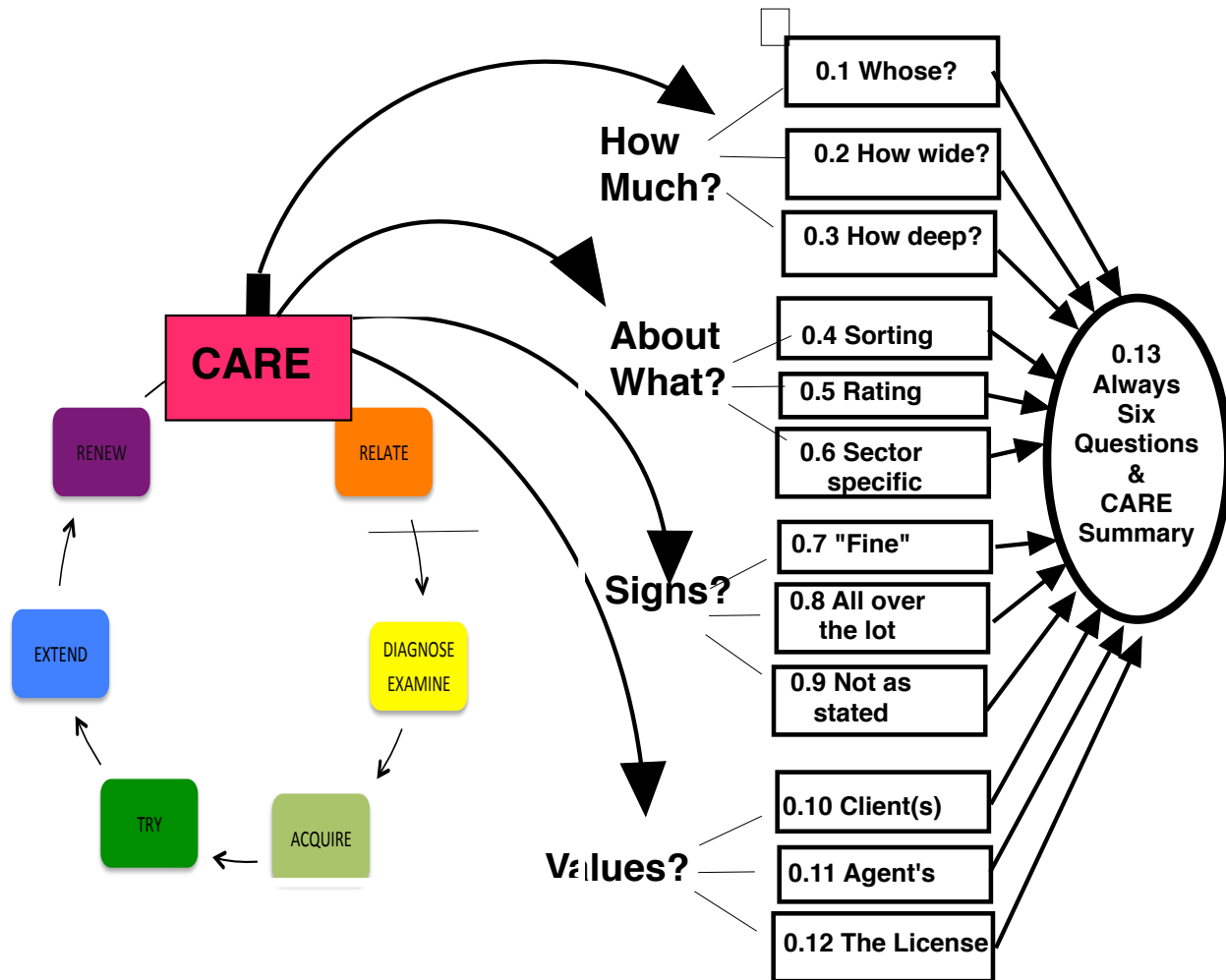


# Change Agent's Guide

Excerpt from the 2021 edition  
From the Seven Stages of Change

## Stage 0: CARE

The first task of the change agent is to develop some sense of what the concern is, a sense of where the system seems to be hurting, and where the need for change is most pressing. This may be obvious enough from signs and symptoms everywhere. It may be a 'given' if the change agent has been asked to work on a particular problem. But this 'given' may not be what is really the most urgent issue for the system. The change agent needs to look around and listen to what is being said by different members of the system before determining what the **real** concern is.



