

WHITEPAPER

# Change Readiness: Ready to turn?

As a leader, you probably spend a big chunk of your time realizing changes in your organization. That is not easy, because people and organizations are often focused on stability, even though agility is increasingly important for the success of organizations. In this whitepaper we describe the six most important conditions for change readiness; to create the ability to deal with change not only once, but structurally. We pay particular attention to the role of leaders. And to the importance of creativity as a cultural characteristic as well as a method to find new solutions constantly for the challenges you face as an organization. We even introduce a new concept: creative change leadership.

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## How change readiness puts wind in the sails of change?

We see established organizations looking at the flexibility and agility of startups and scaleups with admiration (and sometimes with a little envy). It seems that the latter see opportunities faster and seize them effortlessly. While larger organizations find it more difficult to keep up with developments in the world. But... are large established organizations, by definition, less agile? Not in our opinion.

Whether you - as an organization - are or are not able to move along with developments does not depend on size, but on flexibility. This is about structure and control, but also about culture and people. Agility requires a culture in which people embrace change and have the ability and mindset to play a (pro)active role in it. That's what we mean by change readiness. In our opinion, this is such an important topic that we dedicate an entire whitepaper to it. Let's start by explaining our vision using a metaphor:

*Tanker, speed boat and sailboat.  
Who will win the race?*

*Often the larger or more complex organizations are compared to tankers that are difficult to turn when faced with change. In contrast, the fast, agile, innovative organizations are depicted as speedboats. A clear, imaginative metaphor. Be careful with this comparison though, because a tanker never becomes a speed boat and a speedboat can never match the strength, mass and stability of the tanker. A better metaphor in our opinion would be a sailboat. Whether you are sailing on a tall ship or on a small yacht: it is important to adjust your course*

*and sail position to the circumstances. Darwin said that in nature not the strongest or the fastest wins, but he who is most adaptive. That also applies here. Whoever reacts best to the elements, wins.*

## Why is change readiness more important than ever?

The ability to change is not a "nice to have". It has always been essential for organizations. And it is perhaps even more urgent today due to two developments taking place simultaneously:

1. The success of organizations depends on the extent to which they anticipate or respond to the ever-faster developments in the market, regulations and expectations of clients and citizens. It's not just about speed; Due to the diversity of expectations and requirements, the necessary changes are often more complex. For this you need inventiveness as well as flexibility.
2. Organizations have created a work environment in which the pressure is constantly too high, for the achievement of results and for the health and well-being of people. That too requires different ways of looking and thinking and creative solutions.

The best solution would be to get out of this rat race. The most realistic solution is to create an organizational climate in which people are agile and resilient. Where they turn threats into opportunities based on trust. And where they have the skills and working methods to find creative solutions time and time again.

# What do we mean by change readiness?

Anyone involved in organizational change has an idea of the concept of change readiness. We choose the functional definition from an article in the Harvard Business Review:

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*“Change readiness is the ability to continuously initiate and respond to change ways that create advantage, minimize risk, and sustain performance.”*

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This definition has been formulated from within the organization. And to get this done and really be able to change continuously, you need the strength of all your people. The more people with different perspectives from role, background, personality, look at the possibilities for improvement, the more initiatives arise and the more flexible and agile you become as an organization. And the more involvement there is from the organization, the better you're able to integrate the changes directly into your daily work.

We therefore see change readiness as a combination of 'hard' and 'soft' factors and/or skills. Flexibility in structure and management, people who can handle change well and a climate in which the search for creative solutions is stimulated.

We see change readiness mainly as a structural characteristic of organizations. Something you can develop and must maintain. Of course, there is also such a thing as: being ready for a concrete change that is just around the corner. We regularly help clients prepare their people for a major change, for example during reorganizations or mergers. Then it is mainly about helping people deal with the direct impact, and with their own role in the change. But even in those 'acute' cases

it is often possible to work on the structural side of change readiness, so that the organization learns to deal better with future changes.

In the following paragraphs we will discuss six conditions that are important for this:



Figure 1: Change Readiness Conditions – Involve 2023

## 1. Change leadership

Leadership plays a central role in our approach. Leaders (also "informal" leaders) are in the position to help people understand where the organization is moving. And to involve them in realizing change, so that they experience more direction and control. Leaders play an important role in how safe people feel to speak up, try new things, and make mistakes. And leaders can encourage their people to continue to develop themselves so that they can keep moving along with changes. In short: leadership plays an essential role for all other conditions that are important for change readiness.

