

**Management Competencies of Change Agents for Corporate Sustainability.  
A Systematic Literature Review and Conceptualization**

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Sustainable development requires a sustainability transformation of companies and markets. The fact that such transformations do not happen but have to be initiated and organized by actors in and around organizations highlights the importance of sustainability management competencies and education. Acknowledging the complexities of sustainability challenges, various scholars have emphasized that in addition to knowledge on sustainability facts and management, inter- und transdisciplinary knowledge as well as soft skills, values and mindsets may be important. The current literature, however, is dominated by an educational and sustainability perspective and has so far not addressed specific challenges of individuals as actors in a corporate context of decision making. Against this background, understanding individual decision makers as possible change agents, as those “responsible for initiating, sponsoring, directing, managing or implementing a specific change initiative, project or complete change programme” (Caldwell 2003, 139f.) becomes a relevant field of research, particularly with regard to designing higher management education for sustainability.

Despite this apparent high relevance of change agents, a more detailed analysis of the literature reveals a research gap: Research on sustainability activities of companies has so far focused on the organisational level without particular consideration of individuals acting for change within the organisations. Whereas terms such as change agents, champions and entrepreneurs are often used in the research literature on corporate sustainability, a common understanding of what a change agent for sustainability is or could be is clarified rarely. While education and management research has characterised systemic or anticipatory thinking as vital competencies

for sustainable development, this research has not yet been systematically linked to the specific roles individuals can have in contributing to sustainability transformations.

This paper aims to address this gap by conducting a systematic literature review on the understanding of change agents and what competencies they need for enhancing corporate sustainability. The review covers more than 220 journal articles in the management literature, ranging from 1992 to 2014. As a first step, the paper provides a systematic overview of the different concepts of ‘change agents’ as individuals acting for organizational sustainability transformation. In a second step, it offers an overview of competencies linked to the specific roles of change agents. Finally, the paper combines different concepts of change agents and the respective competencies with challenges identified for corporate sustainability.

While conducting research in the field of corporate sustainability and focussing on the characteristics and required competencies of change agents, this paper contributes to a better understanding of initiating and implementing change in corporate practice. By conceptualising change agents and change agent competencies more explicitly, the paper also offers new opportunities to develop management education in a direction more apt to support managers dealing with the challenges of corporate sustainability transformations.

## **References**

Caldwell, R. (2003): Models of Change Agency: a Fourfold Classification, *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 131–142.