## **ESTABLISHING THE NEED FOR ACTION**

***Someone must care enough to make it all worthwhile.***

Change begins with a care or a concern, a feeling that something is wrong, and that someone should do something to correct that wrong.

But where is this concern located?

Who has the concern?

How strongly do they feel it?

How can we decide if this is the right starting point or the best call to action?

Change agents must face such questions before setting out on the 'change' adventure.

Start with these **framing** questions:

What constitutes the "system" to be served?

Who are the people who have a common concern?

In what sense are these people a "group"?

To what extent are they aware that their concern is *shared*?

Can all those involved reach *consensus* on their main concern?

Is the shared concern high enough to drive the "change" effort?

The CHANGE AGENT and the "CARE"

Having established the shared concern, ask yourself these questions:

1. Is this an appropriate concern for **your** involvement ?
2. Are **you** really needed?
3. Do you have **legitimacy** to assume a change agent role here?

### **Stage O.1 Whose Cares Are They?**

The stimulus for change can come from anywhere and apply to anything, but it all starts with some precipitating event or action which makes someone believe that a change of some kind is needed. Yet, social systems are complicated, and what appears obvious and urgent to some may not appear so to others. Caring is certainly the engine of action. It is what brings the change agent into the picture in the first place.

We need to ask initially:

Who is the initiating source?

Who is the creator of this stimulus to action?

Is it the creators' concern for themselves or for others?

If it is a shared concern, how widely is the concern shared?

Is there self-interest involved as well as interest for others or for the system as a whole?

If so, is this a troubling element or is it a positive element, an energy reinforcer?

For the change agent who is invited into the situation to "help," it will be important to judge where the concern is *really* coming from. For example, if it is the concern of the leader of the system, is the leader truly representing the system the way it is or is he/she reflecting more their own opinion or concern about where the system should go?

If the change agent is also the leader, these questions need to be self-addressed.

### **Stage O.2 How Widely is Concern Felt?**

**Who cares? Is the entire system riled up?**

A concern may be felt by just one member of a system and still be a legitimate basis for system-changing action. Obviously, the larger the system and the more members, the more important it is to have widespread acknowledgement or acceptance that something needs to be done.

If the change agent senses at the outset that not enough people really feel the pain or are even aware of the need, then the first task may be to get members to become more aware.

Three complicating factors should be noted:

1. Your pain and my pain may not be about the same thing. Even though both are energizers, the actors may find themselves at cross purposes, and the energy required to invest in one sort of change **may** drain away the energy required for the other.
2. Concerns may be in direct conflict with one another. They may effectively cancel each other out. Here the main change agent concern may be to resolve the conflict and bring more order and calm into the system.
3. The concern or caring is primarily driven by the leader or by outside powers, in effect, mandated change. It is also characterized in The **Guide** as “one step” change. The boss orders it and so it is done. This is the way many people look at change, it’s just that simple: it must be done, so do it. However in many situations, this one-step mandated “change” generates all kinds of resentments and resistance at different levels, often hidden from the view of the initiators.

## **Stage O.3 How Deep?**

### ***When they care too little***

Someone always wants some kind of change, but there has to be a certain level of concern by key members of a system before anything can happen. In some sense, a theoretical ideal system in perfect equilibrium doesn’t need to be disrupted, but there is no such system in real life.

It is not always easy to judge when the energy to advance a change process is just not there. After all, most people are polite, and if someone has assigned you the job of initiating some sort of change action, they may pretend to be interested. Nevertheless, if you find your appointments continuously rescheduled or the people you are supposed to meet with are always late or somewhere else, it may be that there is just not enough energy to proceed in a successful direction.

### ***When they care too much***

Sometimes the concern of a client will be felt so intensely that it interferes with constructive problem solving. First of all, such an intense focus may blur perception of other concerns; the client doesn't get the big picture, may miss other important concerns that yield more easily to problem-solving, or may fail to perceive that there are underlying problems that need to be covered.

