Grow A Culture

Accelerating The Journey

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There's an old saying "culture eats strategy for breakfast." The vast majority of CEO's and heads of HR have cottoned onto the idea that if they want to stay relevant and deliver exceptional outcomes, their culture will help them deliver on that promise more than strategy alone. And given the pace of societal and business change, most organisations have pegged cultural transformation as a 'must have' rather than a 'nice to have'[1].

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead, Cultural Anthropologist

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Current State: Why It's Not Working As Well As It Could

Cultural change is usually slow and often lurchy . But it doesn't need to be that way. Here are some reasons why slow and lurchy prevails in so many of our organisations:

- Senior leadership teams and their HR functions often invest massively in defining their desired culture, and then launch formal cultural change programmes that start with a hiss and a roar and then wither into nothingness.

- Organisations invest a lot in formal training, including leadership development programmes that are designed to help shift the culture. While these can to make a difference, it's not enough. We wonder: "What else can we do to speed things up?"

- The same question can be heard from talented, committed people throughout the organisation. People who want to make an outsized difference end up frustrated by the limitations of the culture they find themselves up against. "It's like wading through treacle" is often the outcry behind closed doors. People who are hired for their brilliance, passion and potential often burn out and choose to go elsewhere where the grass is greener.

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Three Misconceptions To Put To Rest

1. Culture change can only be led from the top.

Traditionally, culture change programmes are expected to be led from the top. The CEO and senior leaders are a necessary, but not sufficient ingredient. They need to be role models, but they can't simply be the hero leader and expect everyone to willingly follow. Their distance from the majority of employees means their behaviour has limited impact.

We're more influenced by our peers than we are by senior leaders. Build a tribe of others in the organisation who can be everyday role models.

We need more than just top-down leadership.

2. Leadership programmes should be for 'at a level' leaders

Most organisations have their cultural change agenda supported by formal leadership development programmes. Most of these programmes will be targeted at leaders 'at a level'. For example, front line leader programmes, leaders of leaders, and executive development programmes. This is all well and good if you want to build a competent, connected cohort 'at a level'. It's also an efficient way to give a large number of leaders a common language and skill-set. However, it overlooks the opportunity to really leverage the influence of a smaller number of people - the ones who can truly drive change.

We need a greater focus on fewer people.

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Three Misconceptions To Put To Rest

3. The best people will rise naturally

Organisations invest substantially in recruiting talented people, with the assumption that if we have the talent, our culture will thrive. However, the culture the talent works in hugely affects their performance. As John Bertrand, skipper of the first crew to win the America's cup from the Americans, once said "a team of champions does not make a champion team." When we believe that the best people will rise naturally, we assume that the existing culture will enable those people to shine. Whereas in fact the existing culture can kill that potential.

The people that rise to the top in the old culture aren't necessarily the ones who will shape your new one. For a new culture to emerge, the best people often have to battle mightily against the status quo. More often than not, it's easier for them to leave, or to give up, than to carry on.

We need to actively boost the people who represent the culture we want to see.

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It's 'And', not 'Or'

To avoid stalling, wasted investments and undue turnover, and to accelerate cultural transformation, we need a different lens. It's about taking the good intentions we have and building on them. It's about 'and' not 'or'.

If you're charged with enabling cultural transformation in your organisation, here are some principles to consider:

Do this...	...*and* do this
Everyone	**A critical few**
Top down	**Influencer out**
At a level	**Across all levels**
Prescribed	**Generated**

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# How To Accelerate Cultural Transformation

Use the Power Law

Most organisations map their employees across a bell curve. The assumption being that there are a few very people who create a very positive impact, most are in the middle having a reasonable amount of impact, and there are few who at the low end. Something like this:
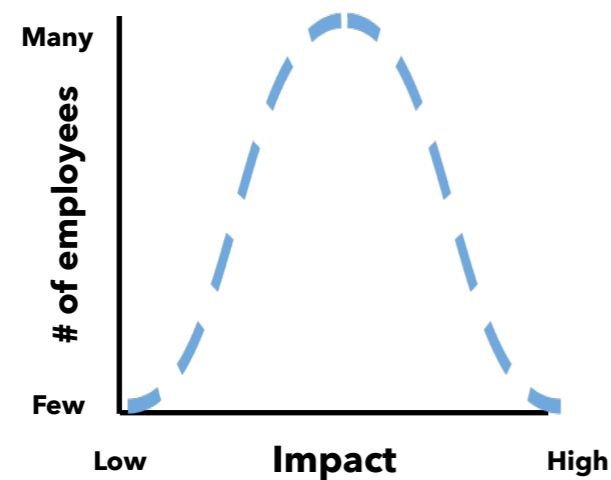
What the research actually shows is something different.[2] The bell curve doesn't describe the distribution as it actually is in most organisations.

