KNOWLEDGE

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY BUILD KNOWLEDGE IN INDIVIDUALS

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The knowledge that lives within individuals impacted by change enables change success. Understanding how to change and how to operate in the future state is an essential precursor to adopting new processes, systems and job roles. When a person has the awareness of the need for change and the desire to support a change, knowledge is the next building block in the Prosci® ADKAR® Model.

The five parts of the Prosci ADKAR Model show the milestones an individual must reach for a change to be successful: awareness, desire, knowledge, ability and reinforcement.

Knowledge is the third milestone. Knowledge represents the information, training and education necessary to know how to change. The knowledge that each impacted individual needs to implement a change includes:

- Behaviors and skills
- Processes, tools and systems
- Roles and responsibilities

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Building Knowledge

Historically, training is the most commonly used vehicle for building knowledge. Many organizations have a long and rich history with delivering training. Some even have an entire department dedicated to training. However, training is not the only way to develop knowledge. Informal interactions with colleagues as well as other formal vehicles like self-paced reference materials, online resources, super-user support and job aids all play their part in ongoing knowledge-building.

From a change management perspective, there are two aspects of knowledge to consider when assessing training needs and designing training programs to build knowledge:

- Knowledge on how to change – what to do during the transition. This requires training and education on the skills and behaviors needed to support the change.
- Knowledge on how to perform effectively in the future state – detailed information on the new roles and responsibilities associated with the change. This also include training and education on how to use new processes, systems and tools.

Both categories of knowledge must be addressed in an effective change management plan. In practice they are frequently integrated and addressed with a single plan.

Knowledge-building will only be effective when an individual has awareness of the

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need for change and desire to participate in the change. Any training activities that attempt to build knowledge before these first two milestones have been achieved will be ineffective. Skipping to knowledge before awareness has been built or the individual has chosen to engage in the change process has many implications for a project's success. If employees are not ready to learn or are only participating in training because their supervisor required attendance, they will not connect with and retain the learning.

Factors That Influence Knowledge-Building

Three factors impact the successful achievement of the knowledge element of the Prosci ADKAR Model.

1. **Current Level of Knowledge**

   Depending on the starting point, understanding how to change may be a simple process or may demand a huge shift in thinking. For some changes, an individual may already have the required knowledge from past education or work experience. In other cases, there may be a large gap between their current knowledge level and the desired knowledge level associated with operating successfully in the future state. The size of the knowledge gap will directly impact the probability of success for those individuals.

   For individuals with a considerable knowledge gap, the individual and the organization must plan for the significant time and effort needed to develop the required knowledge.

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Occasionally, some employees cannot gain the necessary knowledge to succeed at the transformation and must face the decision to move on.

2. **Capability to Learn**

In addition to the knowledge gap that may exist, each of us has a different capacity to learn. While some people are quick to learn new processes and tools, others may have difficulty learning technical skills or absorbing new information. Just as learning differences occur in children or students, the same can be seen in adults during the knowledge-building process.

Adult learning is a complex area and understanding it is essential for developing knowledge in the workplace. Adults want to know why the topics being taught are important and relevant to them. If they cannot connect the knowledge offered during training to an immediate problem, both attention and retention of knowledge will suffer. Because knowledge comes after awareness and desire, measures to establish the "why" should already be in place.
To ensure that people make this connection, start each learning event with a recap of why the change is happening.

The format you use for knowledge-transfer activities influences how much information employees retain. Learners remember only a fraction of what they cover in training. The highest retention in adults results from hands-on application of learning to a real and immediate problem. In many cases, project teams and change leaders can benefit from collaborating with professional training developers and instructors to support learning initiatives. Well-designed trainings will include both knowledge-transfer and the practice needed to apply this new knowledge to real situations.

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Even if an individual has the capability to learn, they may not have the current capacity to take on the mental process of learning new skills. Often during times of change, the people who need to participate in training have so much going on they either cannot commit the time to training and practicing, or they are unable to focus during the learning events.

3. **Resources Available for Education and Training**

Available resources vary greatly from one organization to the next. Some organizations have extensive resources and funding to deliver training while other companies struggle to provide structured education to support a change. Resource constraints could include the availability of subject matter experts, instructors, classroom facilities, books and materials, equipment and systems for student use, and funding to support the overall training program.

For some desired changes, the specific knowledge may not be immediately accessible or may not yet exist at the time it is needed. Inadequate resources and inaccessible information will negatively impact knowledge-building.

Tactics for Building Knowledge

The changes facing your organization are unique. Each change usually requires its own specific combination of different learning tactics to truly build knowledge in impacted individuals. The

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following four tactics have emerged from our research as the most impactful during times of change and should be combined as needed depending on the unique details of the change at hand.

1. **Effective Training and Education Programs**

Properly designed and professionally delivered formal training programs are an essential channel for building knowledge in most changes. Because the highest form of retention results from applying learning hands-on to an immediate problem, training programs should include hands-on activities and demonstrations with less focus on theory, reading or lectures.

