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# Back to the future: revisiting Kotter's 1996 change model

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to gather current (2011) arguments and counterarguments in support of the classic change management model proposed by John P. Kotter in his 1996 book *Leading Change*. His work was based on his personal business and research experience, and did not reference any outside sources that has questioned its value. A current perspective on a limited tested model aims to be a focus of this paper.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The literature on change management was reviewed for each of the eight steps defined in Kotter's model, to review how much support each of these steps had, individually and collectively, in 15 years of literature.

**Findings** – The review found support for most of the steps, although no formal studies were found covering the entire spectrum and structure of the model. Kotter's change management model appears to derive its popularity more from its direct and usable format than from any scientific consensus on the results. However the model has several limitations, that are identified, impacting upon its universal acceptance and popularity.

**Research limitations/implications** – Further studies should examine the validity of Kotter's model as a whole. More importantly, change management research should form a greater link with stakeholders in order to translate current research into a format usable by practitioners.

**Practical implications** – No evidence was found against Kotter's change management model and it remains a recommendable reference. This paper attempts to "test" the "how-to-do-change management" with empirical and practitioner literature that was not evident in the original text. The model would be most useful as an implementation planning tool, but complementary tools should also be used during the implementation process to adapt to contextual factors or obstacles.

**Originality/value** – Based upon a thorough review, this is the first formal review of Kotter's change management model, 15 years after its introduction.

**Keywords** Change management, Organizational change, Corporate strategy, Empowerment, Engagement, Vision, Management

**Paper type** Conceptual paper



## Introduction

Businesses are constantly required to adapt to a changing environment in order to maintain their position in the market and even more so if they are to truly grow (Biedenbacha and Soumlerholma, 2008). Changes are an inevitable part of the current market. The current rate of technological advancement and growing global competition lets us foresee a continuing need for change in the future (Armenakis and Harris, 2009). Many authors argue that change never starts because it never stops (Weick and Quinn, 1999). Many organizations, in an attempt to adapt to the constant

evolutions of their environment, are adopting cultures of a learning or agile organization. Whether or not an organization tries to constantly evolve, successfully implementing changes can be a major determinant of its short- and long-term success. Considering that “research suggests that failed organizational change initiatives range from one-third to as high as 80% of attempted change efforts” (Fisher, 1994; Beer and Nohria, 2000; Higgs and Rowland, 2000; Hirschhorn, 2002; Knodel, 2004; Sirkin *et al.*, 2005; Kotter, 2008; Meaney and Pung, 2008; Whelan-Berry and Somerville, 2010), considerable research efforts have been deployed to fill that knowledge gap and support managers in the field of change management.

The paper looks at one of the eminent change management models, specifically, John P. Kotter's. His model was first published in a 1995 article in the *Harvard Business Review*. The following year, it was published with greater detail in classic the book titled *Leading Change*. Both Kotter's (1995) article and 1996 book were based on his personal business and research experience, and did not reference any outside sources. This was not typical of an academic undertaking and led to the need to present this paper to test it over 15 years.

Although Kotter's model of change management lacks rigorous fundamentals, it became an instantaneous success at the time it was advocated and it remains a key reference in the field of change management. In 1997, *Leading Change* (Kotter, 1996) became a business bestseller. It subsequently became the best-selling book ever of its kind. Hundreds of researchers refer to one or other of Kotter's publications on change management. This book has been cited over 4,000 times in Google Scholar. The model is also presented to this day in academic textbooks such as Langton *et al.* (2010). The general lack of empirical fundamentals to most change management theory (Todnem, 2005) probably is not alien to this success. “Theories and approaches to change management currently available to academics and practitioners are often contradictory, mostly lacking empirical evidence and supported by unchallenged hypotheses concerning the nature of contemporary organizational change management” (Todnem, 2005). The success of the theory and at the same time the lack of research and rigorous investigation are quite counterintuitive in the world of empirical research that has been the underpinning of accepted OB and OD references and classics. However, the model has several limitations that are identified impacting upon its universal acceptance and popularity that will be explored later in this paper.

One of the most interesting aspects of the 1996 classic book is that there are neither footnotes nor references. A bibliography cannot be found yet this work has had tremendous academic as well as practical success. This paper traces the evolution of the literature and thinking originally selected by Kotter to the formulation of the eight step model. Finally it explores the current validation of the model by an updated 2011 literature search to compare/contrast the 1996 foundation. This paper attempts to “test” the “how-to-do-change management” with empirical and practitioner literature that was not evident in the original text 15 years ago.