In the following paragraphs about the other conditions, we will explicitly name that role. And in the next chapter we will go into this in more detail.

## 2. Processed past experiences

If you've ever experienced change fatigue or cynicism from employees about change, they've probably been through a lot of change. And trust in the organization's ability to change has been damaged for some reason. The effect of history is often not immediately visible, but in the

background, it appears to play an important role in how people deal with a current change. That is why it is important to be aware of the history and to consider how the organization has previously dealt with change.

For example, what creative solutions have been found? And what was done with them? To what extent have people been involved in the past or not? Do people feel heard? Have people been touched or hurt by previous changes? Have they lost something? Or are there no past experiences at all and people therefore expect everything to always remain the same? These kinds of experiences affect the present, and it is often necessary to process them first before people can be open to change.

**The role of leaders** is first and foremost to acknowledge the past: change is usually not a rejection of what is now, it is another step into the future made possible by what has been achieved today. In addition, it is important as a leader to investigate what has happened in the past with an organization, a team or an individual, so that you can assess what may still need attention. And to talk to people where necessary, so that any 'old grievances' can be brought to the table. This does require a safe atmosphere, which people do not always experience precisely because of past events. In that case, think of the use of confidential advisers, reflection with a trusted colleague, coaching or support from, for example, the HR organization.

#### ***Building history together - University:***

*The MT of a department at a large university is entering a rather radical transformation process. They notice that there's a lot of old grievances and people don't really seem to want to participate. To understand what has happened before, an important part of an MT meeting is to construct one's*

*own history together on the wall. What has happened in recent years? What did that mean for people? How did we deal with that? And how did that affect me? The effect of this exercise was great. MT members who had been there for some time indicated that you simply forget what has already taken place. New MT members discovered what their people have already experienced. It gave both groups a stronger sense what the current transformation is building on.*

### 3. Security and trust

This brings us straight to the third condition for change readiness: security and trust. This is not just about creating an atmosphere in which past issues can be discussed. In a broader sense, it is about people feeling the space and support to express themselves and actively participate in a change process. To ask questions and raise concerns. But also: to come up with new ideas, to experiment and to make mistakes. The latter is essential because the concrete realization of change is not possible without the active involvement of the people who 'have to change'.

Safety means that the matters mentioned before do not actually have any negative consequences, and that people really feel that way. Trust means that people believe that management, but also colleagues, treat them well and with integrity. That there is open and honest communication. No political games are played. That there may be differences and that you are valued for your personal contribution.

Safety and trust play an important role in creating a creative and solution-oriented climate for the long term. Partly because there is openness to 'creative diversity': different ways to make a creative, innovative contribution. One person is very good at creating a dreamed vision, while the other can come up with a thousand and one ideas to bring that vision to life. While yet another can turn a wild idea into a usable solution and then

implement it. People thrive when they are given the confidence that they can make their unique contribution.

**The role of leaders** is primarily to be a secure base themselves. A healthy balance between caring, being the safe haven for people, and daring, also challenging them to step outside their comfort zone and try new things. As a leader, you also have an important role in creating a culture of safety and trust in your team or organization. Meaning that it is an explicit topic to bring to the table and you steer it. Finally, it is important that you recognize the creative diversity in your team(s) and know how to use it effectively to arrive at new solutions. Ideally, that too is part of the culture: an open atmosphere in which people with different creative preferences appreciate and complement each other and solve the whole puzzle of creative, groundbreaking change together.

#### 4. Agile and resilient people

When changes have a personal impact on people's roles or jobs, it requires agility and resilience to deal with them properly.

People differ in their basic attitude towards this. Resilient people are often curious and proactive. They get pleasure from movement and innovation and have sufficient self-confidence and self-esteem. That makes it easier to deal with change, because they know that they will 'land on their feet' again. There are also people who are more defensive and hesitant and are more comfortable with stability. Because they have little experience with change or because they are unsure about their chances. For the latter, it is much more difficult to turn towards and defend themselves against unexpected or undesired changes.

In addition (positive) experience with change, agility and resilience are mainly related to personal development. If you continue to learn and develop, you can keep up with developments in your profession and your organization more easily. Organizations that invest in the development and employability of their people structurally are therefore able to deal with change better.

