

State of Change Management in the UN System 2025

Leading strategic change: Actions for change sponsors

Introduction

This action paper considers the implications of the State of Change Management 2025 survey findings for change sponsors in the UN system and makes recommendations for future action.

Change sponsors are responsible for initiating change, in line with the strategic priorities of the organization, and for its overall leadership.

There is a strong message emerging from the 2025 survey findings, which is reinforced by UNLOCK's own experience of working with senior leadership in support of change across the UN system. To realize the full value of change management described by change management experts such as Prosci, organizational leaders and change sponsors must go beyond treating change management as an operational activity. Instead, change management should be embedded within strategic planning, investment decisions, and project delivery frameworks, and every change initiative should be designed and delivered with a robust approach to change management in mind.

In an environment defined by geopolitical shifts, funding constraints, and technological disruption, it is more important than ever that change is approached as a strategic discipline.

But what does this mean in practice for change sponsors in the UN system?

1

Change Management sponsorship



Effective change begins at the top, with clear communication of the vision, purpose, and benefits of the proposed change. Senior sponsors of change should take an active and visible role in championing change management across their organization, including:

- Advocating for the value of change management at a strategic level
- Removing barriers to investment, and building support for change management resources, tools, and the development of internal capabilities

2 Building organizational alignment

Strategic alignment of change requires clear ownership and coordination. Establishing central accountability for change portfolio management ensures that change priorities are transparent, dependencies are understood, and change initiatives across the organization are coherent rather than fragmented.

To enable alignment in practice, change sponsors should consider bringing change managers and practitioners together to understand and leverage the skills and experiences they bring – for instance, around strategic insight, assessing organizational change readiness, and relationship-building.

At the same time, change sponsors need to be clear about their own roles and accountabilities in organizational change – whether as advocates, decision-makers, or enablers. To support them in this, change sponsors may be interested in learning more about the range of change management skills, tools, sources of information, and practical resources available to them as well as to change managers and practitioners – for instance, via UNSSC/UNLOCK.

management of change. Mapping and coordinating this internal change ecosystem will help clarify interdependencies, avoid duplication, and strengthen collective capability.

Change sponsors are encouraged to participate in peer-to-peer learning with others leading change. Such dialogues provide the potential for sponsors to learn from each other about the challenges and successes of change, to build a shared understanding of what might work in the future, to enhance collective leadership engagement and accountability, and to help strengthen the ecosystem by building a culture of senior-level learning. One starting point might be for senior leaders to review the three 2025 UNLOCK papers on mergers, downsizing, and relocation, and convene peer discussions on the implications for their organization.

4 Building connections

Change sponsors need to be alert to the risk that, given their role and seniority, their understanding and experience of change management may differ from that of change managers and practitioners. Leaders are encouraged to connect on a regular basis with change managers and practitioners in their change ecosystem, to understand the challenges they face, both strategic and operational, and agree on how sponsors can help address them.

More generally, leaders are encouraged to seek feedback from colleagues at all levels about how their change leadership is perceived and how and where they can have greater impact. Leadership behaviours that demonstrate an openness and humility towards the views and experiences of less senior people not only strengthen relationships but reinforce the credibility of leadership in times of upheaval and change.

3 Strengthening the change ecosystem

Change is delivered not only by those with “change” in their titles. The study found that every part of an organization – human resources, learning and development, information technology, internal communications, and beyond – contributes to the effective

5 Encouraging AI as a strategic enabler of human-centred change

The use of AI in change management in the UN system is in its early days, but AI has enormous potential to contribute to effective change management. Change sponsors might want to encourage the use of AI as a strategic enabler, capable of amplifying human potential and accelerating transformation, while maintaining a clear commitment to ethical, transparent, and responsible use of AI in line with the principles of the United Nations' Governing AI for Humanity 2024 report. To achieve this, change sponsors should:

- Keep people at the centre of change. AI should augment, not replace, human experience and judgement
- Ensure transparency and data protection, fostering trust and accountability across all levels
- Frame AI to strengthen the purpose and impact of change, and not as an end in itself.

In summary

The role of the change sponsor is not about managing projects – it's about creating the conditions for successful change. By embedding change management into change strategy, demonstrating visible sponsorship, aligning priorities, engaging with change managers and practitioners, and championing the ethical and innovative use of AI, change sponsors have a pivotal role to play in guiding their organization to deliver on the vision of successful change.