This paper will present a short review of articles related to each of the eight components of Kotter's model in the attempt to highlight the value of each. According to Kotter – the eight steps to transforming your organization are as follows (Kotter, 1996; Smith, 2005):

- (1) establish a sense of urgency about the need to achieve change – people will not change if they cannot see the need to do so;

- (2) create a guiding coalition – assemble a group with power energy and influence in the organization to lead the change;
- (3) develop a vision and strategy – create a vision of what the change is about, tell people why the change is needed and how it will be achieved;
- (4) communicate the change vision – tell people, in every possible way and at every opportunity, about the why, what and how of the changes;
- (5) empower broad-based action – involve people in the change effort, get people to think about the changes and how to achieve them rather than thinking about why they do not like the changes and how to stop them;
- (6) generate short-term wins – seeing the changes happening and working and recognizing the work being done by people towards achieving the change is critical;
- (7) consolidate gains and produce more change – create momentum for change by building on successes in the change, invigorate people through the changes, develop people as change agents; and
- (8) anchor new approaches in the corporate culture – this is critical to long-term success and institutionalizing the changes. Failure to do so may mean that changes achieved through hard work and effort slip away with people's tendency to revert to the old and comfortable ways of doing things.

The following sections critically discuss each of the eight steps.

*Step 1: establish a sense of urgency*

According to Kotter (1995), successful change efforts must begin with individuals and groups evaluating a company's "competitive situation, market position, technological trends and financial performance". Bold or risky actions normally associated with good leadership are generally required for creating a strong sense of urgency (Kotter, 1995, p. 43). Kotter (1995) further states that leaders must find ways to communicate this information "broadly and dramatically". He claims that the first step is essential as the start of organizational changes require aggressive cooperation of many individuals. This need for change must be understood; otherwise, the change agents will not have enough "power and credibility to initiate the required change program" (Kotter, 1997). Kotter (1996, p. 44) also recommends the use of consultants as a tactic for creating a sense of urgency and challenge the status quo. Armenakis *et al.* (1993) strengthen Kotter's statement by suggesting the recruitment of sources outside the organization, as they can reinforce the change agent's message.

A diagnostic report compiled by a consulting firm, for instance, can be utilized as a tool to add credibility to the need for change message. A study by Gist *et al.* (1989) supports the assertion that a message generated by more than one source, particularly if external to the organization, is given a greater air of believability and confirmation. The news media, for example, is also an external source that can be instrumental in creating a sense of urgency and as a result, a readiness for change (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993). Radio and television broadcasts, magazines, and newspapers can all be sources of information affecting employee knowledge and since such sources tend to have an air of objectivity, they are often persuasive in the creation of readiness for change (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993). However, this information is not easily managed by the

change agent. Belasco (1990) speaks of the change agent as having the individual inertia to accomplish goals.

Five key change sentiments were proposed by Armenakis *et al.* (1999). The authors argued that the sentiments were essential to “encourage change readiness, adoption and institutionalization”. Discrepancy, one of the five sentiments used to explain the reactions of the change recipients, was deemed important in 38 per cent of studies as identified by Armenakis *et al.* (1999). It is the term used when describing “a deviation from acceptable performance” and “captures the sentiment that a need for change does in fact exist” (Armenakis *et al.*, 1999). The authors referred to discrepancy as the “burning platform” which Kotter (1995) claims establishes a sense of urgency for change, and in turn motivates strategic change (Armenakis *et al.*, 1999). Numerous studies (Lewin, 1946; Coch and French, 1948; Bandura, 1986; Pettigrew, 1987; Nadler and Tushman, 1989) have demonstrated the need for change recipients to believe a discrepancy exists.

