

*By Elysia Brenner*

## **Turning Soft Skills into Hard Skills:**

### **The Change Management Evolution**

Thermo-Fisher Scientific – the Fortune 500 global powerhouse that brought in \$14 billion in 2022 alone – was born out of one major 2006 merger and many acquisitions since. It’s a giant in all senses of the word: dominating the landscape, a powerful player...and potentially ponderous in the face of change. After all, for all the strengths of size and reach, a giant cannot pivot on a dime.

So, how does a colossus working across cutting-edge sectors stay relevant, without tripping over the steady stream of changes needed to keep them on the forefront of their industry, moving often live-saving products to market in the face of ever-evolving regulations?

Could a little quantified empathy be the key to smoother sailing?

#### **Tip: Look beyond project planning.**

“We think that implementing the project is the hard part. But the difficulty comes after that: ask yourself, how can I make sure it sticks with people?”

*–Maurits Smits, Sr Director of R&D, TEM Solutions & Site Lead Eindhoven*

#### **Solving the first problem**

Change often starts small, local. “My division builds electron microscopes,” says Roel Mous, now Sr. Manager of Change & Project Management in the Operations Transformation Office in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. “Their goal is to help our customers to do their research and make new discoveries using these tools – that’s the goal of all Thermo-Fisher divisions, really. Our overall mission at Thermo-Fisher is to help our customers make the world healthier, safer, and cleaner.”

Leaving no sector of science unturned, Thermo-Fisher plays a role in the global development of everything from COVID test kits to waste treatment. From the company’s headquarters in Waltham, Massachusetts, to local offices in almost every country of the world, Thermo-Fisher employs nearly 135,000 people across cultures, time

zones, business divisions – it seems almost impossible to get all those different perspectives pointing in the same direction, moving forward together. Beyond daunting.

But Roel's quest for better change management started much more modestly: he was just trying to help his own team, which was the Service team at the time. "The Service Director at that time noticed that a lot of projects were happening without him really being aware that they were happening." They needed a centralized project management office that could gather all those projects in one place, where the Director and the rest of the team could have an overview.

"That exercise was actually quite easy," Roel explains. "We got the biggest projects on our radar, and we knew what was happening with most of the project resources." He recalls an almost immediate improvement in overall project management. But: that still didn't mean that every project went smoothly.

"For example, when we digitized our forms for the service engineers – putting all that paperwork that service engineers need to do when visiting a customer in an app – I was part of that project team." To Roel and the others in the office directing the project, it seemed clear that this would be a vast improvement. "We thought, once we got it live, people would be celebrating. They'd throw flowers at us or something, happy to have less paperwork," he jokes. But, once the app was live, no one wanted to use it. "We really had to start convincing people, to convince the organization why this was so useful for the field service engineers, and we had *enormous* resistance from those same field service engineers."

### **Solving the second problem**

Figuring out why this and other projects that they *knew* would benefit the team weren't being adopted became the next project. In Roel's words: "In our brainstorming sessions we realized that the missing piece was change management, and specifically on the people side. It was as easy as Googling that we landed on several different frameworks – one of which was called Prosci, which in the Netherlands is taught via the company The People Side of Change." It was literally exactly what they were looking for.

The man behind The People Side of Change (PSoC) is Erik Steketee, who discovered the Prosci method when he was living in Canada, and brought it back to his native the Netherlands when he returned, founding his company more than 8 years ago. Roel was intrigued by what Erik had to say, and they agreed to some pilot trainings.

"Those first training sessions were immediately a success," Roel recalls enthusiastically. "Erik brings a great energy into the room. Teaches in a memorable way, so it sticks."

For Erik, the sheer scale and urgency of Thermo-Fisher's needs provided an enticing challenge. "Many of their challenges are: We need to double capacity. We need to onboard people. We need to support diversity. We need to shorten our time to market because there are patients waiting for our help." To him, Thermo-Fisher's work, ensuring it runs smoothly, wasn't just an exciting opportunity, it felt important for the good of humanity.

And so Roel and Erik's pilot trainings grew into a full-blown collaboration. Four years later the ripples of that and similar partnerships can be felt throughout the company, with "change management" a term that's regularly bandied about in many of the offices around the world.

