

CHANGE THAT STAYS · CHAPTER FIVE

# The Tuesday She Was Gone

*A change carried by one person is held on loan against her presence, and the loan is called in the day she leaves.*

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## THE LICENCE

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Chapter Five of Change That Stays. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/change-that-stays (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989557).

## A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

## ABSTRACT

A change carried by one person is held on loan against her presence, and the loan is called in the day she leaves. It is five past eight on a Tuesday in April, and the complaints team at the contact centre is logging on. The room is open-plan, fourteen desks under a long window that faces the car park, and the light is the thin spring light that makes every screen look grey. For a year and a half, at half past eight every Tuesday, the team has met in the small room by the lifts for forty minutes. Five complaints closed the week before, read aloud, one question asked of each: what would have stopped this reaching us? One change agreed, written on the whiteboard, checked the following Tuesday. The number of customers who had to call twice fell over that year, and the regional manager mentioned the team by name at a conference.

CHAPTER FIVE

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## Five past eight, a Tuesday in April

It is five past eight on a Tuesday in April, and the complaints team at the contact centre is logging on. The room is open-plan, fourteen desks under a long window that faces the car park, and the light is the thin spring light that makes every screen look grey. For a year and a half, at half past eight every Tuesday, the team has met in the small room by the lifts for forty minutes. Five complaints closed the week before, read aloud, one question asked of each: what would have stopped this reaching us? One change agreed, written

on the whiteboard, checked the following Tuesday. The number of customers who had to call twice fell over that year, and the regional manager mentioned the team by name at a conference.

The senior adviser, four years on the team, looks at her calendar. There is nothing at half past eight. She checks again, and then she understands. The team leader who started the Tuesday review was promoted in March to run the centre's other site, and her calendar went with her, and the Tuesday invitation, which had always come from her, went with the calendar. The new team leader is capable and kind and has never heard of the review. The senior adviser has brought her printouts of five complaints, as she does every week. Her stomach drops in the way it does when a door she expected to be open is locked. She is a composite, as are her colleagues, drawn from the way these weeks are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no contact centre is meant.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon tells a story about a different kind of place, and it is the clearest account in his writing of what happens when the person who holds something leaves.[30] It is about a woman named Eleanor, whose porch was where her neighbourhood gathered every Saturday, and about what followed when she moved away:

> *When Eleanor had a stroke at seventy-eight and moved to a care facility forty miles away, the neighborhood didn't collapse overnight. But over the following months, something shifted. The Saturday gatherings dissolved. The young mother's depression deepened without her weekly anchor. The firefighter stopped talking to his neighbors. The teenage girl ran away from home. The engineer stopped eating properly.*

This chapter makes one claim. A change carried by one person is held on loan against her presence, and it is repaid, usually without anyone noticing, on the day she leaves. A change lasts when its keeping has been moved, while she is still there, into the parts of the organisation that remain when she goes.

## Inside help

Every organisation knows the figure the research calls a champion: the person who believes in a change, carries it, argues for it in meetings and keeps it going when others lose interest. The literature on champions is large and has been growing fast. In 2018 Edward Miech and colleagues reviewed it for health care, where it is largest, and found 199 research articles published between 1980 and 2016.[31] More were published in the last two years of their review than in its first thirty. The use of the word varied widely, and most studies recorded only whether a champion was present or absent. But the individual studies consistently found champions to be a positive influence on whether an implementation worked, and the four that had randomly assigned champions to some sites and not others showed that the question could be studied experimentally.

The sustainability research says the same thing from the other end. When Mary Ann Scheirer reviewed nineteen studies of whether health programmes lasted, she found five factors with consistent support across them, and one was that "a 'champion' is present."[32] The others were that a programme could be modified over time, that it fitted its organisation's mission and procedures, that its benefits to staff or clients were readily seen, and that it had support from outside.

So the complaints team's experience is not a story about champions being a bad idea. The team leader was the reason the review existed, and for eighteen months she was the reason it worked. The difficulty is what the evidence leaves unsaid. A champion helps a change to start and to last while she is present. Very little in the research measures what happens after she goes, and the complaints team is finding out.