Different forms of persuasive communication, a source of information regarding discrepancy, send “symbolic information” regarding a number of aspects of the change effort: commitment to the change effort, its prioritization, and urgency for the change effort (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993). Armenakis *et al.* (1993) cite the example of a CEO who travels to various corporate locations in order to discuss the need for change. This type of oral persuasive communication not only allows the message itself to be communicated, but also, the importance of the issues to be symbolically magnified by the fact that time, effort, and resources are utilized to communicate the changes directly. Additionally, frequency of interaction regarding change is expected to create momentum. Ginsberg and Venkatraman (1995), and Kotter (1995) state that “the more the change is a topic of conversation, the greater its implied urgency”. Jansen (2004) deduces that apathy is conveyed if there is little interaction regarding the change, thus deeming it unimportant. Discussions about the change, whether negative or positive, indicate that the change is progressing and employees are feeling the need to rationalize of events (Jansen, 2004). As a result, energy for change is created by the implication of change.

Buchanan *et al.* (2005) state that “the timing, sequencing and pacing of events can also be fateful for sustainability”, thus supporting Kotter’s first step. They also claim that delayed change may not deliver benefits, whereas change that is rushed “may not allow time to adapt, and create initiative fatigue, encouraging decay”.

Finally, Kobi (1996) presented a few aspects in order to support the need for urgency of change: showing the attractiveness of the change, confronting employees with clear expectations, showing that it can be done and creating a positive attitude to the change. In order for these aspects to be adequately supported, a “guiding coalition” will be created to lead the changes. In essence, Step 1 still appears to be significant in 2011 as it was in 1996.

### *Step 2: create a guiding coalition*

According to Kotter (1996, p. 52), no one person is capable of single-handedly leading and managing the change process in an organization and putting together the right “guiding coalition” of people to lead a change initiative is critical to its success. This guiding coalition should be made up of people with the following characteristics (Kotter, 1996, p. 53):

- position power: enough key players on board so that those left out cannot block progress;

- expertise: all relevant points of view should be represented so that informed intelligent decisions can be made;
- credibility: the group should be seen and respected by those in the firm so that the group's pronouncements will be taken seriously by other employees; and
- leadership: the group should have enough proven leaders to be able to drive the change process.

Each of these characteristics has some support in organizational change literature. Lines (2007) explored the relationship between two of these characteristics (amounts of expert power and position power) at a large telecommunications firm and their influence in implementing organizational change. Lines (2007) concluded that change agents with a high amount of position power are more successful at implementing change than change agents with low amounts of position power but high expertise; however, both have positive relationships to implementation success of organizational change. Kotter's change leading coalition requires people with position power so that the change initiatives cannot be blocked; however, Kotter does not advocate a monarchical attitude in the change leader (Kotter, 1996, p. 53). In fact, as the case study on organizational change at Honeywell Inc concludes, if the managerial attitude remains that of "command and control" and this behaviour does not change, transformation will most likely fail (Paper *et al.*, 2001). Success of the change initiative depends on facilitative management and visible and continuous support from the top.

A guiding coalition with good managers and poor leaders will not succeed (Kotter, 1996, p. 58). Good managers keep the change management process under control while good leaders create the vision to drive the change (Kotter, 1996, pp. 57-9). This is further supported by Caldwell (2003) in his analysis of change leaders and change managers. Caldwell (2003) and a panel of industry leaders analysed the key attributes for each of these roles and concluded that "change leaders are those executives or senior managers at the very top of the organization who envision, initiate or sponsor strategic change of a far-reaching or transformational nature. In contrast, change managers are those middle level managers and functional specialists who carry forward and build support for change within business units and key functions".

In a review of organizational change in three specific case studies (Cool aid case, Municipality of Saanich, First nations Mountain Pine Beetle initiative), Cunningham and Kempling (2009) concluded that the cases illustrate the importance of a guiding coalition in assisting the change process. Although the other principles might also be useful in the change effort, progress would not have been made without the guiding coalition. Change initiatives supported by the leader have a greater likelihood of gaining support from work-group members, and thus make them easier to implement (Self *et al.*, 2007).

There is some literature that casts doubt on the importance of Kotter's guiding coalition. In his analysis of the organizational change process at the University of Newcastle, Sidorko (2008) credits Kotter's model for the successful outcome of the change process. He argues, however, that Kotter makes no concessions to the fact that his model is sequentially ordered and that all steps must be followed (Kotter, 1996, p. 23). Sidorko's (2008) analysis revealed the need for building multiple guiding coalitions on multiple occasions to deal with different aspects of the change process, something that Kotter does not acknowledge. Another paper that set out to analyse Kotter's model in a university setting focused on a multi-year effort to change the

organizational culture at an information services unit at the University of Memphis (Penrod and Harbor, 1998). In this paper the authors suggest that while a guiding coalition has its advantages, change will not come unless frontline staff engages in adaptive behaviour. Note that Kotter (1996) does ask for the right makeup of the guiding coalition so it could be argued that the reason that the guiding coalition does not achieve its desired purpose at these universities is that the correct people were not chosen for the coalition.

