



Ability

How to foster Ability to implement a change

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During an individual's change process, results and outcomes first emerge at the Ability stage. Individuals successfully achieve new behaviors and the future state starts to take shape. With demonstrated Ability, change comes to fruition.

The five elements of the Prosci ADKAR® Model show the outcomes an individual must achieve for a change to be successful: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability and Reinforcement. Ability is the fourth element.

Ability is turning Knowledge into action. Ability means tangibly applying and demonstrating intellectual understanding in a real-world environment. Change leaders impact project success by intentionally providing time, resources and coaching to help impacted employees develop new skills and behaviors.



The Transition From Knowledge to Ability

There is a distinct difference between knowing how to do something and being able to do it. In fact, the gap between Knowledge and Ability can often be quite large. Athletics provide one of the clearest examples of this gap. Most people understand the strategy and mechanics for running one mile in under four minutes. Yet only a very small percentage of the population will ever have the Ability to successfully execute that feat. The Knowledge of how to change is often by itself insufficient to fully realize new behaviors proficiently.

In addition to training that imparts Knowledge, employees must also receive sufficient time and tools to developing their own abilities. In order to successfully build new skills and behaviors, most employees do best in a supportive environment where they can practice and where it is safe to make mistakes.

Creating Ability is an individualized process. The time and steps involved vary from person to person. Some individuals fall naturally into the new way of work, while others may not adjust with the same ease.



Tactics for Fostering Ability

As a change leader, there are a variety of tactics you can employ to help individuals successfully develop the abilities they need to succeed and thrive in their changing environment. Effective Ability-building tactics from Prosci's benchmarking research follow below.

Day-to-Day Involvement of People Managers

The direct people managers of employees impacted by change play an important role as coaches and advocates for change. These managers are often closest to employees and are, therefore, the best line of defense for change and support for their teams as a change nears implementation. People managers are problem solvers and supporters, teaching and mentoring on the job.

As it relates to Ability, people managers must be able to:

- Provide one-on-one coaching to employees who are implementing new processes, tools and job roles, effectively providing hands-on demonstrations and modeling the desired Ability. Supervisors must be suitably trained and experienced in the change themselves and be on hand to answer questions about the change as they arise.
- Establish a safe, supportive environment where employees can develop new skills and practice new behaviors. Effective people managers encourage and support employees while providing feedback and direction. Mistakes are a natural part of the learning process.
- Create feedback channels to identify gaps in processes or tools. Establishing a clear way for employees to provide feedback quickly alerts supervisors to problems and enables them to communicate them to the project and change management teams.

One-on-one coaching will help supervisors identify any gaps, whether they are related to the employee's Ability or to a process, tool or system. If a people manager is not present during this crucial phase, an employee who experiences difficulty may be more likely to abandon the learning process, revert to old behaviors, or create work-arounds for performing the task.

Access to Subject Matter Experts

Subject matter experts are also key resources in supporting and fostering Ability. Experts and experienced employees help by providing additional Knowledge when the question at hand is beyond the employee's or supervisor's Knowledge. Some companies set up a help desk where employees can call with questions. Other companies provide names and contact information for mentors or subject matter experts. The key to making this work is letting employees know where they can go to get help.



Hands-On Exercises During Training

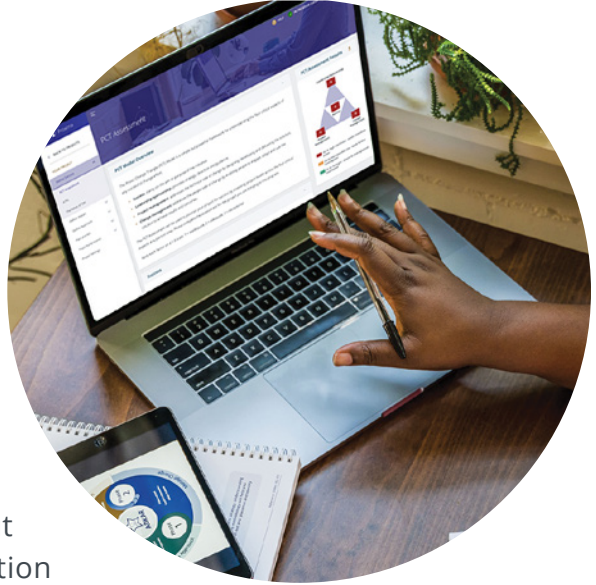
Effectively designed training programs should include hands-on activities that allow employees to test their newfound Knowledge in different work scenarios. Roleplay, simulations and actual hands-on work with new tools and processes can greatly accelerate the process of developing abilities.

Employees will feel more confident implementing a change if they first receive the opportunity to practice what they have learned in a safe and controlled environment.