People in organisations are instead spread across a 'power law' continuum. A small, but not tiny, number of people deliver that vast majority of the impact.[3] And there is a large number of people who don't impact very much at all. The good news? There are more star performers than you think.
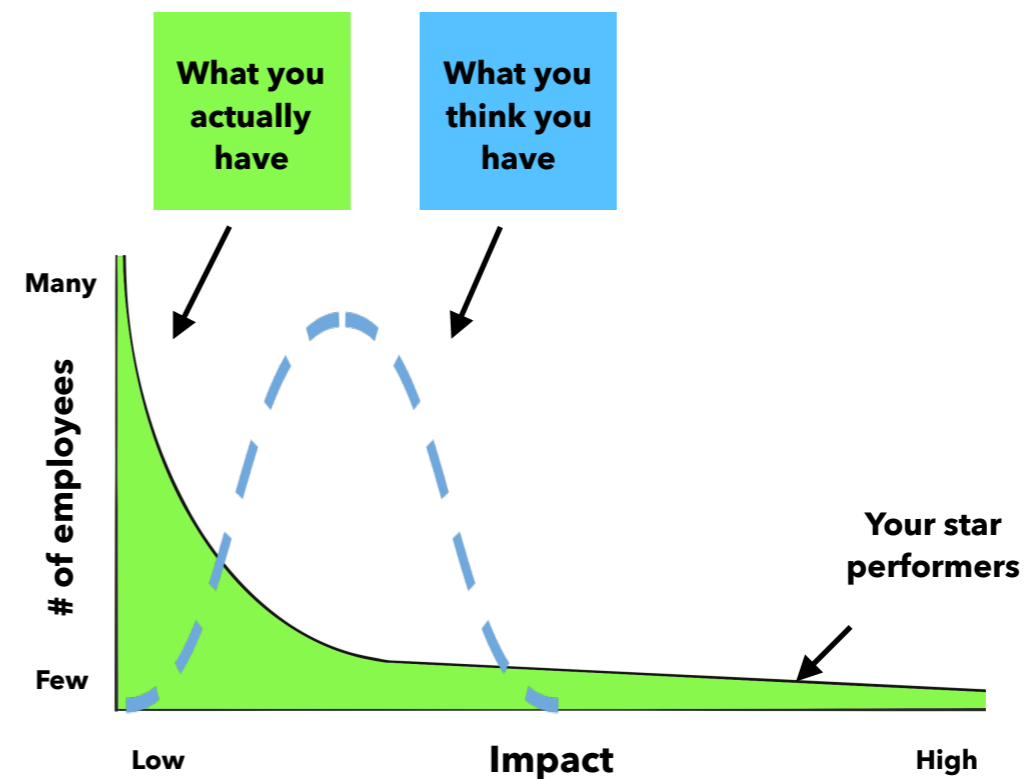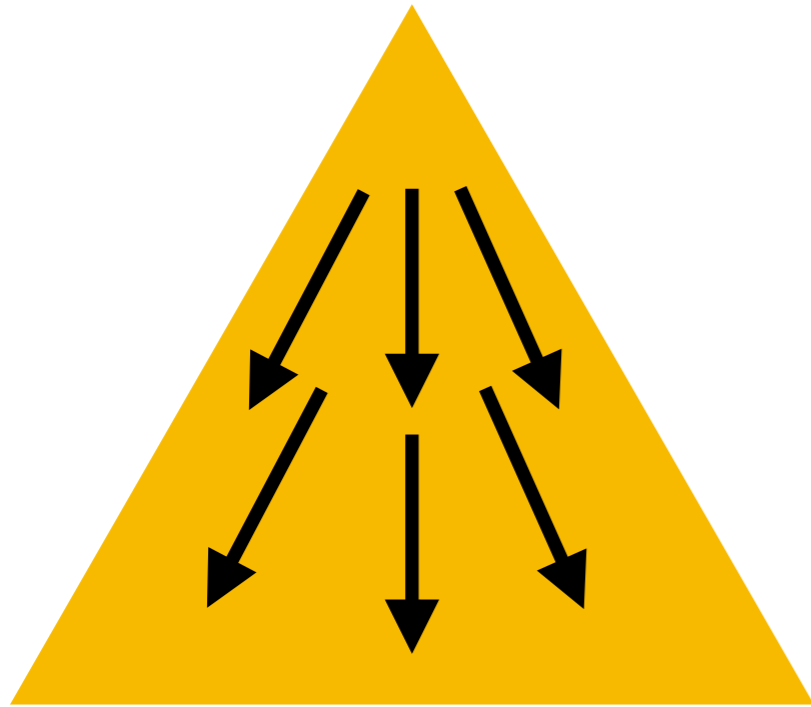