Intense concern focus can also diminish appreciation of the need for deliberate, rational, and collaborative processes. The client's sense that action is needed immediately forestalls serious problem diagnosis, extensive search for resources, and consideration

of alternative solutions. In effect, all the change processes that are described in **The Guide** are vitiated! Thus, the change agent may need to develop strategies to buy time, to create space for reflection and for viewing the array of client concerns without intense pressure for solutions.

## **Stage O.4 How Do We Sort Out CARES?**

### *The hierarchy of concerns*

Most change agents will approach their client systems with their own concerns well in mind. Some may show up as advocates for the concern they intend to promote, and advocacy is often a very much needed form of change agency. In some ways, having concerns in advance helps move the change process forward, but it can also get in the way. Let us suppose, therefore, that our agent starts out as the most altruistic of public servants, with no agenda other than to help clients bring about beneficial change of some kind. What would the change agent look for as concerns or cares of the clients? What sort of list or framework would be helpful for sorting out the cares of individual members, sub-groups, and the system as a whole? Obviously, some cares are more important than others, but how do we decide or, more properly, how do we get them to decide, keeping in mind that these focal concerns are going to become the forces that will drive the change effort.

When Thomas Jefferson penned the phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" into the Declaration of Independence, he gave us a wonderfully simple taxonomy of the cares of humans. These are the things that people prize above all else and probably in that order.

The most basic need of humans is *life*, i.e., *survival*, of the species, first, then, survival of the self, the self being subordinate but integral with the species, i.e. all of humanity. Survival requires food, shelter, protection from the destructive forces of nature and of other people.

*Liberty* is what we hope to have, once life is secure. Liberty implies the freedom to choose our own way of life, our own religion, our own company, and our own ways of thought.

The *pursuit of happiness* perhaps encompasses the rest. The phrase begs the question of whether happiness is out there somewhere. All it says is that we should be able to pursue it, not necessarily find it. Yet implicit in the phrase is the notion that there are many types of things that humans find rewarding and pleasurable and they should be allowed, even encouraged to go after them in their separate ways as part of their fulfillment of life. Thus, there are foods not just for survival but for the infinitely varied delights of taste and smell. There are sounds not just to hear and to warn of danger but also to inspire through poetry and music. The trappings of culture are not merely functional requirements of a system but prized jewels which elevate the quality of all our lives.

Everything we have listed so far represents cares or concerns which can be powerful enough to energize a significant action of some kind, either an action to save, or to enhance, or to create. However, such concerns are vocalized by individuals; the systems to which they belong may not speak with one voice, so what does the system say? The change agent should also be able to think in terms of system concerns that transcend the individual. For example, system survival is always an issue, usually in the back of the

mind but sometimes up front. It is sometimes referred to as “existential,” meaning that the system will be destroyed if something is done (or not done.) Systems, like people, are born, they grow, they decline, and they die. Systems also can merge or subdivide and remain healthy. Even the idea of system “health” is complicated and perhaps controversial. For some, long term survival is proof of health, but, for the change agent, system health is more likely to be suggested by such qualities as the ability to change, to grow, to adapt to new conditions, and to adopt new ideas and new subsystems.

Focal concerns may also reside at the level of subgroups or minorities within a larger system. These concerns may be viewed as system defects by advocates of these particular causes. In such cases the change agent seeks to make the larger system feel responsible for the concerns of the minority, whether it be in terms of caring for the poor, the handicapped, the homeless, or the racially or culturally different.

## **Stage O.5 Rating and Prioritizing CARES**

*Different players and stakeholders = different priorities*

It is probably important to allow different members to articulate their priorities early in the process if there are opportunities to do this.

*Make Your Own CARE List*

Make your own list of the major concerns that relate to your client.

Do your concerns match those of key stakeholders?

Are concerns of various stakeholders compatible with one another?

Are there concerns that can be combined or worked on simultaneously? (Note that there is usually overlap among concerns of different stakeholders and between content, process, and structure.)

Once you have made such a list, can you then find ways of prioritizing for yourself? A greater challenge is to find ways the client system can reach consensus on sensible actionable priorities.

