Organizational Change Management

Best Practices From Real Projects

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Contents

Change management is about defining and driving behavioral changes to individuals, groups of individuals, and entire organizations. It's about increasing user adoption.

Now, change management theories look great on paper. Many practitioners have gone through classes, read books, and have even become certified in change management but still struggle with how to actually perform change management. Change management work is hard. Why is that? Is it because the concepts are difficult to understand? No. In fact, change management is very much common sense.

Then why is it hard? Because everything about it is dynamic. The environment in which change management concepts are being applied is constantly changing. Project conditions (scope, timelines, etc.) change. Stakeholder dispositions change. Someone who was initially supportive at the project outset may be less so as they learn more about what the future will hold. Even the stakeholders themselves may change. There is nothing constant about change management.

For a change management practitioner to be successful, two things must be in place:

1. The practitioner needs to know and understand change management theory and concepts. Those are table stakes.
2. The practitioner must have the ability to apply those concepts in the real world, on real projects, with real people.

We have built a thriving change management practice at Perficient. Our dedicated team of experts have deep real-world experience and apply the knowledge and lessons learned to every client engagement. This guide examines some of the key concepts of change management and provides examples of where and how they have been applied on real projects, the challenges that they brought, and how to overcome them to achieve success.

Executive Alignment Is Critical

Have you ever played on or seen a sports team where the coaches didn't see eye to eye? Perhaps it was related to game strategy. Maybe skill techniques. Or what about as a child, when your parents didn't agree on something? Perhaps it was about what you were or were not allowed to do or a disagreement over discipline. How did you feel? Confused? Directionless? Unaware of expectations?

The same phenomenon happens in the workplace. Prosci, a leading thought leader in the organizational change management space, tells us that the number-one factor in a project's success or failure is "active and visible executive sponsorship" (Prosci, *Best Practices in Change Management 2016*). Taking that one step further, not only is active and visible executive sponsorship critical, but executives across the organization must also be aligned, have a common vision, and comparable levels of support.

Technology is advancing at an unprecedented pace. Moreover, a majority of projects are transformational. What that means from a practical standpoint is that we're crossing organizational boundaries. No longer are projects siloed within a single business unit, but they're spanning entire organizations. To be successful, you need more than a single executive sponsor. You need leaders across the organization who will champion the cause for their respective line of business.

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Prosci, Best Practices in Change Management in 2016

About a year and a half ago, we were about to close a deal with a large, Midwestern manufacturing company that was going to transition from Lotus Notes to Microsoft's Office 365 platform, including Exchange for email. Almost absentmindedly, I asked the client's IT executives, who were driving the project, if they had alignment across the organization to make the switch.

A change as big as migrating email platforms can cause tremendous disruption to a critical operational function. Would all mail history be migrated to the new system? Would employees know how to find the archives? What about contact and distribution lists? Would calendar items come across, and what about the conference rooms reserved for recurring meetings? How much time would be lost in resetting up business as usual functions? What kind of experience would this be for the employees?

In short, the answer was "no," they didn't have alignment. Moreover, a substantial amount of work was required to build the case for change to move to the new system. How could we tell the story around why the switch was worth the trouble and would pay off in the end? Building the story was key to getting alignment.

Without buy-in, the executives, like any rational person, would most likely have resisted the change. That resistance would have cascaded down through each business organization, causing significant friction, impeding the project, and likely resulted in a less-than-optimal adoption experience and putting the whole project at risk.

However, we were able to pause all other change-related activities to drive buy-in and gain executive alignment, and not just early in the project, but first. The alignment provided the greased skids required for the active and visible executive sponsorship across the enterprise, which was in fact, the number-one factor in the project's ultimate success!

Don’t Under-Emphasize Stakeholder Management

Stakeholder management is the lesser-known brother of the organizational change management heavyweights: communications and training. This is the area we most often overlook or choose to invest the least amount of time. Why is that? In short, because it is hard. It takes time. It means reputations must be put on the line. It means risking rejection. People might ask us hard questions that we can’t answer. It scares us. All of that is true, but for us to be effective change practitioners, we must address it.

First, let's define stakeholder management. Business Dictionary defines stakeholder management as "the process of forming, monitoring, and maintaining constructive relationships with investors by influencing their expectations of gain resulting from their investment appropriately."

Look at that again: To form, monitor and maintain constructive relationships. You can't just do a stakeholder analysis at project inception and expect it to be valid throughout the project! People are dynamic. Their dispositions will change. He or she who was once a supporter of the project may have learned something concerning (real or not) that causes internal, or worse, external resistance. A change manager must monitor and maintain these relationships to know when this is happening. This takes time and effort (as an aside, one of the casualties of de-scoping a change effort is the ability to perform this function). But without spending time with your stakeholders on a regular and periodic basis, how do you know when these things happen? How do you know what the concerns are so that they can be addressed?