What do to? Focus on the people who can create a ripple effect on those around them. Your 'cultural carriers'.

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If you want to transform your culture and lift performance, identify, connect and support your 'cultural carriers'- those who have a disproportionate influence on the culture and performance on their part of the organisation.

Cultural Carriers Are Everywhere

We often think that the critical few people who are in the best position to influence the culture are the ones at the top. True - senior leadership does have an influence on the culture.

Rather than a pyramid, a more useful metaphor is a petri dish. Just like a real petri dish is used to grow cultures of bacteria cells, our organisational petri dish - the host of the culture - is where we can grow cultural cells that eventually join up and shape the entire culture. If we want to grow our culture faster, we need to find and cultivate our cultural carriers - those people with the energy and drive to make change happen in their part of the organisation, regardless of their position in the hierarchy.

However, if we expect change to be driven from the top down we're missing a trick. In living systems, like an organisation full of people, change happens fastest where the energy is strongest. And that energy can be found in pockets right throughout your organisation.

Exec Team

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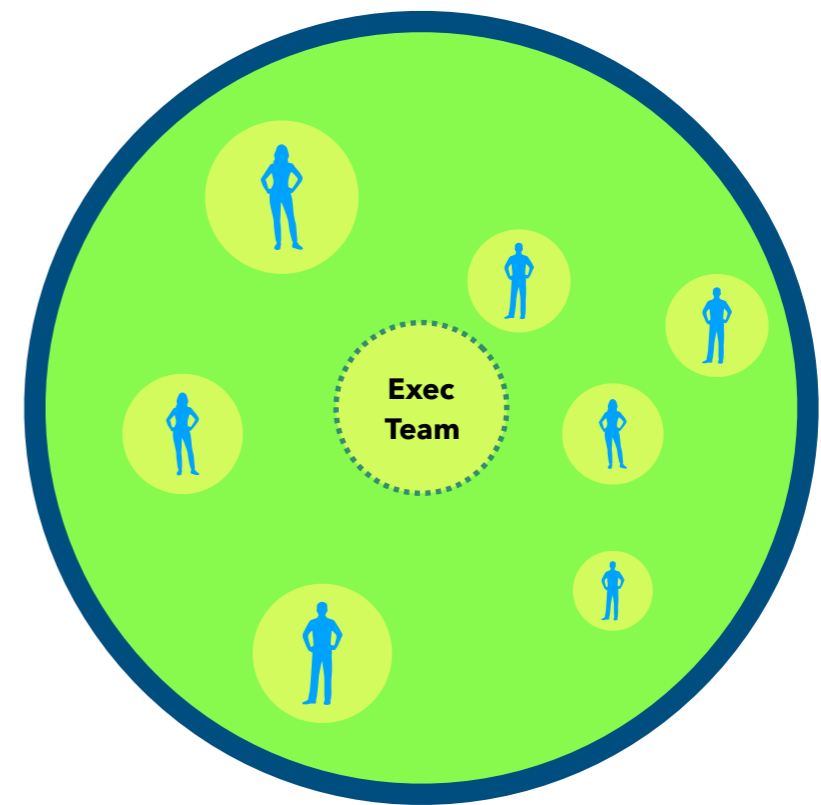
The blue people are your 'cultural carriers'. They have a sphere of influence that you want to help them grow. The more you help them thrive, the faster the culture thrives. You don't need many of them - just a few in the right parts of the organisation coupled with the conditions to enable them to create viral change.