*The special cares of change agents*

Change agents, as a special class of people, are likely to have certain concerns that are somewhat different from other actors in the system. Above all, for the change agent, openness to change and caring about change are prominent and continuing concerns. Each stage of the change process, C-R-E-A-T-E-R, points to an important capacity that a system should have and therefore a legitimate concern and goal for the change agent.

## **Stage O.6 Social Sectors and their Different CARES**

All change efforts are embedded in specific sectors of society, even though sometimes a concern is so pervasive or overwhelming that it spills over from one sector into another, even engulfing the entire society. The world pandemic of 2020 qualifies in that regard.

Every sector has been studied as a target for change action and change strategies over the last century.

### Agriculture

Probably the most thoroughly studied sector and this is where “change agent” started more than a century ago. Every county in the United States came to have a specialist assigned to provide new information on best practices in agriculture, usually based on research coming out of the land grant universities and their experimental farm stations.

Rural sociologists started studying how new practices, i.e., “innovations,” spread from one farm to another and eventually became established practices. Productivity per acre has always been a major concern, but soil and water management plus every imaginable problem involved in rural living and working became part of the domain for these pioneer agents. They thus became a model for change agents in other sectors. Thus, the system of agricultural ‘extension’ has been imitated throughout the world, a major factor in the increasingly successful fight to feed the hungry everywhere in the world.

### Business

The biggest concern of all businesses might at first glance appear to be survivability or profitability, which is often simply defined down as “the bottom line.” Yet it is truly much more complicated. All businesses, large or small, are set to function within a much larger social environment which includes its own workers and managers, its clients or customers, its shareholders, its competitors, and various governments. The CARE target may emerge in any one of these relations, and each presents its own change process issues. Nevertheless the change agent process of The Guide should apply to each and every area of concern within the business world.

### Education: Higher and Life-Long: a sampling of likely CARE sectors.

- Financial stress:
  - on institutions
  - on students and families
- Modernizing curricula
- Matching community needs and requirements

### Education: Elementary and Secondary: a sampling of likely CARE sectors

- Standards
- Underserved, cities, rural areas
- The poorest
- Crumbling infrastructure
- Immigrants, minorities

### Government: a sampling of likely CARE sectors

- Choosing leadership
- Serving publics

Fulfilling missions  
Revenues, budgets, and spending  
Underserved  
regulation

Law and Legal System: a sampling of likely CARE sectors

Equal treatment  
Preserving order  
Law enforcement  
Race relations  
Courts  
Prisons  
Police hiring, training , regulating

Medicine: a sampling of likely CARE sectors

Transition of digital and electronic records  
Medical management  
New Devices and Practices  
Financing

Military: a sampling of likely CARE sectors

Defining missions  
Mobilizing for missions  
Coordinating with governments  
Recruiting and training  
Budgeting  
New weapons and tactics

Non-profits and Voluntary Organizations

Political parties  
Charities

**Stage O.7 When Everything is “Fine.”**

**How People Show and Don't Show They Are in Trouble**

As the change agent enters the scene, different client systems may show widely differing "caring" postures. For example, they may profess that everything is fine: no need for change. At the opposite extreme, they may appear to be so completely absorbed with a particular concern that they have no time for you. The ways in which people express and hide their concerns can present a baffling array to the change agent. Like a good psychologist, the change agent needs to listen with a 'third ear.' What the client says may not be what they really mean; what they say may be a cover for something else.

Is there such a thing as a system without concerns? Without the need for change? Perhaps there are such systems in theory but not in practice. All human systems are unfulfilled, incomplete, or lacking in some ways. Yet, ironically, those that are most able and willing to change are probably in the best shape. These are the systems which can adapt to changing circumstances, which can grow and take on new missions. So if a system presents itself to you as being without concerns that require significant change

effort, what is really going on? There are at least four possibilities, dismissing the "perfection" alternative: (a) the system is frozen; (b) the system members are not yet engaged; (c) the key concerns have not reached the boiling point; or (d) they are not willing to tell you what is going on.