### **The change management conversion**

Roel's current supervisor Alan Dunn-Birch, Director of Operations Transformation in the Materials & Structural Analysis division based in Leicester, the UK, defines change management as "using tools and templates and processes to measure how well people understand a planned change and their part in it, such as how it's going to impact them." Adding, "That was something that was sorely missing."

Sander Hurkx, Sr. Manager in Project Management Operations in Eindhoven – whom Roel calls his "partner in crime" in change management evangelism, has been at this awhile, too. "I trained in this methodology in the US, so I've been working with it five to six years."

This experience was especially put to the test when the COVID pandemic began, and he needed to help his team transition to remote working. He says, "I acted as a fulltime change-management engineer, talking to people, informing them, asking them what they did and didn't like about the new situation." Sander then created a tailored change and communication schedule to address those needs – making sure, for example, that the remote field engineers didn't feel even more isolated during this time. "Of course it's hard to judge what would've happened if we didn't do it," he says, "but we got a lot of feedback that said: 'OK, at least we understand why and how this is happening.'" A feat he credits to assigning someone to manage and ensure that awareness.

A more recent convert to change management, Sr. R&D Director of TEM Solutions and Site Lead in Eindhoven Maurits Smits admits, "To be honest, I wasn't *aware* that I wasn't aware of how much change every project results in, until I completed my training," which he calls "an awakening." He says it made him realize that the challenge was never simply completing projects – the challenge was ensuring the projects stuck.

Which is why he is one of the members of leadership who actually reached out to request a half-day management training of his own last year. He wanted to figure out how he could integrate these concepts into his existing project management system. The training helped him realize they'd been losing time by running back-to-back projects without investing enough energy into this piece of it. If the stakeholders would simply ignore any change they didn't understand then, he says, "We'd just stumble over the same topics again."

### **Tip: Stick to the facts.**

“Start using your data. If you use the tools, then you have data. And you don’t have to say ‘I have a feeling something is wrong’ – you *know* if something is wrong! You’ve got facts and data. So share them with your sponsors or supervisors, your leadership team.”

–Erik Steketee, *Advanced Prosci instructor & founder, The People Side of Change*

### **Prosci’s most important tool**

The Prosci Model is a change framework created by Bell Labs engineer and program manager Jeff Hiatt in 1994. It comes with an entire toolkit to aid change management, but there is one tool designed to be used more than anything else: ADKAR.

“Everybody who’s trained with Erik knows that he’ll always give you the same advice: ‘Do a round of ADKAR,’” Roel tells me, echoing several others. ADKAR, he explains, is how you “take the temperature of where people are within a change journey, putting the spotlight on the people who need change management the most.”

ADKAR is an acronym of Prosci’s five building blocks of successful change:

1. Awareness (of the need)
2. Desire (to participate and support)
3. Knowledge (of what to do during and after)
4. Ability (to make the change happen)
5. Reinforcement (of the results, to ensure continuity)

A team in the throes of change needs to achieve each milestone, in order. But, a simple survey makes the milestones easy to measure. People simply rate where they sit on a scale of 1 to 5 for each step. 1. Did they know about the change? 2. Do they support it? Etc.

“It’s a very simple way of telling me where I need to put my time and effort,” Roel says. “It doesn’t involve high mathematics or anything.” And it also doesn’t bow to emotion. “It’s simply data. If I get scores below 3, I can cry all day about it, but the data doesn’t feel that emotion. So there’s no reason for me to.” Instead, he says, he focuses on his gratitude for the clarity. That he knows what to focus on to get the project unstuck.

ADKAR newbie Maurits agrees, “The way Prosci asks questions does help us recalibrate: this is where we are today, and then we need to do this and this extra. Or this is where we are, and we are happy, so we can go roll it out and make it happen.” And, indeed, once everyone is on board, change can happen.

“But, the methodology doesn’t try to change a group at once,” Roel clarifies. “It takes an individual approach.” He sees a key distinction in talking down to stakeholders and talking *with* them, showing them you’re putting yourself in their shoes, too. “It’s not trying to explain ‘why do we as leaders need this change?’ It’s more about explaining why this change is important for *you*.” The ‘what’s in it for me,’ in other words.