Over time, as we grow our cultural carriers, the entire culture grows too.

When we accept that relatively few key people across your entire organisation can shift your entire culture, a whole new world of possibilities opens up.

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Who Are Your Cultural Carriers?

They might not be who you think. Your cultural carriers will be spread throughout your organisation. They may or may not be in your talent pool or talent matrix. It's unlikely they'll all be near the top of the pyramid. In fact, it's highly likely they won't.

By definition, your cultural carriers are the ones who reflect the culture you would love to have. In complex, ever changing contexts, they often exhibit the following characteristics. [4] They tend to be:

- **Curious:** They're always seeking out new experiences, knowledge and feedback. You'll hear them asking 'what if?' and 'why' a lot

- **Connected** to a wide range of people, and therefore potentially very influential

- **Courageous:** they exhibit perseverance in the face of challenges - they just keep moving. And they'll often call truth to power

- **Convicted:** they exhibit a strong belief in what the organisation stands for and want to achieve big, challenging worthwhile goals for the greater good

They'll likely be esteemed by their colleagues as high-performers, and sometimes be branded as rebels, non-conformists or restless go-getters.[5] Wharton professor and best-selling author Adam Grant calls them 'Originals'.[6]

It's also helps to consider is the roles these people are in. You'll likely find your cultural carriers in roles that matter strategically to the success of your organisation. These roles may not be the most glamorous, but they are likely to encompass what matters most. Many of them will be closer to the front line - for example, customer service roles.

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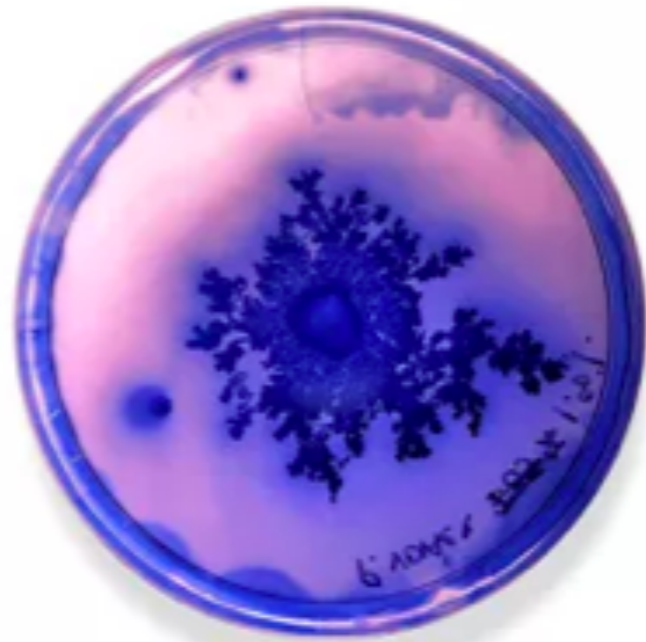
What about the rest?

While this paper emphasises the importance of identifying and developing the critical few to accelerate cultural change, it's of course also important to pay attention to invest in those who don't (yet) fit into that category.

Many of these people will already be significant contributors, and all have the potential to make an outsized difference, given the right role fit and opportunity. By doing both together - igniting your cultural carriers while continuing to develop the masses - you'll maximise the opportunity in front of you.

How To Accelerate Your Cultural Carriers' Impact

Your cultural carriers are already 'energy centres' in the system. Tap that energy. Make them the true change makers they have the potential to be.

Two common barriers to their effectiveness include:

They're not fully rounded: your cultural carriers will likely to have some of the qualities outlined above, but probably not all of them. For example, they may not know how to use their potential influence strategically. They may feel it's unsafe to play a bigger game, preferring to work solely in their current sphere of influence. They might not see the line of sight between their passion and the organisation's goals. Help them grow what they lack.