*Systems that depend on one*

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · CHANGE THAT STAYS · CHAPTER FIVE

## Systems that depend on one

Santa Anna's canon uses an ecologist's word for people like the team leader. A keystone species is one whose influence on its ecosystem is out of all proportion to its numbers, and the canon carries the idea into human systems: the person whose presence holds a group together, often without a title that says so. Its account of what makes such systems fragile is stated without softening: "systems that depend on a single keystone are fragile systems." And it says, in the same passage, what the resilient ones do instead. They have "distributed their keystone functions across many people, many positions, and many practices."

The canon is also honest about why organisations drift towards the fragile arrangement, and the explanation is not neglect. It is that concentration is easier: "Human systems naturally tend toward keystone concentration — it is more efficient, more comfortable, and more familiar for a system to rely on a few exceptionally capable individuals than to develop distributed capacity across many." The complaints team had every reason to let the team leader carry the review. She was good at it. She chose the cases well, kept the forty minutes to forty, and knew how to turn a complaint into a question nobody felt accused by. Spreading those skills would have been slower, and in any given week, less good.

There is a caution in the canon that matters as much as the diagnosis, because the obvious response to a lost champion is to look for a new one. It calls this the hero trap, the habit of an individualistic culture that reduces a living system to its most visible person: "Find the keystone person and everything will be fine." The point, it says, is that keystone influence "is *relational and systemic*", emerging from a person, a position and a context together. A new team leader who is asked to become the old one will either fail or succeed in the same fragile way.

In 2004 Trisha Greenhalgh and colleagues reviewed what was known about how innovations spread and are sustained in health services, one of the most thorough syntheses of its kind.[33] Their model is detailed and resists summary, but one of its threads, as remembered from the full text, bears directly on the complaints team: an innovation lasts when it becomes routine, built into the organisation's ordinary procedures, budgets and roles, rather than remaining a special project dependent on the people who introduced it.[34] That is the organisational form of the canon's distributed keystone. The review needed to stop being the team leader's meeting and become the team's.

## The work nobody wrote down

If a change is to be moved from a person into a place, someone has to know what the person was actually doing, and this is harder than it sounds, because much of what a champion does is invisible to her as well as to everyone else.

List what the team leader did for the Tuesday review, and the list is longer than *ran a meeting*. She sent the invitation, from her own calendar. She booked the small room, by asking the facilities coordinator, whom she knew. She chose the five complaints, on Monday afternoon, and she chose them to be varied, never five about the same fault. She protected the forty minutes from the centre's shift planner, who wanted the team on the phones at half past eight, by agreeing a later start to the morning's calls with the duty manager. She wrote the agreed change on the whiteboard and photographed it. She checked it on the following Tuesday. Once a month she told the regional manager what had changed, so that the work was seen above her. And she made the room safe enough that advisers would read out a complaint they had handled badly. Seven of those eight tasks are mechanical. The eighth is not, and it is the one most often mistaken for the whole.

When she was promoted, the handover was a good one by most standards. Her successor received the team's targets, the rota, the open cases and a page on each adviser. The Tuesday review was mentioned, in a line, as *a weekly huddle, works well*. None of the eight tasks was written down, because none of them had ever been thought of as a task. They were how she worked.

It is worth being fair to the new team leader, because the easy reading of April is that she dropped something valuable. She did not know it was there. In her first month she was learning fourteen people, a new set of targets and a site she had never worked at, and the one meeting on her predecessor's list that sounded optional was the huddle. When the senior adviser finally mentions the review, in the second week of April, the new team leader is glad to hear of it and asks what it involves, and the answer takes twenty minutes, because nobody has ever had to explain it. That conversation is the handover that should have happened in March. It is also, if it goes well, the moment the review stops belonging to one person, because for the first time the people who kept it have to say what keeping it means.

Santa Anna's canon describes this failure in its own setting, a governance practice that depends on a few committed people, and its description fits the complaints team closely: "conscious governance, practiced without adequate support, burns out. The facilitators exhaust themselves. The group's enthusiasm wanes. The organizational culture reasserts its old patterns, and the conscious governance experiment becomes another well-intentioned initiative that didn't survive contact with institutional gravity." Institutional gravity is the right phrase for what removed the review. Nothing pushed it out. It lost the one force holding it up.

