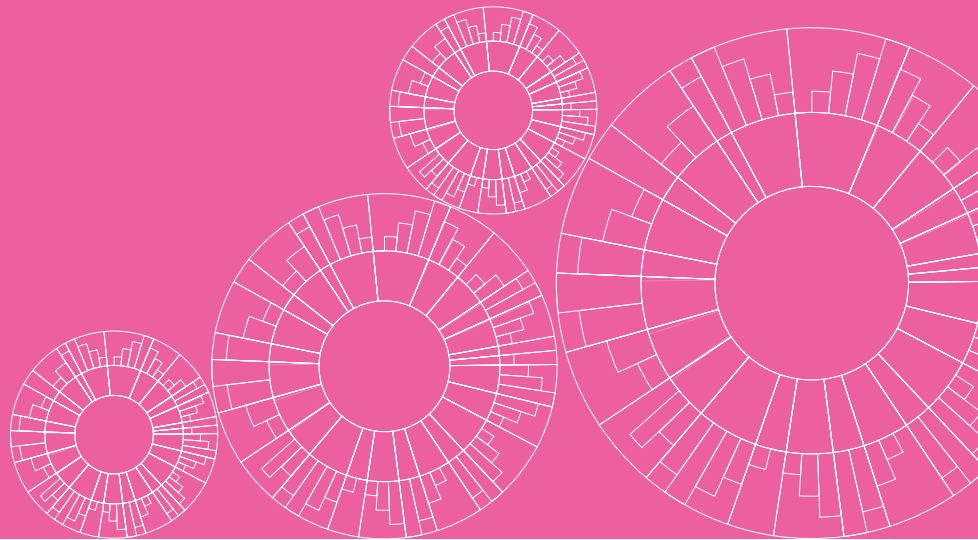# Embedding
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Becoming an Agent of Change

A GUIDE

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Becoming an Agent of Change
A Guide

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Introduction

When we picture a change agent, the image that surfaces is often of young people marching in the streets or disenfranchised groups fighting the establishment. But all of us have the capacity to be agents of change, even those of us who are privileged insiders and benefit from the current system. In fact, as privileged insiders, we hold great transformative potential.

Privileged insiders are those of us who have reaped advantages associated with our education, our socio-economic background, our position, our citizenship, our gender, or our racial identity. We have both responsibilities and opportunities associated with the significant influence we have in our organisations and beyond. This makes it especially important for us to consider our role in addressing the converging environmental and social crises we face, as well as the possible unconscious biases we may hold. Importantly, we also have leisure time to reflect, skills we can leverage, and networks that can facilitate action. We have the means to challenge the status quo.

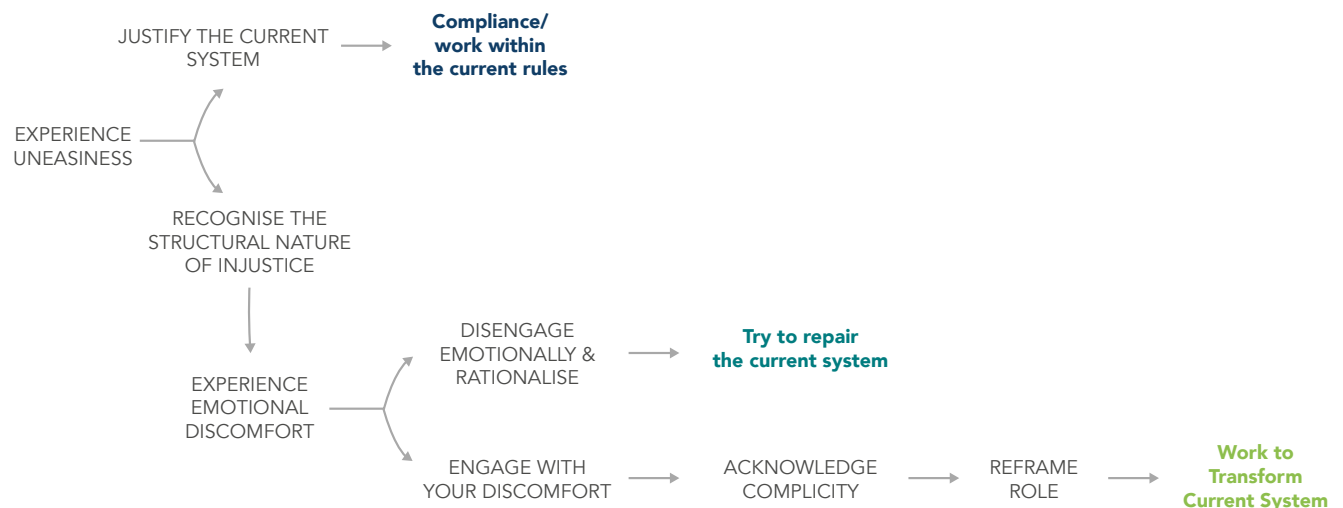This guidebook is based on a multi-year research project we undertook to explore:

