but it is not the change. Starting from the present is reflective of an incremental mindset. It often leads to a large investment but accomplishes little. A transformational future is more likely to emerge when the intent originates from a “yet-to-come” perspective and the change emerges by working back to the present.

Intent is, therefore, a statement of expectations for the desired end state. It paints a picture of the future...a rendering that is not just process and financials. It weaves in how people will act, behave, feel, and interact. Questions often asked in the process of clarifying intent are, “How will we judge success when we are finished?” and “What will we look for in the result that will make us proud of the effort?”

The challenge is that clarity is not just for an individual, but also for the leadership team sponsoring the initiative. It is surprising how often a senior team can agree to fund an initiative, and apparently subscribe to the same desired outcome, yet each member sees what is to be accomplished differently. To be successful, leadership must share a common clarity and commit to the intent. Only when intent is unambiguous within the leadership team can they impart it to others.

The second ingredient in intent is *expression*—the ability to articulate the intent to all who need to participate in its realization. Intent is an expression of what is in the minds and hearts of the

leaders sponsoring the initiative. Without understanding the sponsor's vision, the implementation team will either be constantly guessing what the leaders really wanted or continually returning to ask questions. The former will inevitably lead to an unsuccessful result. The latter will lead to frustration on both sides as well as delays.

The expression of intent is not a two-inch-thick binder or a fifty-slide PowerPoint deck. The most powerful expression is brief and emotional. *Brief* so that people can remember it, and *emotional* so that they can relate to it at a deeper level. It must be presented in a way that allows the recipients to see themselves in it. Expressing intent includes stories, images, metaphors—as well as graphs and spreadsheets. The test of expression is whether people “get it” at an emotional as well as an intellectual level.

The third component of intent management is *integrity*. Intent that is clear and expressed so people can relate to it must also be protected. Between vision and reality, hundreds of decisions are required. Each one has the potential to bring the desired result into sharper focus or to blur it. Safeguarding the integrity of intent means ensuring that each decision on the path is in line with the true purpose of the overall effort. This seems obvious, but with the multitude of inevitable pressures during execution regarding time, resources, and funding, the true intent often becomes lost in the decision-making process. During a project, one person or group usually watches the timing of key events/milestones and often someone else watches the spending, but rarely does anyone guard the vision.

Guarding the vision has two sides to it—protecting the aspirations that have been established and keeping them alive and current in the face of the dynamic environment in which they will be executed. The world does not stand still as change is executed. The intent must continue to be relevant and meaningful regardless of shifting circumstances.



3. Symptoms of the Need for Intent Management

Organizations often succeed in installing change, but find it's more difficult to achieve realization—the true intent. Most of the time, the results of key initiatives are:

- Unrecognizable: They bear little resemblance to the original vision and goals.
- Underdelivered: They yield less than the intended result.
- Overdelivered: They achieve more than the intended result—usually with time and cost implications that limit sustainability. On the face of it, overdelivery doesn't sound so bad, but it can actually be worse than underdelivery when the final solution proves to be too expensive to maintain. Overdelivery sets up high expectations, which can often lead to abandonment of the solution.

When any of these outcomes occurs, a *gap* exists between what was expected and what was produced. Senior management's response is usually one of surprise, disappointment, frustration, and anxiety. Often, they cannot put their finger on where it went wrong—they just know that what they ended up with isn't what they had envisioned.

Here are some typical responses from executives:

“That's not what we thought it would look like.”

“The vision was great, but somewhere on the journey we lost our way.”

“I can’t put my finger on it, but I don’t think they got it.”

“How did it get from what we approved to what we’ve got now?”

“It has the appearance of what we wanted, but somehow the essence of what we were really after just isn’t there.”