(a) *The frozen state.*

Having achieved a certain level of equilibrium and integration, members of a system may not wish to go further at this time, to rock the boat, particularly if the state of integration has been very recently achieved. At the opposite extreme, some systems may have existed at one level of integration for so long that even the thought of change is seen as a threat to system stability. In either case, such a system needs to be unfrozen before any serious change effort can begin.

(b) *Not yet engaged.*

We often make the mistake of assuming that people hear what they are told and see what they are looking at. Very often, especially on first encounters, what appears to be "hearing," "seeing," "understanding," and "agreeing" are merely polite or ritualistic posturing. The supposed audience is not really attending to your message. Change agents will often be angry and frustrated when they proceed on a plan of action which they thought was agreed to, only to find that what they are doing is unsupported, contradicted, and undermined by the very people they thought were on their side. No doubt there is venality involved in some of these cases, but one should first consider that it was just a lack of real engagement. The other parties simply weren't attending to what you were saying. The antidote is *effective initial communication* and *active solicitation of feedback*. If you can get your listeners to repeat to you what you told them, there is a good chance that the message got through.

(c) *Bubbling just under the surface.*

Think of concerns in terms of threshold. Below a certain level of intensity they remain unarticulated, we might say "unconscious." Then something happens to bring these previously silent concerns to the surface: something breaks, someone dies, someone quits. Many really vital concerns can lie just underneath the surface for years, waiting for some catalytic event to come along to bring them to serious attention. Of course, you can be that catalytic event (See later in this text and on the Guide website, "Change Agent role type R-O, change agent as **Catalyst**).

(d) *Not levelling with outsiders.*

If you enter the scene from outside, you may observe or hear no concerns because you are not permitted to, particularly if you are perceived as (i) a threat, (ii) someone of inferior status, (iii) someone from an alien culture, or (iv) simply someone who, for any number of reasons, will not understand and will not respond appropriately. All these are aspects of the definition of "outsider" that the change agent must overcome before he or she can obtain real insights of many client systems. If you think this may be the case, then your first task is to work on building relationships (Stage 1). Then get back to a consideration of what your client's concerns are or should be.

## **Stage O.8 Concerns All Over the Lot**

In some situations, rather than there being no concerns expressed, there are many, perhaps too many. The change agent is now in the predicament of facing widely differing



concerns expressed by different members of the "system." One possibility is that there is, as yet, no real "system" here but rather a pattern of weak and dysfunctional internal linkages, a lack of integration, and a lack of perceived common purpose.

If the concerns are more coherent but tend to line up as polarities, irreconcilable needs and conflicts, then the change agent may be confronting two strong subsystems that have to be reconciled in some way for positive change action to occur. In both the non-system and the conflict instances, the first task of the change agent would again appear to be to start building bridges, to make the first change project a system building exercise.

### **Stage O.9 The Real CARE Is Hidden from View**

It is possible for the members of the client system to signal one concern to the change agent while they really want help on another. It is important for the change agent who is invited in to a situation to, *first*, listen carefully to what the manifest concern is, and, *second*, consider that this might not be the real concern. There are a variety of reasons why clients may not be able to articulate their real concerns. One might be defensiveness or embarrassment. Another might be simply inability to articulate what is really bothering them.

For example, when an educator asks for some outside help on curriculum reform to introduce a "multicultural studies" program, this might be a mask for an underlying problem of racial tension. Change agents should always enter the situation with an open mind but be prepared to view the presented concern skeptically. They should look for any signs that contradict the priority claim of this concern and should develop their own lists of concerns independently to see if they match up.

### **Stage O.10 Client Intentions and Values**

The word "change" can be a very hot button, indeed. If you are the self-appointed "change agent," and I am the one you are planning on changing, I am not likely to welcome you with open arms. Who has the right to change anyone, after all! As the hero farmer of the old western movie might say: *"That railroad ain't comin' through my land."*

Thus, it is important for the would-be change agent to get straight early on about some *value issues* that swirl around the change process.

For example: When does change effort become manipulation?

When does change effort become coercion?

Is there such a thing as "justified manipulation"?

Do we have a right to tell other people what they should do?

Can we justify serious intervention into other people's lives?

What is a "just" cause?

Is justice for some, injustice for others?