**The role of leaders** is therefore not only to focus on performance, but also on development. And to continue to encourage their people to work on their employability. With concrete changes, it is the role of leaders to show the perspective, to take people along and to motivate them to actively participate in the change. That gives more of a sense of 'grip' than waiting for the consequences. And finally, it is important to pay attention to people's (emotional) reactions to change. Colleagues who find it difficult need confirmation and clarity to be able to take steps from self-confidence.

#### 5. Creative and solution-oriented climate

We already started this paper with the question why some organizations tackle changes more effortlessly - or better still: initiate change - while other organizations take small steps with great pain and effort to just keep up. Perhaps the most underestimated condition for this is the creative and solution-oriented climate.

When you create a creative climate, you create openness to the unknown and more flexibility to deal with it. Our natural inclination is to fall back on what we already know and do. In a changing organization this does not always provide the best solutions. So in those situations it helps to think creatively. The Swedish professor Ekvall did years of research and defined ten dimensions of the organizational climate that enhance creativity and thus change capacity.

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*“Creative climate promotes intrinsic motivation, promotes creative behavior.”*

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### **Dimensions Creative Climate according to Ekvall:**

1. *Challenge: employees are challenged in their work.*
2. *Dynamics/liveliness: there is variety in the activities and atmosphere.*
3. *Playfulness & humor: there is room to have fun (with each other).*
4. *Freedom: there is freedom to develop your own initiatives*
5. *Taking risks: people dare to roll out bold new initiatives, without knowing in advance what the outcome will be.*
6. *Time for ideas: there is room to think of and discuss possibilities and to test fresh suggestions.*
7. *Ideas support: management supports coming up with and developing new ideas.*
8. *Trust and openness: it is safe to discuss issues.*
9. *Debate: there is room for exchanging of opinions.*
10. *Conflict\*: you sense (inter)personal and emotional tensions.*

*\* This mainly concerns situations of insecurity that have a negative correlation with the creative climate.*

A creative and solution-oriented climate is not only about culture, but also about procedures and working methods. It is for a reason that we find such a climate more often in organizations that are strongly built on innovation. Innovation requires a lot of creativity, but it is also a very structured process. Organizations that are good at this embed methods to arrive to new solutions in the way they plan and make decisions.

**The role of leaders** is to consciously work on this climate. On the cultural side of it by making this an explicit topic of conversation. By being an example yourself. And by building teams where there is room for 'creative diversity' (see point 3). On the structural side, by choosing appropriate methods to integrate creativity and innovation into regular planning and decision-making routines. And to ensure that all those involved can familiarize themselves with these methods.



## 6. Agile structure and control

In our vision, organizational change is always about people: people who will do something different tomorrow as opposed to what they are doing today. Structures and control are only preconditions. They are however very important and determining preconditions for change. There's a reason why many organizations embrace the working principles of 'agile', so everything is aimed at responding to developments in the market in the very short term and delivering concrete new features for customers at lightning speed. The 'agile playbook' determines in detail how people work and collaborate, and if applied properly, this indeed ensures agility. But more traditional organizations have also long since ceased to work with annual plans. They work with 'rolling plans' in which the goals and focus are constantly being adjusted instead.

**The role of leaders** is less clear here; after all, it is about the entire structure of the organization and that is a much broader issue. Where leaders can make a difference is: courage. Dare to make rigorous adjustments in structure and control.

## Creative Change Leadership

As mentioned, leadership plays an important role in organizations that can handle change well. In this chapter we dive into this a little deeper and we introduce a new concept: creative change leadership. It may seem like a pleonasm because creative leadership already carries change. However, in creative leadership, the focus is on developing the creative capacity of the organization and its people. As mentioned earlier, in addition to people and the climate, we also focus on flexibility in structure and management. It is crucial to include these as preconditions to ensure that change is embedded in all parts of the organization, resulting in agility. To emphasize the importance of both change and creativity, we explicitly put them side by side.

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*"Creative leadership is the ability to consciously use your imagination to move a group towards a new goal [...]. As a result, creative leaders have a deep positive influence on their context (work, environment, school, family) and the individuals in that situation."*

*Puccio, Mance & Murdock (2011)*

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A change leader facilitates change by working on a clear common direction, and by giving people room to translate it to their context and daily work. For truly groundbreaking changes, something more is needed: creative leadership.

