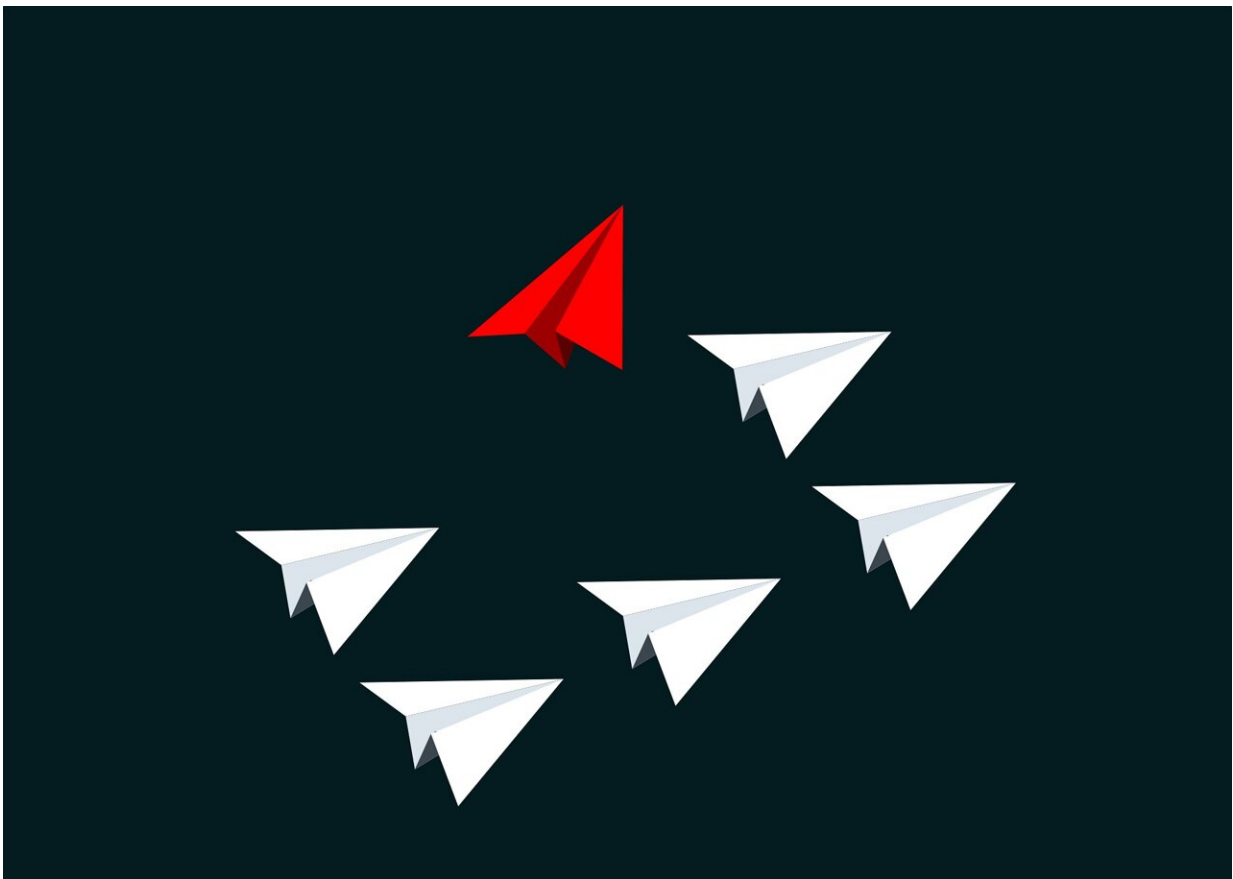


# How to enable insider social change agents to tackle social and environmental issues in organizations

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Businesses play a crucial role in building a sustainable future, but it's the

passionate individuals within these organizations who often lead the change. Known by many names—tempered radicals, social intrapreneurs, champions, reformers, advocates, activists, and more—these insider social change agents are the driving force behind efforts to tackle social and environmental issues.