For example, in Roel’s project to convert field engineer paperwork into digital forms, “When I talked to finance people about this project, I talked about my efficiency savings. So, this project is earns me \$2 million on a yearly basis, etc. And that resonates a lot with finance people, because I’m talking the dollar value.” But, he points out, not all stakeholders have the same interests. “If I’m talking to my field service engineers, and I say the same thing, they’ll look at me like, ‘Who cares? Who gets that \$2 million? Not me.’ But if I say to them, ‘You won’t have to carry your laptop around with you. You can access everything any time on your mobile phone; you’ll have more information at your fingertips when you’re standing in front of a customer,’ then you’re talking their language.”

As Internal Communications and Change Management specialist in the Services division Christina Zoga explains: “We’ve had people who are more resistant to change, or come from a culture that’s a bit more closed – people who don’t speak up or share feedback. But they’re always more comfortable when they realize you’re there to listen to them.” She advises to simply ask, “What else do you need to know? What is your feedback on that? How do you feel about it?” And even if they don’t feel comfortable answering, being asked their opinion matters. “They might not speak up, but at least they come on board.”

### **Finding a shared language**

Alan says, “What ProSci clearly brings to the table is that focus on the human factor and understanding that people don’t just make rational decisions. They’re driven by their emotions and their cultural backgrounds.”

Erik agrees there’s a cultural component. “The way you do ADKAR is different at different sites, in different cultures, different countries, whatever,” Erik confirms. “But the conversation stays the same.” He says they train local experts who can coach them through the cultural nuances at play, so they can find the best way to tailor the Prosci method to reach new participants.

For example: “In the Netherlands you can just ask the questions up front, no introduction. ‘How is Awareness?’ In Asia you usually need to build up the relationship first, maybe give them a survey to think about, and do it anonymously. Americans need an introduction, to understand why they’re being asked to do this, what are you going to do with it?” In each case, it’s the same model, the same types of questions – just a different approach.

And culture doesn’t only mean nationality, of course. Take Thermo-Fisher for example, Erik says: “They are really a global player. I can’t think of a country where there’s no Thermo-Fisher site. They’re really diversity-oriented. It’s never about the Dutch thing or the American thing – no, it’s about the Thermo Fischer thing.” Adopting a common methodology helps pull that unified globe-spanning company culture together.

And the other thing that helps bridge cultural gaps is the shared language Prosci provides. Maurits is already requesting that more of his team follow in his footsteps and get the training, “to make sure we’re using the same words for the same problems, which makes it easier for us to analyze them.”

For example: Roel, Sander, Christina, Christina’s counterpart in Operations Miriam Fontaine – they’re all working on how to embed change management and communication into their existing Project Communication & Change Management Framework (PCC).

This excites Erik. “Thermo-Fisher is building up their whole change vocabulary, and creating a common language that can be shared. So everybody knows about ADKAR. Everybody knows what a risk assessment is. You don’t have to explain it. It’s just part of the project. It’s clear to everybody that, if you run a project, these are the steps you need to take.” This is especially helpful for the many teams who regularly work with other offices across borders. It makes it easier for them to understand each other.

### **Tip: Use it as a mental framework.**

“See it as a mindset, not a tool. The more you understand what it can offer, the more you can find ways to get more out of it, ways that might not even be listed in the books and materials. Make it a part of your day to day.”

*–Christina Zoga, Internal Communications Specialist*

### **Learning intuition**

Once you start to pick it up, I’m repeatedly told, you’ll find yourself using the Prosci method without even planning to, without any formalized surveys. It’s a skillset you can bring into your private life as well. After several years of practice, Sander – Roel’s “partner in crime” says, “I think it’s something, subconsciously, I’m doing all the time.”

Services comms specialist Christina, who also completed her Prosci training in 2018, offers a personal example of how you might apply ADKAR outside the job: Born and raised in Greece, she decided to move to Belgium for her university studies. She knew that would be a big change not only for herself, but for her friends and family, too. In retrospect, she realizes that she instinctively used a version of ADKAR to smooth the path of that transition. “You create awareness about what you are going to do, you have the desire to do it, but you need to also create a desire in your family, for example, to go along with your plans.” Such a big move of course also involved a lot of research and planning (knowledge and ability), the steps she took to finalize that move (like finding housing) reinforcing those plans.