Adoption and Performance Monitoring

Employees need feedback on what they are doing well and which areas they need to improve. Equally, the organization needs to know if people are adopting the change as designed and if the implementation is going according to plan. While employees are in the process of developing Ability, it is essential to measure and assess their adoption and proficiency.

Measuring adoption and performance provides critical information to the organization. Assessments provide information on where the change is succeeding, so the organization can recognize and reinforce new behaviors. Assessments also provide information about where the change is not succeeding, so corrective action and special tactics can be applied.





Potential Resistance Forces and Challenges

Resistance forces and challenges may arise during Ability-building. Several common factors that can impact a person's Ability to implement change follow below.

Psychological Blocks

Each individual has their own set of different psychological barriers to overcome. Some employees may have self-doubt relating to a particular change because of past experiences or unique fears. They may be uncertain if they can really make a change happen or wonder if they will ever be able to develop the required abilities. Psychological barriers to change are complex and, although recognizable, the solution for overcoming them is often personal and not always straightforward.

Fear of public speaking is a common example of how a psychological block can prevent individuals from demonstrating their full potential. For some the fear can be paralyzing. Others reflect back on their performance with frustration, aware that nerves prevented them from performing at their best. And for a lucky few, there is no fear whatsoever.

The Force of Habit

Humans are physiologically wired for habit. Developing new skills and breaking old habits requires developing new neural pathways in the brain. The more that existing habits directly contradict new skills, the greater the barrier to developing Ability. Fighting these old habits can become very frustrating. It can even limit previous Awareness of the need for the change and Desire to participate in the change. Understanding that people are wired to revert to old habits impacts how we approach fostering Ability. Have patience, expect efficiency dips, and allow time as people work to build new habits.

Limitations in Physical or Intellectual Capability

Sometimes physical or intellectual limitations impact the speed or proficiency at which an individual can demonstrate a new skill. In the workplace, physical limitations may include strength, physical agility, manual dexterity, physical size and hand-eye coordination. For example, a tremendous amount of effort may be required for an individual with limited dexterity or arthritis to meet the performance level required by a new keyboard-based technology solution.

Individuals also possess unique skills that fall on spectrums of intellectual Ability. While some individuals have a talent for finance and math, others may excel in innovation and creativity. Depending on the nature of the change, individuals may have mental barriers to implementing the change. For example, a change that requires analytical skills may present an intellectual barrier to an individual who is unable to develop the required abilities around problem-solving and data analysis. Alternatively, a change that requires employees to utilize emotional or social intelligence may stretch analytical problem solvers beyond their natural capabilities.



Time and Priorities

Time is a precious commodity in the demanding pace of businesses today. When competing priorities and essential business operations dominate an employee's work schedule, it can be a challenge to provide the time needed to build Ability in a new skill. Often the time frame for implementing change is driven by external factors, outside of the control of people managers. If an individual cannot develop the required abilities in the needed time frame, the change may fail, even if the individual has the potential to develop these abilities if given more time. Change leaders must leverage a coalition of sponsors across the organization to define the importance of the change and help remove time and priority barriers.



Availability of Resources

Resources that support Ability-building include financial support, personal coaching, and access to mentors and subject matter experts. Properly functioning tools, technology and materials are also essential to many change initiatives. When these resources are not available or not operating effectively, an individual's Ability to perform can be compromised.

During this developmental period, making the right resources available greatly enhances development of new skills and abilities. Providing structured support for an individual during this stage not only helps cultivate new skills, it can also address Knowledge gaps that reveal themselves once the change is underway.



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Prosci's approach to change management fosters end-user engagement, positioning managers to lead their people through change by engaging the intuitive ADKAR Model. This flexible, scalable methodology has been a game changer.

— April Hershman, Oshkosh



Final Thoughts

We have explored the difference between Knowledge and Ability and looked at the most effective ways to support and assist employees as they build Ability. We have also explored potential factors that might prevent a person from developing Ability.

Ability is not equivalent to Knowledge. It is not the automatic result of training. After enabling Knowledge through well-designed training, change leaders must also ensure that employees are given sufficient tools for building their own Ability and sufficient time to develop the new skills and behaviors required by the change.

Ultimately, Ability manifests through demonstrated actions that allow true change to emerge at both the individual and the organizational levels. Building Ability requires hard work and practice from individuals who need to perform differently in a future state. Our role as change leaders is to enable this process by providing the support and resources required to make the change possible.

True and lasting change does not end with Ability, however. Humans are hard-wired to revert back to the old way of doing things. The final eBook of the ADKAR series discusses the fifth and last element of the Prosci ADKAR Model: “Reinforcement: How to Sustain a Change.”

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