When an issue is detected near its inception, the molehill is prevented from becoming a mountain. A few years ago, we did a project at a high-tech firm. We were implementing a state-of-the-art CRM solution, replacing a homegrown system that had been in place for more than ten years. At the project's outset, everyone was excited to see the old system go. They couldn't wait to get the new system up and running. They couldn't wait to get into the 21st century.

However, during the project, people realized what the new system could do – and also what it wouldn't. One-off, unique functions would be replaced by more streamlined ones. Unnecessary process and approval steps would be eliminated. Reporting, both in content and delivery, would look different. None of these would harm the business. In fact, they would improve the business. However, as people learned that their baby was going away, as ugly as it may have been, they got nervous and decided they didn't like it.

These stakeholders went down the "J-curve" to what I like to call the "pit of despair." The world was going to end. "As a stakeholder, I'm no longer supportive," was a common phrase uttered to our team. However, we heard the phrase because we were in constant contact with our stakeholders. We listened. We partnered with them. With regular meetings, we knew when their dispositions went south, and we knew why.

Sometimes the concerns were legitimate, and we took that information back to the project team for corrective actions. Often, the concerns could be remedied with additional information to the stakeholder or by correcting bad information that came from a variety of sources. Either way, we kept the molehill from becoming a mountain.

None of this happens, though, if you don't regularly connect with stakeholders. You need to create a cadence for checking in with your stakeholders, a cadence that may vary by stakeholder. At the end of the day, you'll have your finger on the pulse of the organization, you'll be able to read and react, and the dividends will pay off handsomely at go-live.

How Stakeholder Assessments Drive Effective Communication Planning and Strategy

At least once a week, I open my spam folder to find hundreds of messages. Sometimes I'll briefly scan them before deleting, and other times, I'll simply "delete all" in the interest of time. The important messages from known senders are in my inbox, and most of what ends up in my spam box is irrelevant to me anyway, right?

That's the express risk of a poor, one-size-fits-all communication strategy for a project. It seems like many of projects these days will, in fact, leverage a "project mailbox" for related communications.

This is good. However, this box is not known to most of users, and so messages runs the risk of hitting spam automatically. Moreover, if initial emails aren't compelling and don't capture the audience's attention they run the risk of being put into the spam folder manually – literally or figuratively.

We had a client in the entertainment industry that announced at the project kickoff, "Email is our preferred, and only, communication channel. But, no one reads the emails." It's safe to say that, while I may have been surprised by the first comment, I wasn't at all by the second. So, how do you fix this? How do you get people to read your emails? How do you make sure relevant content is received by your target audiences? After all, you have important information to communicate!

First, you can't rely on email as the sole communication channel. Marketing experts for years have preached that if you want a message to land and stick, you must say it at least seven different times over at least three different channels. Given the diversity of audiences today, from Baby Boomers to Millennials, it's reasonable to suggest those numbers have increased from eight to nine times over at least four to five channels, and one must be some form of social media.

Yes, you should continue to use email, but you should also leverage face-to-face communications and solutions like Yammer and Teams. By the way, don't forget posters – people still love them! One of my favorite tactics came from a client that wanted signs posted to the back of stall doors in the bathrooms! Whatever it takes!

Again, the messages have to be relevant. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression, and that's expressly true of project communications. It's critical to send the right message to the right audience at the right time. This means that your plan cannot be one-size- fits-all. This is where the effective stakeholder assessment comes in. From the assessment, you understand not only who the stakeholders are, but learn what is important to them. You learn what they are concerned about and what areas of resistance might be. You'll understand what

communication channels work best for their team. The information gathered from stakeholders feeds directly into the communications plan. When you send on-point messages to stakeholders that address concerns and topics of interest, you have their attention. They read your messages. They'll be prepared when the time comes.

One of the criticisms I hear frequently is that change managers create a lot of pretty deliverables but don't do anything with them, and one of the most frequent culprits is the stakeholder analysis. However, if done correctly (and keep in mind, it should be iterated periodically), this information is absolutely critical to creating an effective communication plan that grabs and holds attention, while preparing users for events to come.