ADKAR's intuitiveness is Roel's favorite aspect. "It's so powerfully simple that you can't help but think, 'Hey, why didn't I invent that?'"

But yet, for many people, it doesn't start to come naturally, to remember to think from other people's perspectives, until they've been trained. Roel's supervisor Alan notices that members of his team are often surprised by their ADKAR results. "They think that everyone knows about and understands their project, until they get responses saying otherwise. It really ignites stronger communication and engagement."

### **More than communication**

However, Prosci newbies often underestimate, and undervalue, the complexity of this tool. A tool that's really a whole suite of tools.

"I see a lot of people confusing change management and change communication," Christina cautions. "Ideally you should be doing both." Communication can create awareness, she clarifies. Managing the change means building the relationships, coalitions, trusted partnerships.

She notices that people who have not been through the training are most likely to make this mistake. "A lot of the time these are the people who aren't really affected or impacted by the change. They think, 'OK, we're just going to send 10 emails, and then there's going to be change.'"

This top-down approach doesn't allow for feedback, which undercuts buyin. "Of course you can enforce things," Roel says, "but you want the least possible resistance. More managers are seeing that, hey, if we take the people side into account first, things will go much, much more smoothly."

"Our projects take place in an environment of change." This is how Roel summarizes his more holistic view of the Prosci methodology. "It's not about the specific project anymore. That was our aha moment. Change is the environment. And the people side, that's the key success factor."

### **Tip: Ask for help.**

"Engage and connect with your peers and colleagues and coaches. You're not alone in the journey. So, seek help, and get your leadership to support you."

*–Alan Dunn-Birch, Director of Operations Transformation, Materials & Structural Analysis*

## The responsibility of leadership

But, new practitioner and member of leadership Maurits points out, “It won’t work as well if you have the wrong stakeholders at the table.” Your most important stakeholders are the people who need to actually do the changing. If you don’t get their buy-in up front, they could block the project later.

Arguably the most important group you’ll need on your side for successful change management, and one of the key factors in the Prosci model, is the leadership. The sponsors.

Prosci stresses the importance of especially initial communication about projects coming from the people in the company with the most power. This signals to everyone else that this project is being taken seriously.

But that can be easier said than done. Roel clarifies: “At a company like Thermo-Fisher, we don’t always have that luxury. If we have 50 projects running, there aren’t 50 exec sponsors available. Leadership doesn’t have time to check in on every project project, because they have 20 other projects they’re responsible for. And they have day jobs, too. These are very expensive people.”

“I always think long and hard about engaging leadership,” Alan says. “Who do we engage? What’s in it for them, and how are they going to resist? Because if you don’t get that right at the beginning of the project, you’re going to set yourself up for failure.” Don’t assume that all leaders are on board with your plan either, he cautions. “Just because one small group of leaders wants some change to happen, doesn’t mean there won’t be other leaders in the organization who are resistant to it.”

One way to get leadership invested is to get them to follow the same half-day course Alan did. “I believe everything should start at the top,” Alan says.

### **Tip: Play with your tools.**

“Explore. Try everything, and see what works and what doesn’t. You can get overwhelmed by all of it. I see people who opt out, say that’s too much. They don’t know where to start. But I would say, really invest some time to see what works and what doesn’t, and find the people around you who can help you. Don’t just treat the training as a nice star on your resume.”

*–Sander Hurkx, Sr. Manager of Project Management Operations, Eindhoven*



## **Making it your own**

Sander says the Prosci method is made to be tailored. “In a different company with a different culture, I would use different tools based on what that company needs.”

After all, and Sander phrases it, “The whole model, the whole booklet, it’s a lot. And I don’t think anyone is saying you need to use all of it.” He worries that, if you did, you would chase away the very people you’re trying to get more involved in the process. “In our work culture, I don’t think we will help ourselves if we send out ADKAR surveys, say, every two weeks.”

