

# Knowledge Worker

## A Recipe for Successful Change

(June 2021)

I was once asked into the office of a new division-level manager at pre-divestiture AT&T. He and his boss, Archie McGill, had been brought in from IBM to make old “Ma Bell” more market oriented. He asked me about how best to effect the changes he and his boss had in mind. I went to the whiteboard in his office and wrote down what I told him was the first step in making changes in organizations; namely, “Capture the Language.” I also wrote on his whiteboard that “Language shapes thought and thought shapes behavior.” My point was that he and his boss needed to capture the language so they could start introducing new terms and phrases in the language they were using to communicate the changes they had in mind. In turn, these new terms and phrases would lead to different ways of seeing and thinking about things.

As a general example of how language can shape thought and thought can shape behavior, consider this: the metaphors we use invoke certain frameworks and frames of reference. In turn, these shape the behaviors that stem from them.

Here’s a more specific example: From time to time, OD practitioners and change management professionals engage in discussions of this or that *formula* for change. A commonly discussed one goes like this:  $V + D + F > R$ .

In essence, this formulaic expression asserts that Vision plus Dissatisfaction plus First Steps must outweigh any Resistance to the change if the change is to succeed. That, in turn, implies that the quantities involved (and quantities is what formulas contain) must be susceptible to measurement or assessment, and in ways that can be summed and compared. Somehow, I don’t think that’s the case. Moreover, that formulaic expression also posits resistance as something to be overcome instead of leveraged or utilized or exploited. It perpetuates a counter-productive view of resistance to change.

On my part, instead of a *formula*, I prefer to think in terms of a *recipe* for successful change. The recipe metaphor prompts me to think about ingredients. With the recipe metaphor in mind, here’s my list of ingredients for successful change, followed by a brief discussion of each.

- Direction
- Destination
- Rationale
- Commitment
- Leadership
- Resources
- Support
- Sponsor
- Straw Boss

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**Direction.** Which way are we headed, boss? That's the question lots of employees have. Call it goal or vision or aim or any other term but what most people want is a no-nonsense, non-technical, non-political statement of direction.

**Destination.** If it's known, which it often isn't, the precise destination needs to be identified, too. In many cases, the precise destination isn't known; it emerges over time.

**Rationale.** Why are we doing this, boss? Again, a simple, honest explanation will do. More important, a contrived story will be spotted immediately. If there is no reasonable, realistic, true rationale – forget it. The change isn't going to happen.

**Commitment.** Nothing happens unless people are committed to making it happen. That includes folks up and down the chain of command and especially at the bottom where just about anything they don't like can be torpedoed.

**Leadership.** Leadership, like commitment, is needed up and down the chain of command. That means people who are “walking the talk,” modeling the desired changes, and demonstrating that they work.

**Resources.** “There is no such thing as a free lunch,” goes an old saying. Nowhere is this truer than in change efforts. If resources are lacking, the change won't happen.

**Support.** Support from the top is vital. Without it, the change won't happen. But, like leadership, support has to be present up and down the chain of command.

**Sponsor.** This might or might not be the CEO, but this person better be a “big dog” because sooner or later you are going to run into open resistance and it needs to be clear to all concerned that at least one “big dog” is behind this change. The bigger the dog, the better.

**Straw Boss.** If there is a key role in making change happen, it's the “Straw Boss.” The Straw Boss is the person who's “boots are on the ground,” who is “in the trenches,” and who is responsible for making things happen on a day-to-day basis. Get the right one and you are halfway home; get the wrong one and you're dead in the water.

There you have it – the ingredients of my recipe for change. What's in your recipe?

### About the Author

Fred Nickols is a toolmaker, a knowledge worker, a solution engineer, a writer, a consultant, and a former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated Chief Petty Officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer* at [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His web site is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' Tool Room](#) and more

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