Step 2 still appears to be as significant in 2011 as it was in 1996 but some critics have illuminated unique issues today. The initial task of the guiding coalition is to formulate a vision for the change effort and to ensure that it is communicated throughout the organization (Kotter, 1996). This is Step 3 of Kotter's model which we explore next.

### *Step 3: develop a vision and strategy*

The first task of the guiding coalition from Kotter's Step 2 is to formulate a "clear and sensible vision" for the transformation effort (Kotter, 1996, p. 70). Without such a vision, the change objectives can easily dissolve into a list of confusing and incompatible projects that can take the organization in the wrong direction or nowhere at all (Kotter, 1996, p. 70).

The importance of a well-defined vision for the change process is well documented in research literature. A key lesson from the case study on the human resource systems at the US Environmental Protection Agency found that a shared vision of the project's outcome is essential (Wright and Thompson, 1997). Whelan-Berry and Somerville (2010) agree and define the change vision as a key part of change process. According to Kotter (1996, pp. 68-9), an effective vision is essential in breaking the status quo and looking beyond the immediate goals of the organization. A study at Countrywide Financial Corporation (Flamholtz and Kurland, 2006) revealed that vision and strategic planning was necessary to extend management's thinking beyond incremental performance improvement goals and to address longer-term issues and changing competitive dynamics.

A clearly defined vision is easier for employees to understand and to act on, even if the first steps required are painful (Kotter, 1996, pp. 67-84). Washington and Hacker (2005) found that managers who understand the change effort are more likely to be excited about the change and less likely to think that the change effort would fail. Staniforth's (1996) study of organizational change at AB Ltd further reinforced the need for the vision to be "clear, consistent and well articulated" so that managers can reflect on the issues at stake in a "calm, rational and thoughtful way". A significant relationship exists between the perception of planned organizational change and the response to change along cognitive, emotional, and intentional dimensions (Szabla, 2007). The change vision should therefore be desirable, as Kotter (1996, pp. 67-84) suggests, so that it appeals to the long-term interest of employees, customers, shareholders, and others who have a stake in the enterprise.

Though the research literature broadly accepts the importance of a clear vision on the change management effort in an organization, some argue that the vision itself is much less important than the implementation of that vision. In their survey of upper- and middle-level managers of a Fortune 500 US manufacturer, Cole *et al.* (2006) found vision clarity to be less important than the actual execution of the change coupled with the appropriateness of the change. Similarly a case study at Honeywell found that while "people need a systematic methodology to map processes", "execution is the real difference between success and failure" (Paper *et al.*, 2001). Step 3 still

appears to be as significant in 2011 as it was in 1996 and even more so per some case studies presented.

*Step 4: communicate the change vision*

Communication is a critical element of the organizational change process as it can reduce uncertainty (Bordia *et al.*, 2004), decrease ambiguity and can even affect the type of positive or negative responses to organizational change (Nelissen and van Selm, 2008). Uncertainty is defined by Salem and Williams (1984), as an inability to describe, predict, or explain. Complaints of inadequate information are common in organizations (Daniels and Spiker, 1983). A study conducted by Nelissen and van Selm, (2008) served to explore the correlation between responses of survivors of an organizational restructuring and downsizing and the role of management communication. Their studies found that the most significant correlations were between employee satisfaction and management communication. It was determined that employees who are satisfied with the management communication saw more personal opportunities and had a positive state of mind on the organizational change, lending support to Kotter's fourth step (Nelissen and van Selm, 2008). Furthermore, these employees felt confident in the successful enrolment of the change (Nelissen and van Selm, 2008). Employees who felt the survival of the company depends on the organizational change showed positive responses regarding the high quality of management communication (Nelissen and van Selm, 2008).