Effective Communication Leads to Meaningful Training Which Leads to Desired Adoption

It's frustrating when change management gets called upon to provide training, and only training, with the expectation that is the only thing required for the successful adoption of the technology. No! Training is not the only thing required. Yes, sometimes a project will encompass training and still have a productive launch, but that's like a blind squirrel finding an acorn. It can happen, but it's not the norm, and I certainly wouldn't bet on it.

True, a training curriculum is usually a prerequisite for a successful implementation of a new system or process. You have to prepare and enable users for new ways of working. But then you ask, "Why is that not enough? What is missing?" Lots!

Have you ever skipped a training class that you were supposed to attend? Why didn't you go? Many reasons may come to mind, but it likely comes down to your perceived lack of value in what you would get out of the class. You felt it wasn't worth your time.

Now, have you ever multitasked during a training class? It's so easy these days with mobile devices at our fingertips. And you probably did it because you felt there was something more important to be doing than what was happening in the class. Asking someone to attend training without providing the context of "Why should I care?" is futile.

Always start with a “case for change.” The case for change can be thought of the project’s vision in terms that relate to the user. You’ve heard of WIIFM (“What’s in it for me?”). The case for change has to be built in terms that relate to me. That means, you may need multiple cases for change for multiple user groups, and that’s okay. If it resonates with the target audience(s), you’re well on your way.

Next, that case for change has to be embedded in effective communications. Early in the project, these communications are strategic in nature, generating awareness and buy-in. The case for change is critical for these to be effective. You’re setting the hook.

Over time, the communications will get more tactical and will even get more specific around training and associated logistics.

Take this real-world example. One of our most successful change management projects was with a large a Midwestern manufacturer (the same one discussed earlier). We were moving a large population of “old- school” manufacturing users from the only email system most had known to a leading-edge. For this project, we leveraged our training partner, Brainstorm, which by the end of the project reported having the highest usage metrics of its tools ever on that project, and they’ve done a lot of projects.

What made this one different? We had a robust communication drive that got our target audiences engaged and excited early in the project, leveraging the case for change that helped to personalize the project. By the time we got to training shortly before go-live, the users were literally pulling the information from us, anxious to get into the system and learn more. They were ready. They bought into everything. They attended training sessions, and they paid attention. It was effective, not because we provided training, but because they wanted to learn. Keep in mind that we don't measure overall success by who goes to (and pays attention) training. We measure by productivity and ultimately the client's return on investment. Let's keep going.

This client ultimately had satisfaction scores of 94%, which is unusual. While it's tough to measure the impact of a happy workforce, we all know it's desired and increases productivity while reducing turnover, which is expensive in itself. Customer calls to the help desk were less than 20% of the planned volume (less than 5% overall), requiring fewer people to staff the desk. Operational productivity soared from the outset, allowing not only a seamless transition to the new state but a new platform that enabled collaboration like never before. The project came off quickly because of a well-executed change program. Wouldn't it be great if every project had this result?

Training: It's Not One Size Fits All!

Effective communication is not one size fits all. Studies have repeatedly shown that effective communication must be sent at least seven times over at least three channels for it to land and stick. You have to also send the right message to the right person at the right time. But what about training? A multi-pronged training curriculum is more difficult and time-consuming to create than a given communication. With that in mind, can you get away with only creating one style of training for delivery? Probably not! There are two reasons for this: learning style and learning content.

Let's approach learning style first. Just as we each have desired ways to receive and process communications, we each have a preferred way to absorb training. Some people like to attend a live, interactive instructor-led class, where they can be led through a "tell, show, do" approach. They can practice the concepts being taught, and have a chance for live Q&A with the instructor. Of course, this takes planning on the user's part, possibly traveling to the location, and a formalized time to attend the class.

Others may prefer an on-demand training approach. This delivery style is dominated by computer-based training modules, stored locally on a learning management system or accessed via the web. Users can take training when it's convenient for them.

There are pros and cons to each of these approaches. To be clear, there are more approaches than these, and even hybrids between the two. However, when users are training via a non-preferred approach, they're usually there to get through it. They're counting the minutes. Absent-mindedly clicking through slides. Multitasking. They're not absorbing the content, and that's a problem.

Now, the training content. For training to be truly effective, it must both apply to the situation at hand and resonate with the user. The users have to buy in to the purpose and application of the training. That means, at least to some extent, it must be customized to the user and ultimately the organization.

Of course, there is a lot of freeware training out there, but it's generic by definition. It usually doesn't apply to a specific situation and certainly not to a specific organization's needs. For example, you won't find much training out there that looks like your specific instance of Microsoft SharePoint, as it's usually customized (look, feel, and functionality) to the your specifications.