Why and how do privileged insiders become agents of change, challenging institutions for broader societal benefit?

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The insights we share here are based on a review of prior academic research on change agency, combined with the practical experiences and insights gleaned from 73 interviews and a series of workshops with privileged insiders addressing a range of societal issues in different settings: finance, education, agriculture, law, and business. Through this work, we learned that the road to becoming a change agent begins with recognising the systemic injustices around us and experiencing deep feelings of discomfort. How we each engage with these feelings, and in particular, whether we accept our own complicity in perpetuating institutional injustices, determines whether we start to take actions to challenge the status quo. These initial actions, in turn, may lead us to reframe our role, in order to help transform the systems around us.

In the pages that follow, we share what we have learned about the process of becoming an agent of change, incorporating the experiences of the change agents we interviewed in their own words. We hope that this guide helps you to reflect on your own journey of change.

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Becoming an Agent of Change

While each person's journey to become a change agent is unique, we found that there are some common elements. In this section, we describe how the journey tends to unfold. We highlight how decisions at pivotal moments in your journey can shape whether and how you engage in the work of change.

JUSTIFY THE CURRENT SYSTEM → **Compliance/ work within the current rules**

EXPERIENCE UNEASINESS

RECOGNISE THE STRUCTURAL NATURE OF INJUSTICE

EXPERIENCE EMOTIONAL DISCOMFORT

DISENGAGE EMOTIONALLY & RATIONALISE → **Try to repair the current system**

ENGAGE WITH YOUR DISCOMFORT → ACKNOWLEDGE COMPLICITY → REFRAME ROLE → **Work to Transform Current System**

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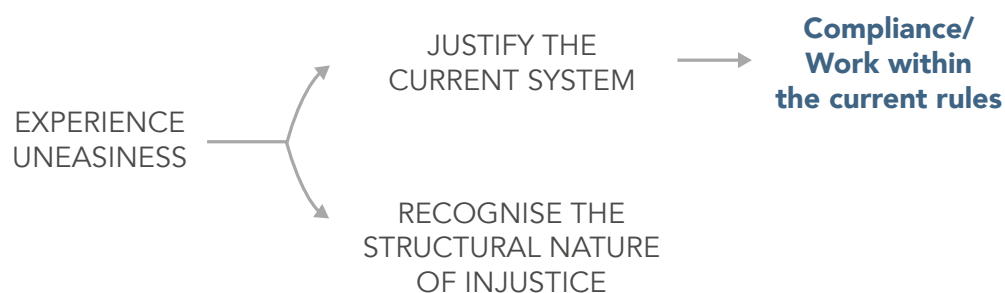**PROJECT**

A growing uneasiness

In every case when we asked people to describe what they remembered about the process of becoming an agent of change, they described a growing uneasiness that started with noticing a contradiction between their personal situation and the suffering of others or the degradation of the natural environment.