Such questions don't necessarily arise or come to the forefront of a change process very often, but they are always there lurking somewhere in the background in any encounter between two people, when one of whom is supposedly providing a service to the other. As societies progress, the unwritten rules of such encounters can change. Just one example is the relationship between doctor and patient. At one time it was assumed that the doctor knew best what was good for the patient. More recently, it has been recognized that the patient has an important role to play, both in describing what is wrong and understanding what the doctor is trying to do and why.

## **Stage O.11 The Change Agent's Value Issues**

The role of change agent can be seen as problematic on a number of grounds that might be called "moral" or value-based. It can be argued, for example, that people have a fundamental right to work out their own problems (or not) in their own ways. This is a dilemma as old as the helping professions. Indeed, the strictures of the ancient Hippocratic oath, "*primum non nocere*," (above all, do no harm) are very much applicable to change agents,

But can we ever guarantee that we will do no harm, that we will leave the system in at least as good a condition as we found it? We definitely cannot. After all, we are trying to make significant changes in ongoing living systems. We are interfering with ongoing linkages and arrangements that may have been in place for centuries. When we open up a new room, how do we know we are not tearing down a bearing wall that will threaten the collapse of the structure? There is risk in what we do, and we should be aware of it, striving always both to minimize the risk and provide the client with "informed consent" regarding our interventions.

One of the trickiest moral dilemmas concerns the client system's initial expectations. They invite you in because they think you will do one kind of thing for them, but inevitably, a good change agent may well end up doing more and different things than their initial mandate stated. If expectations are to 'fill one change agent role, is it legitimate to fill others as well or instead? If brought in by one member of the client system to serve their needs, is it legitimate to reach out in an attempt to serve other members of the system or the system as a whole?

All change agents will have to resolve these dilemmas for themselves in their own way. The **Guide** may help in sorting out some of the issues, but it won't resolve them for you.

## **Stage O.12 The "License" to Manage a Change Process**

One way to approach the "values" question is to ask if anyone has what might be called the change agent "license." Clearly some people do: If you are called in by legitimate representatives of the client system to provide help or consultation of some kind, whether paid or voluntary, this provides you with a kind of moral cover: you are doing the bidding of your sponsor, whoever that might be. You have the sponsor's permission. End of story.

As we have framed the process in The Guide, the change agent who follows the C-R-E-A-T-E-R model will always be working collaboratively with various members of a client "system," which may be defined differently at different stages of a change process. Thus, the originating sponsor who granted the initial license may have different objectives and values than other stakeholders who emerge along the way. It may be that these different stakeholders may require their own licenses, their own acknowledgement that you have *their* permission to work with them or to proceed further through the total process.

## **Stage O.13 Six Questions**

### **CARE Questions the Change Agent Should Always Address**

1. What is the primary voiced concern of the system with which I am working?
2. Why do I CARE? Is this enough to keep me going through this effort?
3. Is the level of concern high enough to keep them motivated throughout?

4. Is there a real desire for change? If not sufficient, can I instill it?
5. Does the system require *unfreezing* before change effort can proceed?
6. Are there competing concerns which might undermine a collective effort?  
If so, can we develop a strategy to contend with these?

## SUMMARY OF STAGE O

There is a beginning to every "change," starting with a growing sense that something is *wrong with the status quo*.

There is always an initiator, someone or some group which articulates and amplifies the concern. This 'someone' may either be inside or outside the client system. They may be a leader or a sponsor or an advocate at any level, but who they are may affect how the change agent operates and how much of a license he/she agent has to guide the process.

This "care" and "concern," at whatever level and with whatever urgency expressed, is the engine driving the change process. Your initial task as a change agent is to evaluate the status of this CARE impulse, to understand how the system works, to identify who the key players are, and to assess where the CARE is felt most keenly. Such an analysis will then guide the process and give an initial estimate of the chances of success.

A concern may sometimes be so intense or seen as so urgent or overwhelming that it vitiates rational action. The client's sense that bold action is immediately required forestalls serious problem diagnosis, extensive search for resources, and consideration of alternative solutions. Thus, the change agent may need to develop strategies to buy time, to create space for reflection and for allowing the client to view the array of concerns without intense pressure for solutions.