Video programs, webinars and other multimedia programs are great ways to convey concepts and develop knowledge; however, retention of learning associated with tools and processes will be highest when these tools are discussed and applied during the learning program.

Effective training programs factor in the precise knowledge required for a group or individual to operate successfully in the future state. Completing an assessment of knowledge gaps between the current state and the desired future state provides direct input into how to tailor and configure the most impactful training content. A gap analysis reveals which knowledge, skills and behaviors are missing and need to be built. A useful technique for assessing the knowledge gap is to work with HR to write new job descriptions for employees, detailing the knowledge and skills needed to perform the role during the transition and in the future state.

It is also important to understand the knowledge required during the transition process. Changes do not happen immediately. Often, old processes and systems may need to be used

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concurrently with new processes and systems. Interim processes and beta versions of tools may require steps that differ from those used in the final state. This means that training programs should address how to operate in the future state as well as how to transition to a new way of doing work.

The last consideration is timing of training and knowledge-building activities. Learning retention declines rapidly over time, especially if it is not used or applied right away. On the other hand, employees impacted by change also need time to develop some measure of ability (the next element of the Prosci ADKAR Model) before the go-live date of the change, too. Training needs careful timing:

- Training too far from the go-live date may result in unused or lost knowledge.
- Training too close to the change may not allow sufficient time to practice and develop basic proficiency before employees must demonstrate new skills in their daily work.

2. **Job Aids**

Some types of knowledge-building content help people remember ideas long after they complete training. Job aids and reference guides that serve as knowledge-building resources include checklists, templates, online help files, and scripts. These can take the form of help or troubleshooting functions integrated into system software, internal wikis, or quick-reference cards. Job aids enable employees to reinforce learning on the job and follow more complex procedures in real time. They are most effective when they are available on-demand and just-in-time.

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3. One-on-One Coaching

Even with the most effective training programs, many employees need one-on-one coaching. Individuals learn in different ways and at different paces. With one-on-one coaching, a trainer can provide customized education based on the unique obstacles each individual faces. In some cases barrier points may not be related to the subject content but a unique personal obstacle instead.

If there is a long period of time between employees taking the training course and implementing the change, one-on-one coaching and on-the-job instruction will provide real-time knowledge reinforcement at the time of implementation. As employees engage in day-to-day work, gaps will also emerge that were not covered in the training. One-on-one coaching ensures that an expert is on hand to answer any questions and fill in the gaps.

Coaching usually comes from the employee's direct supervisor or a subject matter expert. For one-on-one coaching to be successful, supervisors or designated mentors must be equipped in this capacity. Take time to ensure that coaches have built their own expertise in the technical subject matter and effective coaching tactics.

4. User Groups and Forums

Learning from peers can be very powerful because employees readily relate to the experiences and challenges of fellow employees. By designating change agents and super users, employees who have mastered new skills can share their knowledge about new systems, tools and processes, and assist other employees through similar transitions. User groups and forums allow peers to share lessons learned and provide an ongoing education process to complement what is learned in training. User groups and forums also capitalize on experiential learning, which is very effective for adult learners.

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Final Thoughts

Developing a solid knowledge foundation for a change requires a combination of activities that enable a person to learn in a way that is most effective for them. These activities should include formal training and education programs, job aids available to employees as they are applying knowledge back on the job, one-on-one coaching from supervisors or subject matter experts, and effective peer mentoring from user groups and forums. Using these techniques together ensures that employees develop and apply their knowledge and are supported throughout the change process.

Without the holistic lens of the Prosci ADKAR Model, teams can easily fall into the trap of simply sending employees to training when a change is being introduced. This rarely drives successful change. And worse, it can often have negative and lasting impacts on the employees that must bring a change to life in their day-to-day work.

Training is critical, but training by itself is not the answer. To be effective, training must occur in the context of all five milestones of individual change—offered only once an individual understands why a change is happening, wants to engage in the change process, and is seeking knowledge to help them be successful. Knowledge-building is an ongoing process. It must extend beyond formal training events in the form of coaching, mentors, aids and additional support. Any conflicting demands that prevent an employee from fully engaging in training and building knowledge will reduce the success of the knowledge outcome. Be deliberate and provide sufficient time for learning and mastering new skills.

Next Steps

Many people assume knowledge automatically leads to ability. This is especially evident in cases where training is used as the primary change management tool or activity. It is a mistake to think that there is no difference between knowing how to do something and being able to do it successfully.

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While knowledge represents the cognitive understanding of specific information about the change, as well as an intellectual understanding about how to change, ability is the demonstrated capability to implement the change.

In *Ability: How to Foster Ability to Implement a Change*, we look at the transforming knowledge into action to achieve desired performance within the organization. We also explore the best practices for transferring knowledge into ability.

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