> *"On our watch so many people are just falling completely off any radar and the value of their life experience is shocking. That became totally unacceptable for me."* (Financial professional)

> *"I had to some degree arrived. I was successful. But as all of this was happening, I started to get a niggling inside my heart. And the niggling in my heart would not stop."* (Education professional)

What you decide to do with this feeling of uneasiness is crucial.

People who repressed their uneasiness tended to justify the current system that they work within, despite its failings. They focused their efforts on compliance with the latest standards or regulations without really questioning the underlying system or trying to change it.

EXPERIENCE UNEASINESS → JUSTIFY THE CURRENT SYSTEM → **Compliance/ Work within the current rules**

EXPERIENCE UNEASINESS → RECOGNISE THE STRUCTURAL NATURE OF INJUSTICE

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Recognising the systemic nature of injustice

In contrast, those who were willing to explore this uneasiness often came to recognise patterns of injustice in our society.

If you allow yourself to explore your uneasiness, you may begin to notice that societal arrangements you had previously taken for granted seem to reinforce the privileges of a few at the expense of the majority, or that they are harming the health of the planet. When this happens, you may find yourself questioning the very system that has helped you to get to where you are.

"Things started to really shift for me when it became clear that some systemic mechanism was at play." (Business professional)

"I progressively realised that we are all part of a system that just strengthens injustices." (Finance professional)

"I started asking critical questions. Yes, we were tripling alcohol sales. We won awards. But how much of that didn't go to medical care, school books, or education? How many wives and kids were beaten, or raped, or …? You start opening that can of worms and you have an unarticulated gut feeling that all of this is wrong." (Business professional)

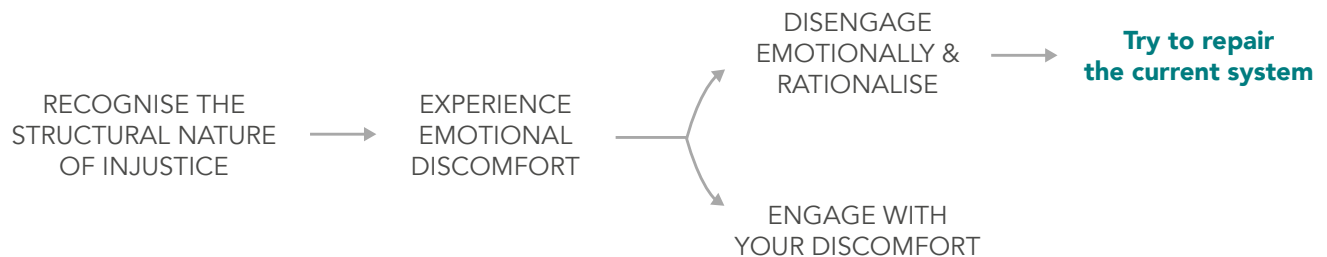*"It's an iterative and partly subconscious process. You seek out answers to your feelings, you get new information and you kind of hold on to your old ideas. And so on. It's realising you're wrong, over time. You notice, you question but you move along … until you can't hold on any longer to your old understanding and it hits you."* (Law professional)

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Questioning aspects of our current socio-economic system can lead you to experience a shift in your understanding of the world. You may find that you are no longer able to rationalise some of your long-held beliefs and that, as a consequence, your personal narrative may unravel. This is a process that will push you into uncertainty. Some of your deeply held assumptions will be challenged and the resulting emotional discomfort is likely to become too acute to ignore.