Symptoms of Intent *Mis*management

Indicators that intent has been poorly orchestrated include:

- **Lack of relevance:** The primary purpose of the initiative is stated in such a way that the initiative appears to be unrelated to what is important to the target population.
- **Overly complex:** The intent is expressed in such detail and length that it becomes overwhelming. This is evidenced by thick books, consultant reports, and detail that clouds the basic intent. Such complexity limits the target audience’s ability to focus on the right things at the right time. The result? An inability to see the forest for the trees.
- **Inaccurate retelling:** In any change initiative, the intent will undergo a series of depictions—level to level, person to person. By the time the message is said aloud by the person at the end of the line, it often no longer matches the original wording, much less intended meaning. Even a small error or omission in recounting what was said can cause a multiplier effect—a distortion of a distortion—that reproduces and radically changes the original purpose.
- **Lack of internalization:** People don’t fully align their mindset and actions with the new direction. Most of us have learned that people can say things and behave publicly in ways that appear to support the intent of an endeavor while their private beliefs and actions are inconsistent with the true intent.
- **Compounded compromises:** Concession-making and tradeoffs are inherent in the successful execution of major change. Some compromises are necessary and justified, but too many can bring down an initiative. One bee sting might hurt, but a thousand can kill. In the case of poor intent management, it’s death by a thousand good, but misguided, intentions. Every decision along the way must be evaluated not only on its individual merits, but also against the overall intent.



4. The Intent Architect—Guardian of Outcomes

To avoid the symptoms of intent mismanagement (see my last post) and keep the intent’s line of sight in place (clarity, expression, and integrity), critically important initiatives must be supported by an intent architect.

The intent architect is responsible for helping the initiating sponsor maintain the integrity of the intent as the transformation is executed. He or she is the guardian of the desired end state. The role includes facilitating intent clarity with the leadership team, helping to communicate it to others, and interpreting it for the various individuals and groups involved in implementation, as well as for the leadership team itself.

The key to success is managing consistency and alignment across the various execution streams. To achieve this, the intent architect must constantly interact with the teams and senior

management. To use an analogy, the intent architect is a product manager and the product is the full realization of the intended outcomes. The responsibility is to ensure that the product that leadership expects is the product that is delivered.

A common question raised is, “Why is a separate role needed...can’t the intent architect duties be handled by the project manager?” Experience tells us that on a major initiative, the answer is an unequivocal “no.” There is always tension around how timeframes, funding, and vision relate to each other. The first two deal with installation and the last with realization. Yet, most project managers focus on and are rewarded based on installation metrics. An intent architect is rewarded on realization and, therefore, must maintain tight vigilance on the integrity of the sponsor’s promise.

The intent will be frequently questioned and challenged, both directly and indirectly. The intent architect must be flexible and practical but also strong-willed to hold the line when appropriate, confident to raise questions when needed, and willing to confront people at all levels who compromise the intent.

Finally, the intent of a key initiative is justified in the ultimate business results. The intent architect needs business focus and understanding to represent the intent appropriately.

In summary, responsibilities for the intent architect include the following:

- Help the initiating sponsor develop and represent the intent of a major corporate transformation (complete, concise, clear, and compelling)
- Assist in gaining understanding, commitment, and alignment among the leadership team as well as cascading alignment and enrollment throughout the organization
- Develop and track installation and realization indicators
- Assist in defining and expressing the detailed solution that will achieve the intent of the transformation

Intent Management: The Bottom Line

Collectively, businesses spend hundreds of billions of dollars on strategic initiatives each year. The evidence is clear that, when using traditional planning and delivery approaches, each initiative begins with a 70 percent chance of failing. Lack of clarity, poor expression, and inadequate attention toward integrity all contribute to the failures. It doesn’t have to be that way.

For leaders, the cost is more than the dollars invested. A promise is made—to the boss, the board, shareholders, employees, and customers—when funding for the project is secured. Important results and the leader’s reputation is on the line. Explicit and deliberate management of intent not only avoids disappointment, but, most importantly, it provides the critical starting point for creating transformational results in the organization.