The same mechanism appears wherever a change slips back, in a different coat each time. At the outpatient clinic of Chapter 1, the forces that held it were withdrawn one by one when the project closed, each for a good reason.

In a bakery, the person most likely to keep a new system going turned out, in Chapter 4, to be the night supervisor who had said it would fail. In each case the question is the same: what is holding this up, and will it still be there next quarter?

## Anchoring

The change literature has an older word for what the complaints team needed. John Kotter, in his account of why transformation efforts fail, named as the last of his errors the failure to anchor a change in the organisation's culture, by which he meant, as remembered, showing people how the new way connected to results, and making sure the next generation of leaders embodied it.[35] The second half of that is the part the complaints team missed. The team leader's successor had not been chosen for the review, told about it, or asked to keep it.

The sustainability studies support a broader version of the same idea. Shannon Wiltsey Stirman and her colleagues, reviewing 125 studies, grouped the influences on whether a programme lasted under four head-

ings: the organisational context, the capacity to keep it going, the processes by which it was carried out, and the features of the programme itself.[36] Only one of those headings is about people, and even it is about capacity, which can be built, rather than about any particular person.

The canon adds the dimension the studies find hardest to measure, which is time. Of the kind of culture in which keystone functions are shared rather than concentrated, it says: "A keystone culture is not built in a quarter, a year, or even a strategic plan cycle." The Tuesday review ran for eighteen months, which is long enough to change a number and not long enough, on its own, to change who keeps it.



*Rehearsing her absence*

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · CHANGE THAT STAYS · CHAPTER FIVE

## Rehearsing her absence

The practice this chapter describes has three parts, and the most important is done while the champion is still in post, because that is the only time it can be done well. It is called the rehearsal of absence.

The first part is the carrier's inventory. The champion and one or two colleagues sit down for an hour and list everything she does that keeps the change going, in the plainest terms: who sends the invitation, who books the room, who chooses the cases, who protects the time, who checks the follow-up, who tells the people above. The list should include the relational work, the eighth task, described as concretely as possible: *reads the first complaint herself, and it is always one of her own mistakes.* Most champions are surprised by the length of the list, and most find at least one task they had never noticed doing.

The second part is moving each task into something that remains. The invitation comes from a team calendar, not a personal one. The room is a standing booking. The choice of cases rotates among the advisers, with a short note on how to choose. The forty minutes are written into the shift plan as a fixture, agreed with the duty manager, so that protecting them is not anyone's personal favour. The monthly line to the regional manager becomes a line in the team's report. And the relational work is shared deliberately, by having different people lead the review, with the champion beside them, until several can do it. None of these moves is clever. Together they are the difference between a meeting someone runs and a meeting a team holds. In the canon's terms, the keystone functions have been distributed across many people, many positions and many practices.

The third part is the absence itself, rehearsed. Once the tasks have been moved, the champion steps away from the change for two or three weeks while still in post: a holiday, a secondment, a deliberate gap. The team runs the review without her. When she returns, they sit down together and read what happened. What ran without her? What stopped? What was done, but differently, and is the difference better or worse? Whatever stopped is the next thing to move. A change that survives a rehearsed absence is a change that is ready for a real one.

Two further habits help. When the champion does leave, her successor inherits the change explicitly, in a conversation about it and not in a line of a handover note, and is asked whether she will keep it, and what she would change. And the people who keep it are named, regularly, for keeping it, in the way Chapter 2 describes for the prevented problems a plant learned to count: maintenance is visible only if someone makes it so.

The mistakes are familiar. The inventory is skipped because the champion is busy and the change is working. The tasks are moved on paper and the champion goes on doing them, so that the rehearsal of absence is the first time anyone else tries. Or the absence is never rehearsed, because it feels like a vote of no confidence, and the real absence, when it comes, is the first test. Chapter 7 carries the inventory, the list of moves and the absence review as working pages.

There is a gain in this practice that has nothing to do with the change itself. The champion who has handed her change to the place is free to carry the next one. The team that has kept a practice without its founder knows something about itself that it did not know before: that the improvement was theirs.