Another study conducted by Frahm and Brown (2007) investigated whether communication during organizational change was linked to employees' receptivity to change. The researchers found that weekly team meetings allowed employees to be trusting and open (Frahm and Brown, 2007). They were able to discuss the changes as well as their subsequent implications with the manager. The study results showed that frustrated employees typically felt this way due to a lack of involvement in the change process and due to a lack of information regarding the changes. However, much like the Nelissen and van Selm, (2008) study, there were sub-groups of employees who had a positive outlook about the changes. Such employees viewed the necessary changes as an "opportunity for personal gain" and perceived change as "a welcome response to perceived organizational problems carried over from the past". It was determined that these were also participants who were more involved in the change process compared to others. Therefore, like the participants in the Smith *et al.* (1995) research, employees with a higher level of participation and greater dialogue responded more positively to change.

Klein (1996) suggests a number of effective communication strategies based on empirical principles found in the literature in order to apply them to various stages of organizational change. These strategies, as listed, strongly support Kotter's overall communication requirement:

- People's memory can be increased by diffusion and repetition of the message through several media, leading to message retention (Bachrach and Aiken, 1977; Daft and Lengel, 1984; Dansereau and Markham, 1987). This point supports Kotter's suggestion to ensure that the change message and vision is repeatable as "ideas sink in deeply only after they have been heard many times" (Kotter, 1996, p. 90).
- Kotter maintains that "two-way communication is always more powerful than one-way communication" (Kotter, 1996, p. 90). This is confirmed by D'Aprix

(1982) and Jablin (1979, 1982), who demonstrated that face-to-face communication taken by itself is the medium with the greatest impact. The interactive potential of face-to-face communications is in fact what works, concluded Gioia and Sims (1986). The two-way process allows involvement, irons out ambiguities, and increases the chances of the communicators connecting adequately (Klein, 1996). According to O'Connor, 1990, face-to-face communication is "the best way that feedback can be used to correct deficiencies immediately in the communication process". O'Connor's finding supports Kotter's following statement: "unaddressed inconsistencies undermine the credibility of all communication". Additionally, face-to-face communication in a group context can be key for carrying out successful change. Weick (1987) states that it allows for opportunities to be seen from different perspectives and interpretations, which can, in turn, be generated from explanations and clarifications related to variations of understanding.

- Employees expect to hear important, officially sanctioned information from their immediate supervisor or boss, and therefore, this is the most effective source as they are also presumed to be well informed (Klein, 1996). These supervisors can subsequently keep supervisees aware of the changes (Higginson and Waxler, 1989; Smeltzer and Fann, 1989).

Roberto and Levesque (2005) studied six strategic initiatives undertaken over the course of several years at Apparelizm Corps. One of the four critical processes outlined in their study clearly support Kotter's view pertaining to "vivid" communication: "a verbal picture is worth a thousand words – use metaphor, analogy and example". By engaging in storytelling and symbolic action, the managers at Apparelizm created a "compelling account of the need for the initiative". They were also able to explain the specific changes that would be made (Roberto and Levesque, 2005). The use of metaphors served a few purposes; relaying of the details of the programme and creating excitement and support for the programme. The core team used an auto racing metaphor. It compared a NASCAR race crew to the store staff. A video was even created in order to solidify the metaphor, thereby employing Kotter's recommendation to use many forums to relay the message (Kotter, 1996, p. 90). Roberto and Levesque (2005) concluded that the metaphor was in fact effective. Employees understood the link between the need to be "fast, responsive and highly knowledgeable", much like a NASCAR team. They also understood the importance of communication and teamwork within a NASCAR team, and were then able to make the correlation with their role in the initiative. Links were drawn carefully in order for the connection to be easily made by the employees (Tsoukas, 1991). Step 4 still appears to be significant in 2011 as it was in 1996.

#### *Step 5: empower broad-based action*

Employees are emboldened to try new ideas and approaches, often just simply by the successful communication of the vision across the organization (Kotter, 1995). However, communication is never sufficient by itself and employees often need help in getting rid of obstacles to the change vision (Kotter, 1995). Typically, empowering employees involves addressing four major obstacles: structures, skills, systems, and supervisors (Kotter, 1996, p. 102). An analysis of empowerment in frontline employees at 16 luxury hotels in seven European countries revealed that structure, supervisor attitudes, and training all play a role in employee empowerment (Klidas *et al.*, 2007).

Obstacles created by supervisors and the hierarchical structure of organizations were also acknowledged by the organizational consultants at Burswood Resort Hotel in Western Australia who found that empowered actions and independent thinking were often were frowned upon by supervisors who were more used to the existing structured hierarchy (Cacioppe, 1998).