They're wading through treacle: These people are driven, however they're often stymied by bureaucracy, process and cultural norms.

What you can do:

1. Help them create 'centres of excellence' from where they are

2. Connect them with other cultural carriers (inside and outside of the organisation) to learn with and to build their networks

3. Build their change-making capability in a few critical areas that make the biggest difference eg influencing, storytelling, leading curiosity, and building resilience

4. Teach them to be coaches and mentors for others (when people associate with high performers their own performance rises)

5. Give them opportunities to work in areas of the organisation that will benefit from their influence, and that will stretch them to grow.

By targeting a few critical people and developing a few critical behaviours, you get a disproportionately large return on your investment.

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What's The Role Of The Executive Team?

Rather than solely trying to 'be the change' themselves, the Executive Team can also play a significant 'backstage leadership' role.[7] That means facilitating, supporting and enabling your cultural carriers to do their work. It may mean actively sponsoring initiatives generated by the cultural carriers. It may mean brokering relationships between various parts of the organisation. It could mean removing red tape and empowering people to make decisions without going through the usual channels.

It's essentially about making it easier for the culture to grow.

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Harnessing The Power of Cultural Carriers

The senior leadership team of New Zealand's Ministry for Culture and Heritage wanted to define the organisation's common purpose and culture in a way that resonated with all staff. This was part of a programme designed to focus the organisation's efforts to best serve the interests of all New Zealanders.

To achieve this, the senior team chose to do two things:

1. Invite all staff into collective conversations about purpose and culture
2. Invite people across the organisation to lead those conversations.

The leadership team recognised that in any group of people, there are a few who people represent the best of what the entire group aspires to be. They have the sort of energy and drive to make a difference, and when you meet them, you can't help but be inspired. The cultural carriers.

The senior team shoulder-tapped a few possible cultural carriers, and invited any interested others from across the organisation to join. We equipped this relatively small, yet highly engaged group with the mentoring, the training, and the tools to host the conversations, and then handed them the reins. All members of the leadership team were active in the conversations, but they were not the leaders.

The senior team knew that the culture lives *in* the organisation, not at the top table. They tapped the wisdom of the crowd while being hosts and enablers. They got out of the way and let the people do the work, accelerated by a few key cultural carriers.

It was a powerful experience that created ripple effects across the entire organisation, and established a compelling, common purpose that all staff aim to live every day.

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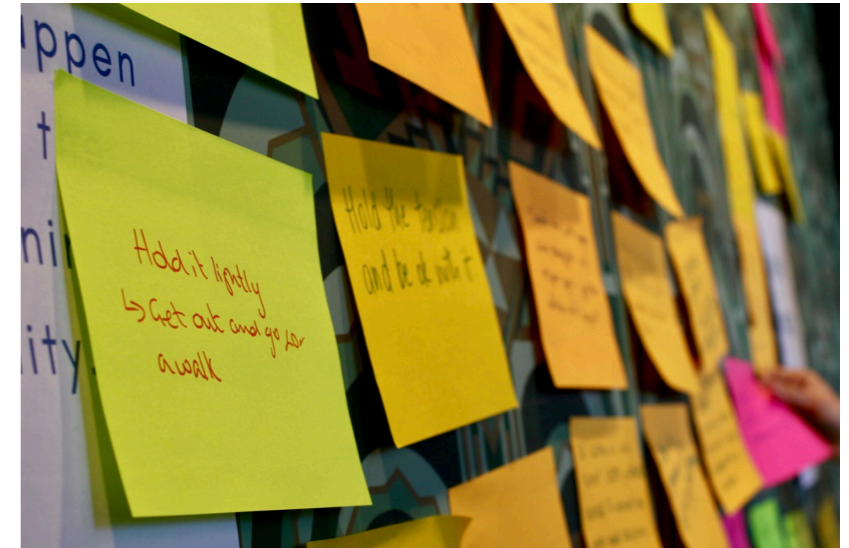
Change Makers

Change Makers is a programme to accelerate your cultural carriers' impact. The Change Makers programme lifts people up above the maze of their day-to-day work to help them see a broader perspective, and develop a practical set of strategies and tools to help them accelerate their mission, stimulate growth and increase their influence.