## Rehearsing absence, in practice

The article this chapter began as ended in the small room by the lifts in July. The book can go further, into the finer points a leader meets when she moves a change from a person into a place, and the first is when to begin.

The best time is at the start, when the change is introduced, by naming from the first week a second keeper beside the champion. The next best time is the moment the change has visibly worked, when the champion has most credibility and least reason to fear that sharing it will look like a loss of confidence. The worst time is when the champion's departure has been announced, because by then everyone, including her, is busy with the handover of everything else, and the change gets a line.

The second point is how to run the carrier's inventory so that it finds the invisible tasks. A list made from memory in a meeting finds the visible ones. Two methods find the rest. The first is a week's diary: for five working days the champion notes every action, however small, that she took because of the change, from the email she sent to the room she booked to the colleague she reassured in a corridor. The second is the question asked of the team rather than of her: *what does she do for this that you would notice if she stopped?* The team's answers are usually different from hers, and the differences are where the relational work is.

The third is matching each task to a structure that remains. The structures are few and ordinary, and most organisations already have them: a team calendar or shared mailbox in place of a personal one, a standing booking in place of a favour, a rota in place of a person, a fixture in the shift plan or the production schedule, a line in a regular report, a sentence in the role description of whoever holds the post, and a page in the induction for new staff. Every task on the inventory should end with the name of the structure that now holds it, and the date it moved.

The fourth is the relational task, which cannot be moved into a structure and has to be shared between people. The method that works is the oldest one: the champion leads, then co-leads, then sits beside someone else who leads, then is absent. Each stage lasts several weeks. During the co-leading stage the champion should say less than she wants to, and in the sitting-beside stage she should speak last, if at all. The canon's distributed keystone is built this way, one person at a time.

The fifth is the absence itself. It should last long enough for the change to meet one of its ordinary pressures without the champion: two weeks for a weekly practice, a full month for a monthly one. During it she is not consulted, which needs saying out loud, because the team's first instinct will be to message her and

hers will be to answer. Before she goes, the team agrees what it will write down: each week, what ran, what did not, and what was done differently.

The sixth is the absence review, held in the week she returns. Four questions, in order. What ran without her? What stopped, and why? What was done differently, and is it better? What task is still hers that should not be? The last question produces the next round of moves. Many teams need two rehearsals before a change survives a real absence, and that is a good result, not a disappointing one, because the second rehearsal costs nothing and the real departure, unrehearsed, can cost the change.

The seventh is the successor conversation, when the real departure comes. The incoming leader is told about the change in a conversation of its own, with the inventory, the record of moves and the last absence review on the table. She is asked whether she will keep it and what she would change, and her answer is taken seriously. A successor who chooses to keep a practice is a keeper. A successor who inherits it in a line is a caretaker until the first busy month.

And the last is the hardest to accept: not every change should last. Some practices outlive their purpose, and keeping them out of loyalty to the person who began them is its own kind of fragility. The canon's account of living systems names the balance between keeping an identity and adapting to new conditions, and a change that is retired deliberately, with its reasons and its lessons written down, has not failed. What fails is the change that fades without anyone deciding, because then nobody learns whether it should have lasted. Chapter 6 places the carrier's inventory and the rehearsal of absence in the third month of the ninety days after done, and Chapter 7 gives the inventory, the moves and the absence review as working pages.

## Five past eight, a Tuesday in July

It is five past eight on a Tuesday in July, and the complaints team is logging on under a window full of summer. At half past eight the team calendar sends its reminder. The small room by the lifts is booked, as it is every Tuesday, until December. This week the senior adviser has chosen the five complaints, and one of the newer advisers will lead.

At twenty past eight a message arrives on the team channel from the centre's other site. It is from the old team leader, who has started a review of her own there, and wants to know how the team chooses its cases now. The senior adviser types a reply, attaches the note on choosing, and picks up her printouts.

The door to the small room is open.

A NOTE FROM THE HOUSE

An improvement carried by one person is a gain held on loan, and the loan is called in the week she leaves. A gainshare counts what a change still returns long after it was declared done, from records the firm already keeps. Luminous Prosperity Inc. does this work inside organisations, and is paid as a share of the gain it helps keep.

REQUEST A CONVERSATION

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