Kotter (1996, pp. 107-9) stresses the pivotal role of training in the empowerment process and he has broad empirical support for this assertion. Denton (1994) has described how Ford and its union, the United Auto Workers, jointly created an effective training programme that emphasized changing Ford's corporate culture. He suggested that training was successful because it helped build a sense of responsibility and empowerment in the employees (Denton, 1994). Likewise, a study on the influences of communication and training on third-party logistics providers found communication, training, and coaching to be the mechanisms through which companies develop empowered employees (Ellinger *et al.*, 2010). Similar results have also been reported by Kappelman and Richards (1996).

There is wide support for employee empowerment in change literature. A case study on organizational change at Honeywell Inc found that creating team ownership and a bottom-up or empowered employee base is important to help an organization transform successfully (Paper *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, results from research at a large telecommunication company have provided support for a positive relationship between participation and the successful implementation of strategic change (Lines, 2007). In his PhD dissertation on understanding the approach of bringing the Toyota Production System's lean concepts to a traditional operational model, Pinheiro (2010) concluded that "organizational change cannot occur without a paradigm shift in the culture of the organization and the empowerment of workers at the functional frontline level". Often, however, even giving employees a small empowering opportunity can have a profound effect on employee attitudes as this can provide them with some sense of control over the change process and help move the change effort along (Kappelman *et al.*, 1993). In essence, Step 5 still appears to be significant in 2011 as it was in 1996.

#### *Step 6: generate short-term wins*

Seeing the changes happening and working and recognizing the work being done by people towards achieving the longer-term goals is critical in Kotter's (1995) view.

The former President of Lever Brothers' Foods Division in the USA, Willie Pietersen, says that large-scale change can be a long, formidable undertaking, so it is important to create short-term wins (Pietersen, 2002). A number of early victories, he insists, even if they are small, create self-confidence and the belief that bigger successes are possible and this builds up the momentum towards the longer-term goals (Pietersen, 2002). Rewarding opportunities and celebrating small wins also provide employees and management reassurance that their efforts are on the right track (Reichers *et al.*, 1997; Marks, 2007). Note, however, that while focusing solely on short-term gains may increase the frequency of organizational change initiatives, finding the right balance between the short-term gains and the long-term effects of change on employee perception can become a complex issue for organizational leaders (Boga and Ensari, 2009).

Short-term wins demonstrate that the change effort is paying off (Kotter, 1996, pp. 122-4). Such wins help the guiding coalition test the vision against real conditions and make adjustments (Kotter, 1996, pp. 122-4). Ford *et al.* (2008) found this "proof" to be critical for the change management effort and stated that managers seeking to

implement change should find evidence that the change has achieved the desired results (Ford *et al.*, 2008). Short-term wins also help remove obstacles to change by reinforcing the change vision in the minds of employees (Drtina *et al.*, 1996). Short-term wins also provide opportunities to celebrate and reward those working for change (Kotter, 1996, pp. 122-4). Throughout the transformation process, the leader should set high-performance expectations and reward behaviours that are directed toward fulfillment of the vision. It is also important that the leader models the behaviours that are required to institutionalize the change and sets the standards for the rest of the organization to emulate (Eisenbach *et al.*, 1999). Step 6 appears to be significant in 2011 as it was in 1996.

*Step 7: consolidate gains and produce more change*

Kotter states that it may be tempting for managers to declare victory after the first signs of performance improvement are visible. However, as new processes can regress, it's crucial for leaders to use these short-term gains in order to tackle other issues, such as systems and structures that are not in line with the recently implemented changes (Kotter, 1995). Pfeifer *et al.* (2005) argue that verifying the credibility of vision and strategy through the use of measurable results is the main goal for gathering first successes. Management will require these first successes to plan for the further change process, and be able to partially justify the short-term costs incurred through change (Pfeifer *et al.*, 2005). This is further supported by Kotter, as he maintains that leaders will need to prove the "new way is working" (Kotter, 1995). First successes can also serve to "neutralize cynics and self-centered opponents" (Kotter, 1997). Company P3 GmbH, for example, decided to enter into the telecommunications advisory business and a first success was achieved through the production of the study results which were published in major German newspapers (Pfeifer *et al.*, 2005). These results showed P3 GmbH's competence and as a result, several projects took shape and market participants were interested. The change led to the creation of the company P3 Solution GmbH, devoted to the telecommunications market (Pfeifer *et al.*, 2005).