When you combine these two elements of leadership, something like creative change leadership emerges. A leadership style in which you work on an organization that has the structural ability to move along with – and respond to – all developments in the environment. One of the mentioned conditions especially plays a role in this: the development of a creative and solution-oriented climate. The other conditions are mainly about the question: how do you deal with changes that come your way as good as possible? Creative leadership and a creative and solution-oriented climate are much more about actively pursuing, seeking out and initiating change. Creating an organization that thrives through change, where it's not about obstacles but about opportunities.

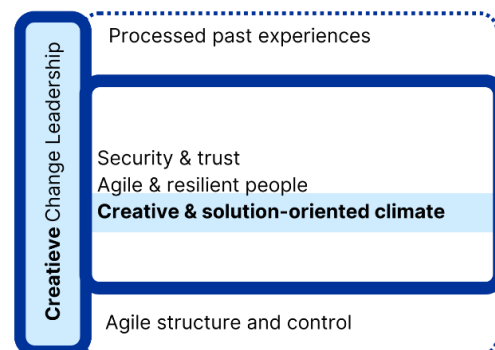


Figure 2: Creative Change Leadership – Involve 2023

## What makes you a creative leader

Professor Sid Parnes identifies the following elements of creative leadership:

1. *I believe in the creative potential of all people.*
2. *I am open to ideas and different points of view.*
3. *I tend to ask questions rather than tell.*
4. *I gather information before I decide.*
5. *I am enthusiastic, sincere and intrinsically motivated.*
6. *I have a sense of humor and playfulness in me, but I always work towards results.*
7. *I can live with ambiguity just fine.*
8. *I look for the positive in people and ideas.*
9. *I am involved with others.*
10. *I take calculated risks.*
11. *I can stand on the sidelines*



## Creativity: how does it work?

Central to this idea are the principles of creativity (and innovation) and creative thinking. We will elaborate on them below. But firstly, It is good to be aware of two things:

- Anyone can learn creative thinking. The more you do it, the better it works. Our brain builds new pathways. The more often you use those pathways, the easier it becomes.
- A creative process is a structured process, just like most other ways of developing strategies and plans. The most common way is: analyze – come up with a solution – design a solution – implement a solution. You do the same in a creative process and on top of this you add more perspectives

and options, so that you also find less obvious and more novel solutions.

## The creative breath

(Note: this is a metaphor, not a spiritual practice). When you want to arrive to special solutions, it is important to first come up with many solutions (breathe in fresh oxygen: diverge). One option gives no real choice. Two options forces you to think in black and white. More options maximize your power and allows for greater flexibility and increases the likelihood of reaching your final goal.

When you have come up with many different options, you choose the most promising special one that makes you want to start straight away (exhale what you don't need: converge). Mind you, these are NOT the practical feasible options, because you already do them and that does not



yield enough opportunity or growth. Choose the special options that you would like to get started with but do not yet know how to. It takes some imagination to turn unusual ideas into usable solutions. But that does mean that these solutions are truly special and innovative.

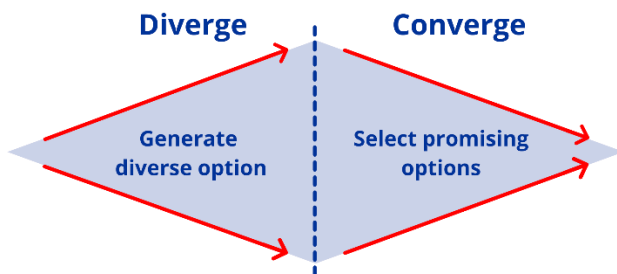


Figure 3: Creative breath

#### **Practical creative leadership for MT:**

*An IT organization wanted to create a vision on hybrid working, flexibility and job satisfaction and safety with its MT and determine a strategy to realize the vision. We started working on the development of creative leadership and a creative climate.*

*With the use of creative working methods, meditation, alignment of the perspectives of the various MT members and practical action plans, we created a shared vision in half a day. In the following month, we went on a creative leadership expedition with each MT member individually. Everyone*

*discovered for themselves where the biggest growth could be realized in the development of creative leadership and the creative climate. In the expedition vision, strategy, devising possibilities and converting them into workable solutions and implementing them were discussed and picked up. Each MT member had a clear "aha" at their own pace and theme and therefore a strong intrinsic motivation to get started with the leadership development that was needed for each person individually.*

*In the meantime, we also surveyed the employees' perceptions of the creative climate and leadership. By comparing the insights of the leaders with those of the employees, they decisively chose those things that made the most impact. A perfect way to prioritize and make it manageable.*

## The creative process

Contrary to popular belief, creative thinking is not just about generating ideas to solve a problem. Creative problem solving is a process which includes coming up with options and selecting the most promising ones (diverge-converge) in all phases of change:



- clarifying the problem – the creation of a dream vision and the strategy to get there;
- the transformation – generating ideas and solutions to realize your strategy;
- the implementation - stakeholder management and the creation of an action plan.