We work with a number of training partners that have excellent web-based training content. It has its place, as it's very effective for on-going, on-demand skill building. However, we always attempt to connect the dots for the users first. We generally do this via our communications strategy, helping the users understand what this will mean for them, and also via customized training at the outset that helps sets the foundation. We've found this works very well, and also sets our training partners up for long-term success.

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We conducted a large-scale implementation of a leading collaboration tool at a Mid-Atlantic healthcare company with locations in multiple cities. Conducting live, in-person training for the entire company wasn't an option for many reasons, and we didn't like the idea of leveraging computer-based training. Therefore, we developed a hybrid approach that gave personized training to as many users as possible, and provided an online curriculum to help with the basics at go-live, as well as to provide a platform to enhance skills in the future.

To execute this approach, we created live, customized, and face-to-face training for select users – a combination of early adopters and power users who will be advocates and support those in the field. This train-the-trainer program was delivered in classrooms of 15-20 participants using PowerPoint, a live system, and hands-on exercises and activities in a sandbox environment (i.e., the tell, show, do approach). The training provided an overview of key activities that would be necessary to be operationally efficient at go-live without causing significant disruption. This training will cascade to employees face-to-face via the "trainers" and was also recorded for future use.

In addition, we built quick-reference guides for key activities to be used in the early days after implementation. We leveraged our partner Brainstorm and its subscription-based model for on-demand video vignettes that users can watch ondemand. As there are thousands of Brainstorm Office 365 videos available, we created a virtual playlist to aid users in efficiently finding relevant videos.

This approach was well received by our client. It allows different users to move at their desired pace, as well as provides access to content that is most relevant for their given roles. Finally, we regularly survey our training participants for feedback so that we can make the training more meaningful and effective.

Before you throw generic, one-size-fits-all training at your next project, think hard about the impact you want to have.

Secure Adoption for the Long Term

There's an adage that says, "No one likes change." I'd like to add to that with this: "Even change managers don't like change." As humans, we're naturally resistant to change. That's what makes the discipline of change management so hard! On paper, it's easy and arguably very straightforward. In reality, it's anything but either of those.

People are just naturally resistant to change. Even if you can get someone to change, getting that change to "stick" is much more difficult. People have a natural tendency to revert to old ways of working. In other words, just because you used the new tool or process when it was launched, over time, one is likely to go back to the old ways of doing things, even using old tools, if that remains a possibility.

Sustaining change is hard. Why? Because old tools are processes are comfortable. They may not be better, but they're easy for us. Comfort is king. Change, on the other hand, requires hard work.

We worked on a project with a non-profit healthcare provider. The company is global, and there were numerous content management tools in use at the company (Dropbox, Box, Google Docs, SharePoint On Premises, etc.). Since there was no common platform, people used what they wanted. While this approach worked for the individual, it caused all sorts of issues with collaboration, security, knowledge capital protection, and required significant costs to upkeep.

The client identified SharePoint Online (SPO) as the solution to fix all of these issues. It would allow everyone in the company access from anywhere at any time. Collaboration capabilities would be worlds ahead of where they had been previously. The company would own all of the knowledge capital, and thus it would not "walk out the door" when an employee left. And ever importantly, the single solution was much cheaper than paying for the mishmash of Dropbox, Box, Google Docs, and SPO.

However, admittedly, we initially did not create a very good Case for Change. We didn't train them well on how to use not only the content management aspects of SPO, but the platform's enhanced collaboration capabilities. We didn't even cut off funding to the legacy tools.

Can you guess what happened? When we flipped the switch to turn on SPO, very little happened. Most people stayed on their legacy tools, and the few who switched over had returned to their former ways of working within weeks of the launch. So, what did we learn? A lot!

1. The Case for Change – the why of the program – had to be stronger if we want sustained change. It had to speak to employees on an individual level. It couldn't just be about security and cost savings for the company, but it had to address the "What's in it for me?" from an employee perspective.
2. We had to revamp our communication strategy to leverage the case for change and also provide key logistical information.

That leads us to training. We had to get people to go back to training, and we had to get them to pay attention. The training had to be layered with the case for change, and all sorts of user benefits called out to keep their focus. Training had to be supplemented by on-demand, self-help tools to allow people to both recall training concepts, as well as learn advanced functionality once the basics became routine.

Finally, and with a huge eye towards sustainment, we opened our weekly power user sessions to the general population for what in essence became post-go-live training. We reinforced key concepts while opening the floor for folks to ask “how to” questions. And guess what happened this time? It worked!