> *"What does it mean when the theatre that we call life starts to change dramatically all around us? What questions do we ask when all that we have known to be true and sufficient no longer is, when our ideas about progress, development, governance systems, institutions are being challenged?"* *(Education professional)*

> *"I realised that you absorb a whole lot of stuff subconsciously from your society, which are unexamined beliefs, which become incorporated into your own belief system, and may be entirely wrong. I realised that a whole lot of things that my society had taught me were wrong."* *(Law professional)*

How you react to the feelings triggered by this new understanding of the world will shape the type of change agent you will become. Whether you suppress these feelings of discomfort or allow yourself to explore them sets you on different paths.

RECOGNISE THE STRUCTURAL NATURE OF INJUSTICE → EXPERIENCE EMOTIONAL DISCOMFORT → DISENGAGE EMOTIONALLY & RATIONALISE → **Try to repair the current system**

ENGAGE WITH YOUR DISCOMFORT

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Trying to repair the system

The respondents who disengaged with the discomfort triggered by this new understanding of the world shielded themselves from having to engage in further questioning. Their journey paused in a place where they recognised the faults of the system but also accepted them as unlikely to fundamentally change.

> *"Going deeper [is] too scary. I don't have the capacity. There is only so much I can do."* (Business professional)

> *"It's easy to become passionate ... be a greenie... but we need to stay realist, this is how decisions are made by large asset managers. If they engage, it is to improve profits, first and foremost."* (Finance professional)

Disengaging from your discomfort about the system can provide immediate relief, but it also constrains your scope of action. Among those we interviewed, people who disengaged emotionally and rationalised their feeling of discomfort tended to focus their efforts on working within the current system. They pushed for changes that limit the negative impacts of business as usual, or they used established operational mechanisms to try to improve societal outcomes.

> *"[Within the capitalist system] impact investing can make a difference. It's not aid, but empowering people to create social change and a beneficial setup for the business owner and the consumer and the investor. That's why I like impact investing a lot, because it's got that very strong human element, although it also aligns with financial and economic imperatives."* (Finance professional)

Change agents who focus on repairing the system tweak it to enable small improvements; however, in doing so, they are unlikely to fundamentally address the underlying issues.

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Engaging with your discomfort

It's only when participants explored their discomfort, when they were willing to take a difficult introspective journey leading them to **engage with their emotions**, that things really started to shift.
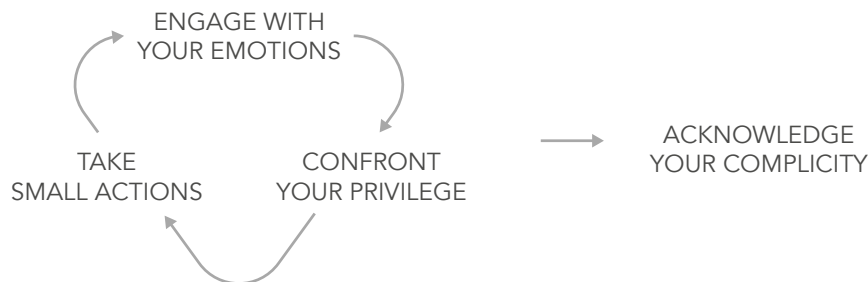
"Your insert yourself into the centre of the issue and you engage with it deeply, intimately, intentionally." (Education professional)

"There's a feeling, an inchoate dimension to what's happening, and you decide to burrow into that and understand what this is about and to raise it to the level of self-awareness, of proper analytical understanding."
(Agriculture professional)

People described how they experienced **a 'mind shift' about privilege**. Most had not initially perceived themselves as privileged.

"I grew up in what I perceived as a non-privileged family and when I realised I was privileged, I couldn't place it at first. But it shifted my mindset, realising we have this huge capitalist mentality, where a very small percentage of people get to spend quality time with their kids. They're driving their fancy car, they don't deal with the weather, they don't worry about food. And so it completely hit me that we are beneficiaries of the system."
(Business professional)

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While they engaged with their emotions and confronted their privilege, people described that they also started **taking small practical actions**. They explained that doing something (no matter how small) allowed them to cope with the feeling of being overwhelmed and get some relief from the tensions they were experiencing. What mattered was the process, rather than the immediate outcome or magnitude of the actions themselves.

