

Leading Change: A Model by John Kotter

By Kenneth H. Rose, PMP

Change is a matter of central concern to project managers. In their book, *Project Manager's Portable Handbook*, David I. Cleland and Lewis R. Ireland state, "Projects are the principal means by which the organization deals with change." While projects may be the mechanism for change, the actual how-to steps of implementing change are often a frustrating, unsolved mystery.

John Kotter, the Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership at the Harvard Business School, has developed a model for leading change that offers a valuable tool to project management professionals. His model is a result of many years of experience in consulting with hundreds of organizations. He observed the myriad difficulties associated with change efforts, distilled the common themes and turned them around into a prescriptive framework.

Change in History

In 513 B.C., Heraclitus of Greece observed "There is nothing permanent except change." And in the 16th century, Niccolo Machiavelli stated in his political treatise, *The Prince*, "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things."

The challenge today is that change is not an "engineering" problem. Change involves people, and can call up emotions, uncertainties and inconsistencies. Therefore, simply managing change is insufficient. Successful change requires leadership. The old saying, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink" provides good advice, though slightly off the mark. It might be better stated, "You can manage a horse to water, but you must lead it to drink." Getting the horse to the water is a control issue that can be managed. Getting the horse to drink is a behavior issue that demands leadership.

The Steps to Change

When dealing with people and change, American social psychologist Kurt Lewin observed during the 1940s that a successful change includes three progressive steps:

1. Unfreezing the present level of performance
2. Moving to a new level
3. Freezing group life at the new level

Lewin also stated, "To break open the shell of complacency and self-righteousness it is sometimes necessary to bring about deliberately an emotional stir-up." Kotter's model suggests a similar three-part framework:

1. Defrost the status quo
2. Take actions that bring about change
3. Anchor the changes in the corporate culture

Establish a Sense of Urgency

The first element, "defrost the status quo," comprises four essential steps. First,

leaders must establish a sense of urgency. People must have a reason, and a really good one at that, for doing something different. Leaders should examine market or competitive realities and identify an urgent need in terms of a crisis, potential crisis or great opportunity.

This is not a sky-is-falling scare tactic. It is a necessary step to jolt people out of complacency — to make them believe that the current situation is more dangerous than leaping into the unknown. This is a critical first step. In Kotter's experience, 50 percent of change efforts failed right here. His studies further suggest that about 75 percent of the work force must accept the urgency if the overall effort is to succeed.

Elicit Executive and Peer Sponsorship

The second step is to form a guiding coalition. Change cannot be directed through the existing hierarchy. It must be nurtured and supported by a dedicated group of influential leaders throughout the organization. The group may be small or large. It will probably not include the complete corporate leadership because of some reluctance to buy it. But it must be influential in order to lead the change.

Without sufficient influence and power, the group will lead only apparent change. Over time, opposition forces will gain strength and snuff out the effort.

Create a Vision for Change

Third, leaders must create a vision. Once people accept the urgency, they want to know where they are going — they want a clear direction to a better future. Without a vision, the change effort can dissolve into a series of incompatible projects that start to look like change for change's sake.

Failed change efforts are often littered with plans and directives, but no codifying vision. The vision must be clear and concise. It's not much good if it makes great copy, but nobody can understand it. Kotter suggests that leaders should be able to communicate the vision in five minutes and elicit understanding and interest. If not, they should rework the vision. *Communicate Vision to Implement Change*

The fourth step, alluded to above, is to communicate the vision. The best vision in the world has no value if it's a big secret. Communication is more than a corporate announcement or a notice posted on the bulletin board. Leaders must communicate the vision through their actions.

All the typical communication media play a part. But leaders must make opportunities to communicate the vision in day-to-day activities. For example, when presenting an award, a leader should take a moment to explain how the employee's performance fits into the vision and how the performance is a contribution to something much larger than the act being rewarded. More important, the day-to-day actions of leaders must reflect the vision. Nothing will kill a change effort quicker than leaders saying one thing and doing another.

Kotter cautions that a results-oriented leader may want to skip one or more of these first four steps in order to get right to the action. Doing so imperils, perhaps even condemns, the change effort. Without the solid foundation established by all of these steps, any change action is unlikely to take hold and survive for the long term.

Empower Employees to Implement Change

The second element of the model includes three steps. This is the action element, and the first step is to empower others to act on the vision. Leaders must clear the way for employees to develop new ideas and approaches without being stymied by the old ways.

The guiding coalition must remove obstacles that may be entrenched in organization processes, or exist only in the minds of employees. Both can be showstoppers. Kotter warns that worst of all can be the bosses who will not change and who make demands contrary to the vision. Such people should be given the opportunity to get on board and embrace the vision. Those who will not...well, a corporate turn-around expert once observed, "Sometimes you gotta change the people, or you gotta change the people."

Establish Short-term Goals

The second action step is to plan for and create short-term wins. People will not follow a vision forever. Employees must see results within 12 to 24 months or they will give up or perhaps even join the naysayers. Short-term wins validate the effort and maintain the level of urgency. Leaders may have to look for things that disclose unambiguous benefits of the change effort. Rewarding people responsible for the benefits is essential.

Encourage Additional Changes

The third step arises from the second: consolidate improvements and produce still more change. Short-term wins can be seductive. It can be easy to declare the battle won based on early benefits. Doing so can be fatal. Premature victory celebrations can quash momentum and allow the forces of tradition to regain their hold.

Short-term wins must be stepping-stones to greater opportunities and bigger wins, all consistent with the vision driving the overall effort.

Kotter adds another word of caution that action alone is not enough. Any change, even that undertaken with great effort over an extended time, will wither unless it is reinforced within the organization. Leaders must not stop here; they must follow through with the next element.

Reinforce Changes Made as Permanent

The third element is a single step. Having made effective changes, leaders must now make the changes permanent. The forces of recidivism are still alive and well. Leaders must connect new behavior with corporate success, showing that the new ways are here to stay.

Just as important, new leaders in the organization must espouse the new approaches. All that was accomplished can be undone by a change in leadership that bends back to the old ways.

Heraclitus, Machiavelli and many others all had it right. Change is omnipresent, uncertain and difficult. But it is not impossible. Kotter's model for leading change provides a framework that may be applied in any organization at any level. It is a powerful tool for project managers who must lead their organizations into a better future.

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