On a different topic, gambling, sporting events, and political campaigns all have a particular energy pattern in common termed momentum (Jansen, 2004). Jansen (2004) qualifies momentum as being "recognizable" and "imputed by participants and observers". We can easily relate momentum to the process of organizational change as the energy and enthusiasm required to carry out the change is crucial (Coleman and White, 1998; Jick, 1995). As there are few studies dedicated to understanding momentum in the context of organizational change, there were two goals driving the Jansen study. One of the goals was to examine the events and activities creating initial momentum and causing fluctuations over time through the use of quantitative and qualitative analyses during the first few months of an organizational culture change. The path of change and its success or failure can be predicted by understanding these events or activities that contribute to momentum fluctuations in order to improve the change management process as well as its impact on the company (Jansen, 2004). Kotter (1995), Linstead and Chan (1994) both state that "change-based momentum incorporates the prescriptions of transformational change agents, where momentum is described as a dynamic force whose presence or absence determines the ultimate success of a transformation". For example, Elmes and Wynkoop (1990) argue that there must be sufficient change-based momentum or initial energy in order to allow organizational transformation to occur. Furthermore, change-based momentum can be initially created by "attaining a critical mass of accumulating support"

(Jansen, 2004). Therefore, a positive relationship between employee commitment to change and change-based momentum must exist. Jansen (2004) also states that employees become part of the accumulating support the change is collecting as individuals choose to commit to the change process, thereby increasing their perception of the change-based momentum. Committed employees are subsequently less resistant and less likely to want to maintain the status quo (Jansen, 2004). On the other hand, uncommitted employees or those who have lost their commitment over time are more likely to resist the change-based path (Hambrick *et al.*, 1993). As a result, this can lead to a decrease in perception of change-based momentum. However, when “victory is declared too soon” (Kotter, 1996, p. 66) or when management celebrate “the first clear performance improvement”, this can kill momentum. According to Kotter (1996, p. 66) momentum is also lost when, “the urgency level is not intense enough, the guiding coalition is not powerful enough, and the vision is not clear enough”.

Kerber and Buono (2005) suggests that “changes associated with continuous improvement methods” (Choi, 1995) and “transformative, breakthrough changes” (Kerber, 2001) can be made by “encouraging people to initiate and experiment with changing”. Such actions can empower employees to lead and this is necessary for the production of additional change (Kotter, 1996). In essence, Step 7 still appears to be significant in 2011 as it was in 1996.

#### *Step 8: anchor new approaches in the corporate culture*

Kotter (1995) believes that new behaviours are subject to degradation if they are not rooted in social norms and shared values once the pressure for change is alleviated. He cites two factors that are critical to the institutionalization of change in corporate culture:

- (1) showing employees “how the new approaches, behaviours and attitudes have helped improve performance” (Kotter, 1996, p. 67); and
- (2) ensuring that “the next generation of management personifies the new approach” (Kotter, 1996, p. 67).

Reisner (2002) examined the US Postal Service which, during the 1990s, “transformed itself from the butt of sitcom jokes into a profitable and efficient enterprise” (Buchanan *et al.*, 2005). However, the change was not sustained going into 2001 and analyses determined that morale and performance were low, and losses were predicted (Reisner, 2002). It was observed that there were three “momentum busters”: “the indifference of senior managers, who regarded some aspects of strategy as a ‘distraction’; resistance from trade unions, whose role and voice had been marginalized; inability to steer funding through a budget process which favoured traditional initiatives over innovations” (Reisner, 2002; Buchanan *et al.*, 2005). Senge *et al.* (1999) argued that to sustain any profound change, a “fundamental shift in thinking” was required. However, an understanding of the forces and challenges that impede the growth and change processes must be present in order to deal with such challenges (Senge *et al.*, 1999). Jacobs (2002) defines institutionalization as change that has relative endurance and staying power over a length of time or that “has become part of the ongoing, everyday activities of the organization”. From this, we can determine that the US Postal Service must not have undergone a fundamental shift in thinking as the changes were not sustained.