By making more structural use of the imagination in the organization, you not only find better solutions; greater ambitions also emerge. And a greater desire to realize these.

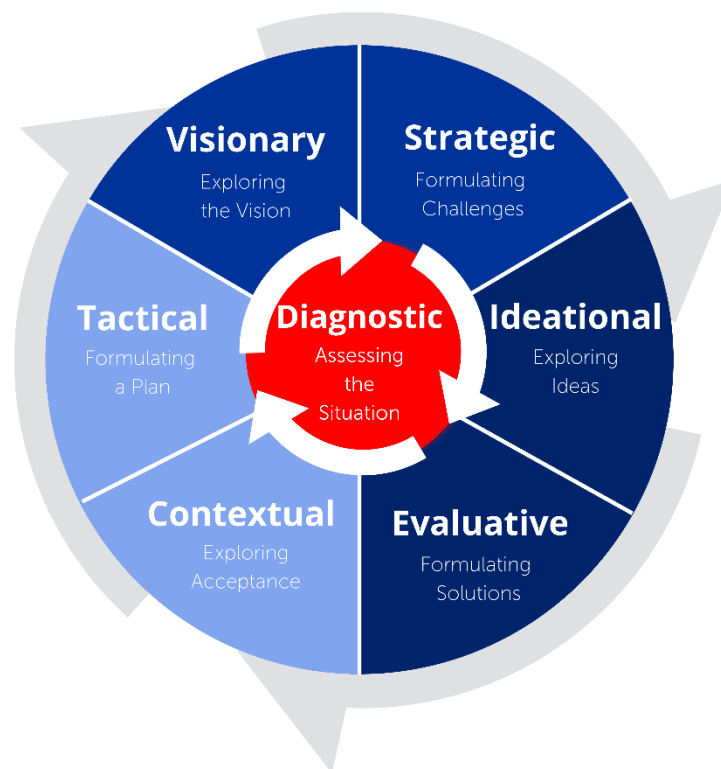


Figure 4: Creative Problem Solving: The Thinking Skills Model – Puccio, Mance & Murdock (2011)

You don't just develop options by diverging and converging at each stage. It is equally important to use both cognitive and affective skills at each stage. That is to say: rational thinking, but also making room to feel, to be inspired, to dream, etc. The various steps in the creative process are described in the diagram below, including the required skills. On the internet you can find many exercises and tools for each step.

Step	Goal	Thinking skills	Affective skills
Assessing the situation	To describe and identify relevant data and to determine next process step	Diagnostic thinking	Mindfulness  Giving attention to thoughts, feelings and sensations which are relevant for the current situation
Exploring the vision	To develop a vision of a desired outcome	Visionary thinking	Dreaming  Imagining hopes and desires
Formulating challenges	To identify the gaps that must be closed to achieve the desired outcome	Strategic thinking	Sensing gaps  Being aware of what currently exists and what is needed
Exploring ideas	To generate novel ideas that address significant gaps/challenges	Ideational thinking	Playfulness  Toying freely with ideas
Formulating solutions	To move from ideas to solutions	Evaluative thinking	Avoiding premature closing  Resisting the urge to push for a decision
Exploring acceptance	To increase the likelihood of success by testing solutions	Contextual thinking	Sensitivity to environment  Being aware of the physical and psychological environment
Formulating a plan	To develop an implementation plan	Tactical thinking	Tolerance for taking risks  Not allowing to shy away or become nervous of possible failure or setback

There are three affective skills that help in all three phases of the creative process:

1	Openness to novelty	Embracing ideas that might seem bizarre and risky at first
2	Tolerance for complexity	Being able to keep an open mind and persevere without being overwhelmed by large amounts of information, interrelated and complex issues and conflicting perspectives
3	Tolerance for voorambigüiteit	Being able to deal with uncertainties and not jump to conclusions

## Back to change readiness. Where do I start?

First of all, it is important to mention that anyone can start with this. We already said that creative leadership is not about position but about influence. If you want to take the lead in change readiness to improve yourself, your team and/or the organization, you can start.