> *"Doing something small just helped [me] figure out what it is that we should be trying to do."* (Agriculture professional)

> *"I realised I needed to live out what I preach in a sense. Even with small actions. And I think by doing that, internally, I then started feeling more at ease and at peace with myself."* (Education professional)

These actions also initiated a cycle of discovery and experimentation with change. Like helping to peel an onion layer by layer, small incremental actions allowed people to progressively gain insights into the nature and the scope of the changes required.

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Acknowledging your complicity

Those that went on to engage in efforts aimed at changing the very system of which they were the beneficiaries described a crucial feeling of complicity, after realising that they indirectly participate in the perpetuation of injustices.

> *"Part of it was recognising that I'm part of the mess. It was taking responsibility for my own part in it rather than finding some external object that I could blame."* *(Agriculture professional)*

> *"What if the story was that I had abandoned my responsibility? What if the story was that I was also to blame?"* *(Education professional)*

> *"I think it's often a lot easier to ignore troubling facts and do nothing about them than to confront them because when you do confront them, you're confronting yourself personally. You've now got to think 'Why wasn't I aware of this before? Why didn't I do something about it before?'"* *(Business professional)*

Feeling complicit is emotionally and intellectually difficult. But it also drives the need to engage in transformative change. You are likely to find that your only way out of this personal crisis is to start taking action that challenges the status quo.

> *"You realise that actually the only way to counteract that feeling of being less complicit is to engage in actions that make you feel less complicit."* *(Education professional)*

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Reframing your role

The key to moving forward is for you to identify how you can use your privilege – this could be your skills, resources, networks, or your influence. When you use your privilege to drive change, you begin to see yourself in a different way.

> *"Because I have privilege, I can convene, I can help shape or shift a conversation. I have credibility in that space."* (Education professional)

> *"I became determined to use the skills I've built up over the last 20 years to create positive change using communication, awareness. All the skills I'd learned at the advertising industry that used to exploit, increase sales, increase market share – they are now going to be used to increase awareness, increase change."* (Business professional)

Once this shift towards action had been initiated, it was common for the people we interviewed to begin to reframe their role in the system. Some leveraged their role to **disrupt** the current system, and others more fundamentally reframed their role in order to **transform** the system.

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR COMPLICITY ⟶ REFRAME ROLE ⟶ **Work to Transform the System**
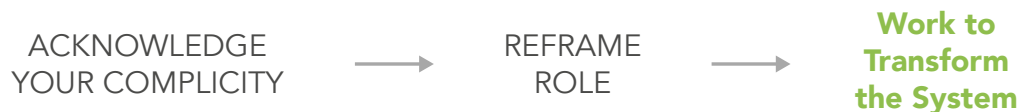
We saw that some chose to leverage their role to engage in actions that openly challenged the core beliefs and practices of their profession or context, and to make space for others to do the same.

> *"I think it's publicly questioning the status quo, openly challenging the system and the stories we've been told about the system. I see my role as starting a lot of conversations."* (Education professional)

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"I haven't given up my daytime job. But I'm trying to use it to re-introduce some of the values that have been forgotten by my profession and challenge those that are oppressive." (Law professional)

"My job is to stimulate different thinking and to make people feel uncomfortable. If I'm not a day away from being fired every day, then I'm not doing what I should." (Finance professional)

These acts of disruption ranged from creating space for and amplifying the voices of others, to helping new ideas gain legitimacy.

"Just knocking it a little bit further... pushing the orbit of a community slowly into a particular direction by mixing different types of engagement techniques, some non-conflictual and others more daring." (Education professional)

For example, finance professionals pushed their board to publicly adopt climate change resolutions, and corporate managers helped to expose their senior executives to issues such as working poverty or plastic pollution.

