THE ROLE OF A CHANGE AGENT IN FACILITATING POSITIVE CHANGE

A change agent is a person who makes a positive change in their organization, economy, or the world at large through their actions, timely questions, and/or direct or indirect leadership, including the positive example they set for others. Think of the ripple effect you get when you toss a stone into a pond, or how the strands of a spider web are interconnected: A change agent helps create a much bigger positive impact, beyond the power of just one person, through a series of connections he or she has with other people.

In their book *Power and Organization Development: Mobilizing Power to Implement Change*, Greiner and Schein (1988) describe three types of power that a change agent can have in an organization (or in other types of work, in their community or economy) based on their: *knowledge* (expertise), *personality* (including such factors as charisma, reputation, or professional credibility), and *support from others* (strong connections with key individuals and various types of human resource networks).

The following case study below of a world-famous change agent in the conservation field, John Muir, shows the positive impact that one person can have. Muir made millions of people aware of environmental issues, and his efforts lead to new laws to protect the. Additional discussion questions provide opportunities for students to reflect on sustainability issues and the role of change agents in organizations, communities, and economies.

CASE STUDY

John Muir: Change Agent, Hero of the Environmental Movement

**Decision point:** The year is 1867. John Muir has just turned 28 years old. He had recently worked as a foreman and engineer in a sawmill and broom and rake factory in Canada. Now he’s working in a carriage factory in Indiana, in the United States. He has always loved nature, but his job is in a factory. He is talented, but restless and bored.

**Key question:** How did John Muir go from having a promising (but obscure) career working in a local factory to becoming one of the most famous environmentalists in the world, known by some as the “father” of the national park system in the United States?

Take a moment to read about John Muir's life by clicking on both of the following links to the Sierra Club Website (an organization he helped found), then answer the questions:

http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/about/


**Discussion questions:**
• Mention three famous things that John Muir did in his life.

• John Muir was not only a famous naturalist and conservationist; he was also a very accomplished mountain climber and legendary for living a simple life, close to nature. In fact, he would usually take just a small back pack with him into the wilderness, often sleeping directly on the ground.
  
  o When John Muir quit his job in the factory, he took off on a very long walk across the United States. Where did he go? How many miles did he walk?
  
  o What famous American went camping with John Muir? Where did they go?
  
  o You are about to go on a wilderness adventure with John Muir. You have only 20 minutes to pack your supplies into a small school-type backpack before you start your hike into the wilderness. What things would you take with you?

  Sample language:
  
  ▪ I would take a…
  ▪ I would probably take some…
  ▪ I would not take any…
  ▪ (Compare notes with your classmates) What items would you take?

• John Muir was an effective change agent.
  
  o Think of a positive change agent in your country today (or in the past) related to:
    • the environment
    • business
    
    What did the person do that was beneficial? How did they do it?

• Self-reflection
  
  o Name one or two things that you could do to be a positive change agent in your family, neighborhood, or community related to the environment.

  Sample language:
  
  ▪ I could…
  ▪ Example: I could stop using paper napkins.
  
  o Name one or two things that you and your classmates could do in your school to help your school be a model school for sustainability.
  
  o Share an example of a situation where you or someone you know was a positive change agent, helping to make a positive change of some kind in his or her organization, community, or economy. Who was the change agent? What did they do? How did they do it?
- Look at the following list. Write “yes” next to the items below that show ways to be a positive, effective change agent. Write “no” next to the items that are not examples of being a change agent.

_____ Set a good example for others.

_____ Ask an important question that gets everyone thinking about an important issue in a new way.

_____ Get frustrated easily when there is a lot of change going on around you.

_____ Start a meaningful conversation with other people about an important topic that is being ignored.

_____ When someone says something that makes you angry, count to 10 and remain calm before responding to them.

_____ Think about what you are going to say next when you are listening to someone share their opinions, ideas, or feelings with you.

_____ Do some research and share new facts and information with other people to help them make better decisions.

_____ Assume that you are completely right and that there aren’t any other perspectives.

What other ideas do you have for how to be an effective change agent?