A new integrative review [published](#) in the latest issue of the *Academy of Management Annals* brings together knowledge on these insider social change agents to advance research and practice.

Insider social change agents are individuals inside businesses who seek to propel their organization toward acting on social and [environmental challenges](#), and contributing to positive social change—either as part of a job title or beyond regular work duties. This review synthesizes the insights from more than 400 articles across five questions: (1) What makes an insider social change agent? (2) What are the key characteristics of the issues they tackle? (3) How does context enable or constrain their efforts? (4) What activities do they perform? (5) What are the outcomes of their actions?

## **Key recommendations**

The review offers an integrative model that enables locating specific insider social change efforts within a broader landscape, making comparisons across different efforts, and assessing the simultaneity of multiple efforts—across the dimensions of person, place, activities, outcomes, and issues.

The authors conclude that previous studies have primarily concentrated on insider social change efforts resulting in significant but isolated small victories. The key insight for future research is to shift attention to exploring how the endeavors of insider social change agents can accumulate and culminate in driving substantial positive social change.

Three recommendations emerge from the review:

1. Focus on understanding the factors that inhibit or block insider social change agents' efforts toward transformational outcomes. Despite the use of savvy tactics, insiders often face opposition from individuals and groups with vested interests in preserving the status quo. To what extent are the activities of blockers the same or different from those of insider social change agents?
2. Adopt an ecosystem perspective that goes beyond a focal organization. What happens as change agents across organizations and sectors align and join forces—can they aggregate toward broader change? Or do they compete for limited corporate resources, legitimation, and attention?
3. Take an interdisciplinary approach. Social and environmental challenges are complex and intersect. How can issue-specific insights from other disciplines (e.g., natural sciences on circular economy or planetary boundaries) inform insider social change agency?

## **Business Implications**

Insider social change agents are essential drivers of business transitions to a [sustainable future](#). Employees are increasingly seeking to align their [personal values](#) with their work, but companies are failing to tap into this potential ([Deloitte Insights, 2023](#)). The integrative review uncovers six key insights for businesses and insiders driving positive social change:

1. Insider social change agents can emerge anywhere in the organization. Organizations can support this by integrating sustainability and social change into all job functions. Would-be insiders can build on external pressures to initiate social change efforts, as well as existing company commitments to social and environmental issues.

2. Emphasizing collaboration instead of heroism is central to effective social change efforts. Organizations can foster this by encouraging insiders to work as facilitators and active members within networks. Insiders can contribute by building connections, fostering "network contagion," and considering diverse perspectives in problem-solving and solution creation.
3. Finding and sharing resources in communities is essential for insider social change agents to access the support they need. Organizations can facilitate this by connecting insiders with communities of practice and platforms. Insiders can utilize these resources to share strategies, learn from failures, and inspire each other in their endeavors to drive positive social change within organizations.
4. Every insider social change effort needs to make sense within the business, but transformative change requires novel takes on the business case. Organizations can support this by encouraging insiders to carefully align with the business case while maintaining a bold approach. Insiders can utilize their business acumen to seek opportunities for redefining the business case around making positive social change financially viable, while also seeking champions at higher levels to adjust organizational incentive structures and systems.
5. Staying true to values is crucial for insider social change agents to maintain their effectiveness. Organizations can support this by fostering an environment where insiders can uphold their values without resorting to moralizing. Insiders can navigate [ethical dilemmas](#) by seeking motivation and support from like-minded peers while considering the potential risks associated with overlooking unethical behaviors.
6. A focus on small victories can be a valuable strategy to tackle complex challenges incrementally, but connecting small wins can unlock broader change. Organizations can support this by developing a clear strategic roadmap that outlines how small wins

contribute to larger social and environmental goals. Insiders can leverage small wins to maintain momentum, sustain engagement, and amplify their influence within broader industry networks by sharing experiences and utilizing evaluation tools effectively.

**More information:** Katrin Heucher et al, Catalyzing Action on Social and Environmental Challenges: An Integrative Review of Insider Social Change Agents, *Academy of Management Annals* (2024). [DOI: 10.5465/annals.2022.0205](https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2022.0205)

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