Like we explained, it starts with an assessment. First check for yourself – with the smart mix of leadership elements - how things are going in your organization. Take a self-assessment: where do you stand as a creative change leader? And do a quick scan with people from your team or organization. And assess what is helpful and necessary in your case to increase change readiness. It is important to create openness about this subject in various ways. Some people are more likely to answer honestly. Others find that more difficult. And there are those who don't know what they know until you give them the right questions or other triggers. It is also important to make sure it's safe for people to share. Maybe your quick scan should be anonymous, or it helps to have outsiders interview your employees.

When you have a clear and broad picture of the current state of change readiness, you can determine which interventions are needed where, when and by whom to increase the change readiness. Perhaps it is necessary to work on more safety first. You can train your people in creative

problem solving, using the principles discussed above. You can take steps to create a creative climate. You can develop creative leadership. Our most important tip is to make it small and manageable and just start taking steps. Small steps take you a long way. This is much more effective than exhausting yourself and those around you by wanting too much too soon. Embed it in existing consultation moments. Share and interact on existing communication channels. And be honest, open and sincere. Be vulnerable by also sharing mistakes.

Make sure you and other role models are visible in different places with your real stories. Create enthusiasm and fun. And share results. However small. When it's fun and yields results, people want to contribute.

You don't need everyone to be involved from the start and it doesn't have to go well or be complete right away. When a few enthusiastic people start, they make it better. They ensure that more people will get involved who in turn get more people and that's how it grows. And that's how you arrive at a tipping-point and find yourself in an organization that is structurally ready for change.

## Finally: the power of metaphors and surprise

In the beginning of this white paper we used the metaphor of the tanker, speed boat and sailboat. Why? Because metaphors spark people's imagination and people make personal

associations, which makes them more emotionally involved with the subject and therefore connect with the subject more. In addition, we process and remember images better than words. If you want to take your team along in change, it is important to paint a picture and trigger people's attention. A few important tips when choosing metaphors. Choose images that surprise.

That evokes images that your people are not yet familiar with, or at least not in relation to your substantive story. This causes them to pause for a moment, after which curiosity sets in and they try to resolve the discrepancy by looking at the situation from new perspectives. So it creates openness. Something you definitely want from your people during change. And do you know what the beauty is? Surprise intensifies our emotions, which we need to ventilate and we do that by sharing with others. Metaphors therefore offer you a way to get your story passed on to a larger part of your audience. Disclaimer: you understand that there is also the downside here. Choose consciously. When you provoke negative emotion with your metaphor, this emotion is also intensified. So when there are negative changes, surprises should be avoided as much as possible.



## Conclusion

Change Readiness is your helm in our rapidly changing world. The better your organizational structure, leaders and employees are set up for change, the better you can deal with it. Realize that developing agile people and organizations takes time and practice. The more often you consciously apply the conditions for change readiness in every small change you are facing or want to realize proactively, the more it becomes part of the DNA of your organization and your people. You will start to notice that change will not only become easier, eventually a culture emerges in which people look for change in order to continuously get the best out of themselves and the organization. Consciously take the conditions from this white paper into account and refer to the starting tips from time to time. And just go and do it.

## Authors

Anneke Veenendaal-de Kort is a senior manager at Involve. With a Master's in communications, she guided various organizations to get employees on board with changes. Not by forcing them, but by giving them the lead and enthusiasm for new possibilities with the use of creative concepts. To transfer her creative leadership to more people and organizations in order to empower them to turn on their creative potential, she is one of the few Dutch Masters (Msc) Creativity and Change Leadership in the United States. Together with Involve partners Ilse van Ravenstein and Michiel van Delden, Anneke wrote this white paper and with the further development of the themes described here, Involve continues to build on the design and funding of change processes that get people moving.



## About Involve

What is the secret of organizations that successfully innovate and keep responding to developments in their environment? For us these are: employees who feel connected to what the organization stands for. And who move along and help build to realize their shared ambition together every day.

We have been helping organizations to innovate for almost 30 years through a communication and change approach that works. With more than 20 passionate professionals in the field of change, communication, leadership and program management, we provide all the expertise and experience needed to really get organizations moving.

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