On the other hand, some change agents became compelled to radically transform the current system. They redirected their efforts towards creating new practices and trying to fundamentally alter the underlying mindset of their profession.

"It meant reviewing my life and my work so that it could be an instrument of change. As an [environmental] lawyer, I had until then worked and drafted laws to reduce or manage human behaviours that were causing problems. I then discovered that there were some problems I couldn't fix with better drafting, and that the problem was deeper. It was in the philosophy that informed the law. So, when I realised that the legal system was fundamentally part of the problem, I felt my role was to set out an entirely different vision of what law could be." (Law professional)

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"You are changing your life, and you somehow break from the career that you've built for 25 years to embark on a path hardly anyone understands. It's getting over the fear and having a blind faith that you can play a role in enabling this alternative path." *(Business professional)*

These people used their expertise to design, implement, and promote new practices within their profession or context that aligned with their new understanding of the world.

"I think that there are times when you need to resist things and fight against things that are happening to stop bad things from happening. But there are other times when you can't change the world by fighting an existing reality. If you really want to change things, you need to invent a new model that can make the existing model obsolete." *(Law professional)*

For example, some were developing social enterprises, some were redefining the philosophies and practices underpinning the legal system, and some were creating new regenerative approaches to agriculture.

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A renewed sense of purpose

Ultimately, no matter whether they were disrupting systems or transforming them, these change agents described feeling a renewed sense of purpose and meaning that helped them face the resistance they encountered from others.

> *"I'm questioned and misunderstood. Yet, I'm proud, I feel privileged and happy to be able to do what I do. I feel I am realising something deep inside."*
> *(Law professional)*

> *"I'm driven by my sense of purpose and the promise of change."*
> *(Education professional)*

> *"Oh, it brings me incredible joy and hope and, yeah, satisfaction."*
> *(Business professional)*

> *"I consider myself so privileged to be able to do something that is meaningful. I believe it is meaningful because it makes a meaningful difference to other people's lives." (Law professional)*

> *"I look at myself in the mirror in the morning and, you know, I feel good. I don't feel bad about myself. I feel less guilty. I get peace in knowing that I'm doing something about an issue I care deeply about." (Agriculture professional)*

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Reflecting on Your Own Journey

Our research has revealed that a commitment to change agency often begins with a sense of discomfort. And that it is what we do with that discomfort, and the degree to which we are willing to accept our responsibility to act, that shape our journey as change agents.

 Can you recall a specific experience that caused you to question systems that you had previously taken for granted?

To what extent do you benefit from current institutional arrangements?

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How do your personal values align with the practices of your organisation and your profession?

What actions could you take to leverage your position to facilitate change?

This guide is part of a larger set of resources that we have developed to help change agents to embed sustainability into their organisational practices and decision-making.

Our resources are co-created with our partners based on an extensive review of academic research, practitioner guidance, and feedback from experts. Preliminary versions are trialled in workshops and in pilot projects in our partner companies, through working with global practitioners in executive, sustainability, operations, human resources, marketing, and communication roles in a range of industries. Feedback is then incorporated into successive versions of the resource.

Our research is ongoing. We recognise that the knowledge presented here is provisional and we invite you to participate in improving these resources.

What next?

To help support you on your path towards becoming an agent of change, we have also developed a guidebook on Being an Effective Change Agent, as well as other related resources:
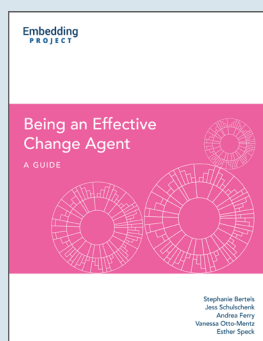
[Being an Effective Change Agent](#)

How can you prepare yourself to be a more effective sustainability change agent? This guide was designed to share insights on how change agents can support their CEO and influence thinking on sustainability.

For more resources to help you embed sustainability, please visit us at:
www.embeddingproject.org

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