Most of the time, people focus on go-live and implementation-related events and spend only a fraction of time, if any, thinking about how to sustain change. However, when you consider that three-quarters of your return on investment

(ROI) often comes from users actually using the system the way you intended, shouldn’t you think of long-term sustainment (Prosci, Best Practices in Change Management 2016)? After all, ROI is not a measure at go-live, but rather a measure over time.

Isn’t it worth making sure you’re sustaining the change? Isn’t it worth measuring and asking about its success? There are plenty of tactics to employ to make sure you’re getting your users to the future-state and keeping them there. In the end, your ROI will be there and the leadership team, and shareholders, will thank you.

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David has more than 20 years of management consulting experience, specializing in the change management discipline. David brings his unique insight to the people aspects of any change, from technology implementations to broader strategic organizational imperatives.

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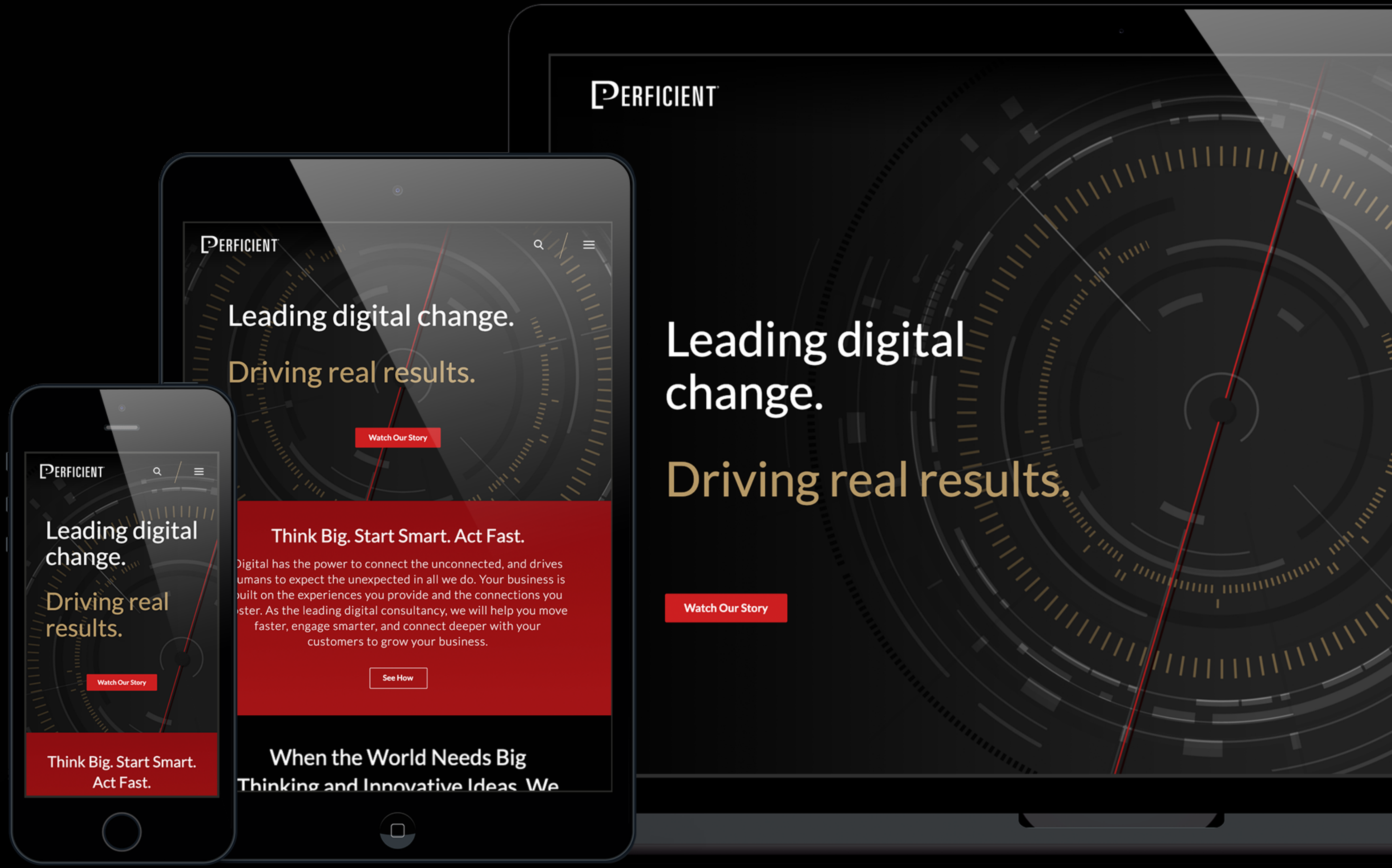

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