Even Erik, on the training side, sees this. “Project managers aren’t usually very methodology oriented,” he says. “They need to have some freedom and autonomy in their way of working. But everybody is smart enough to pick out the solution that is most helpful and relevant to them.”

Roel agrees. “A huge company like Thermo-Fisher can’t implement every single thing. Thermo-Fisher wouldn’t be happy if I tried. So, we cherry-pick the things that work for us.” He calls ADKAR his “silver bullet” to use in projects: “If a project is going to take a year or a year and a half, there’s only maybe 4, maximum 5, moments that I will do ADKAR.” More than that and he worries he’ll invite backlash. So, he saves it for the more foundational change moments.

Maurits, much newer to the practice, says he leaves his training materials on his meeting table, in plain sight, to remind himself to think things through the ADKAR way. “It gets me to ask not only what the new project is, but more specifically, what is the new thing that you have changed in the way of working? Is everybody aware? Do we have training set up? Do we have a roll-out plan? A communications plan? Do the people who need to change want to change? Is there a conflict in reaching that desire?”

This process, the early stages of getting started and figuring things out, is exactly what Sander and Roel hope to smooth with their ongoing project to integrate change management principles into current Thermo-Fisher project management practices. “We took the components we thought were adding the most value, and we integrated them into our own framework that we already use,” Sander explains.

### **Tip: Stick with one thing.**

“I think what really made our partnership with The People Side of Change a success is we stuck to it. We said, ‘This is a journey, and we want to do this with you.’

It’s not a one-day thing. If three months later you say, ‘No, this isn’t working,’ and move on to the next methodology, then you’ll also throw away that next methodology after three months. Go in with at least five years in mind.”

*–Roel Mous, Sr. Manager in the Operations Transformation Office*

### **The final first step**

Often the first people new practitioners need to practice their training on is themselves: changing their own behavior as they learn how to put change management into practice in their own work.

“A lot of people think, ‘Oh, that’s a nice theory,’” Roel says, “but that they’ll wait for leadership to tell them, ‘OK, now you can use your change-management thing.’” Roel says there’s no reason to wait, and worries you might never get started if you’re expecting the directive to come from someone else. “Just start using the methodology, and impress leadership with your results.” Best of all, he points out, you don’t even need to explain those results. “Even if you don’t know how ADKAR works, if you look at the results, it’s a scale of 1 to 5. It’s easy to understand. There’s no secret formula.”

And, of course, once you start, you need to keep up the momentum. Alan notes, “The hardest thing is to get that reinforcement and consistent messaging. Certain individuals have a tendency to drift back to the old way of working.” He emphasizes that it’s the responsibility of leaders like him to do the reinforcing. A process that happens more naturally as more of his team gets trained.

Roel is noticing this as well. “For the first time since I joined the company, we have KPIs for tracking change,” Roel says. “Very high-level, simple KPIs, like: Do you have a change manager?” But, importantly, he elaborates, it’s now the norm that 90% of their projects *do* have someone managing change.

And the results are speaking for themselves, with Prosci spreading by word of mouth. As Roel puts it, “Put it into practice, and people see the results. Like, ‘Hey, there’s more communication.’ ‘Leadership is here.’ ‘We see much more engagement, especially in the project you’re running [with this method].’” And, as people change teams and departments, they bring what they’ve learned with them and get others interested. Now, Roel says, “I think in every division, at least some people or some departments are using this methodology. It’s actually going pretty fast.”

Alan sees it on his team as well. “When a survey goes out, people know why we’re doing it and what’s expected of them. And it’s driven real action.” There’s a growing “army,” as he and Erik call them, of change agents working together.

Sander also sees the positive effect that shift in company culture is having on morale. “Everyone likes to see that we are taking change management seriously, that we are taking them into account. And that’s a really big win. That you show that you actually care.”

Not that there isn’t a long way to go, Roel emphasizes. There’s always room to grow, to do better. “We’re building the plane while flying,” he muses, “but it feels like we are together on this journey. Look what we accomplished in the last 4 years already. Are we there yet? Probably we’ll never get there, but we are all moving in the right direction together.”