This programme will help your cultural carriers to:

- Build an active network of fellow change-makers to learn with and from

- Build strategies for resilience and thriving, especially for when the going gets tough

- Identify and map the broader systems at play in their industry and organisation

- Strategically build relationships with the people who matter

- Develop their compelling 'Why' story so they can articulate in ways that others engage with

- Identify and leverage their strengths in ways to have more impact

- Upgrade their thinking patterns to navigate complexity successfully

- Get a guaranteed shift in their ability to amplify their impact.

For more information, visit https://digbyscott.com/work-with-me/programmes/change-makers/
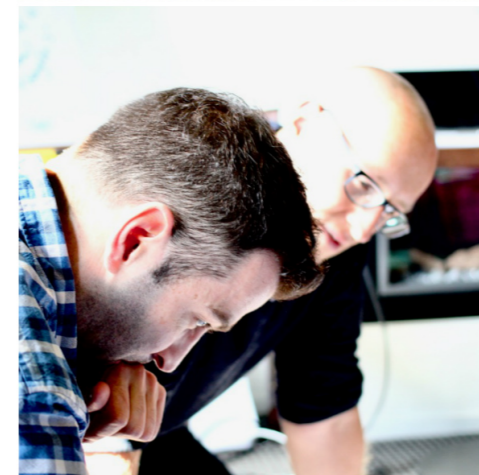
Change Makers is unlike any other development programme I have experienced before. Digby has cultivated a network of people who are all motivated to make change happen, and given us the space and tools to really push the boundaries of our thinking. It's an opportunity to grow your personal and professional resilience, to grow and challenge ideas, and to connect with an inspirational and supportive group of people.

Claire Baillie, Manager Communications, Ministry for Culture and Heritage

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About The Author

Seeker. Player. Maker. Restless go-getter. These are all words my clients and colleagues use to describe me.
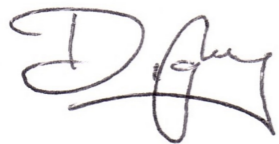
Others might say Facilitator. Mentor. Teacher. Guide. Motivational speaker. All true too.

What underpins it all for me is a drive to make workplaces more human, leaders more real, and life to be really worthwhile.

All of my work is about making it a little easier to bring those ideas to life for my clients.

I blend my corporate background with my expertise in leadership and organisational development, and add a touch of edginess and fun to the work we do together.

Whatever it is for you – I'm ready to partner with you and show you how to make positive change happen in your world.

Get in touch

Get in touch about about how my team and I can help you accelerate your culture's development. Contact my Business Manager, Belinda Wilson, at belinda@digbyscott.com to set up a chat.

And check out digbyscott.com for more about who I am, what I do and how I make a difference.

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References

1. For example, see Deloitte Human Capital Trends 2016 https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/focus/human-capital-trends/2016/impact-of-culture-on-business-strategy.html

2. Research conducted by Ernest O'Boyle and Herman Aguinis in 2011 and 2012 gathered journal publication data covering 633,263 researchers, entertainers, politicians, and athletes in a total of 198 samples. They found that performance in 94 percent of these groups did not follow a normal distribution, but a power law distribution.

3. Research by McKinsey suggests it could be as few as 5% of the people who drive 90% percent of the value an organisation delivers. For more see https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/attracting-and-retaining-the-right-talent

4. Global executive search firm Egon Zehnder developed a model to assess candidates' potential to adapt and learn in volatile and complex environments. The model consists of four dimensions: curiosity, insight, engagement and determination, which align closely with the four C's outlined in this paper. For more, see https://www.egonzehnder.com/insight/digging-for-hidden-treasure

5. Harvard professor Francesa Gino has done important research into the power of cultivating restless go-getters, whom she calls Rebel Talent. She has found the most he most important quality to cultivate in these people is curiosity. For more, see https://hbr.org/cover-story/2016/10/let-your-workers-rebel

6. Adam Grant's book 'Originals: How Non-Conformists Move The World' delves into this idea. See https://www.amazon.com/Originals-How-Non-Conformists-Move-World/dp/014312885X

7. For more on this idea, see Leandro Herrero's work on Viral Change at https://viralchange.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/changing-the-way-we-think-about-change-leandro-herrero.pdf

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