According to Massey and Williams (2006) a support structure for change agents is required in order for change to be sustained. This structure should offer mentoring, training, and shadowing opportunities. Different forms of communication and recognition of change initiatives should be used: newsletters, seminars, informal meetings, web sites, conferences/seminars, and visual display/storyboards of projects and progress (Massey and Williams, 2006). Buchanan *et al.* (2005) mention that institutionalization processes include training to establish competence and commitment, meeting reward expectations, the further spread of new ideas and monitoring, and control processes. These steps and aforementioned studies allow the solidification of the change in the corporate culture of a company, lending support to Kotter's final step. Therefore, Step 8 still appears to be significant in 2011 as it was in 1996. The eight-step model has significant contributions to organizational behaviour and development but there are issues that impact upon its universal acceptance that will be covered next.

### **Limitations of Kotter's eight-step model**

Kotter's eight-step model was fully elaborated to address "fundamental changes in how the business is conducted in order to help cope with a new, more challenging market environment" (Kotter, 1995). This statement implicitly states a framework in which the model is applicable; therefore it is not expected to be applicable to all types of changes. Following are a few examples where the model might not be applicable without modifications.

#### *A rigid approach*

Kotter argues that the eight steps should be followed in sequence and that extended overlapping of the steps will compromise success, implying that steps are requisite of one another. Therefore, not implementing the first step will make it difficult or impossible to implement the subsequent steps. Burnes (1996) argues that such a prescriptive approach does not correlate well with studies that suggest that organizations prefer to use approaches to change that stems from their culture and thus cannot easily be amended or replaced (Cummings and Huse, 1989; Schein, 1985; Burnes and James, 1995). "Indeed, this may well give a clue as to why so many change projects are said to fail owing to the apparent inability of managers to follow the prescriptions for successful change laid down in the literature (Schein, 1985; Juran, 1988; Kearney, 1989; Kotter, 1995; Zairi *et al.*, 1994)" (Burnes, 1996). A plausible explanation is that, where such prescriptions run counter to the organization's culture, they will be either ignored or be ineffective (Burnes, 1996).

#### *Some steps are not relevant in some contexts*

Some transformations do not require nor are able to go through certain steps. A simple example is the replacement of major software used to process operation, or the change of equipment on a manufacturing line. In these cases the changes are often irreversible, and so Steps 7 and 8 might not be as relevant. Other examples could include changes with need for a great deal of secrecy, where Steps 1 and 4 will be significantly undermined.

#### *Dealing with difficulties during change management*

Companies implementing changes face many difficulties. Planning changes according to Kotter's framework should limit those obstacles, but the model is not detailed enough to provide help in all scenarios. For example, resistance to change and commitment to change are major aspects of change management and complementary

components outside Kotter's model, such as Stephen Jaros's (2010) predictors to determine commitment to change, might be needed to address these.

#### *Difficulties of studying change management projects*

Studying major change management projects is inherently difficult, due to their sheer complexity. This is probably why we found only a few case studies that tried to formally document a change process using Kotter's model. Major obstacles to those studies included:

- The difficulties of implementing all of the eight steps (Sidorko, 2008; Penrod and Harbor, 1998).
- The need for a long follow-up of the change project, to cover all the steps. Changes usually require many years to take form, making the study time consuming. Validation of Steps 7 and 8 are therefore more complicated to evaluate (Penrod and Harbor, 1998; Betters-reed *et al.*, 2008).
- Difficulties encountered in evaluating the level of implementation of the steps, and the challenge of corroborating implementation level with implementation success level (Sidorko, 2008; Penrod and Harbor, 1998; Dianis *et al.*, 1997).

#### **Conclusion**

This exhaustive review of the relevant empirical and practitioner literature to find congruence or lack thereof on individual aspects of Kotter's change model, found that not many studies set out to validate the full eight steps. In fact most of the evidence found during the search points to data that has been compiled by Kotter himself in his book titled *The Heart of Change*, which is a 2002 follow-up to the book *Leading Change*. In essence Kotter validated Kotter.

Integration of all eight steps in an orderly fashion is an important part of Kotter's model, but the importance of maintaining this order remains under investigated in empirical literature. Despite this major gap in the validation of this theory, the model remains very popular. To explain this popularity, we considered the target audience for these references. Neither the 1995 article nor the 1996 book were addressed primarily to a scholarly audience. Rather, these were meant for end users such as stakeholders involved in managing the change. The reliance of managers on "evidence-based practice" remains limited (Rousseau, 2006). They are more likely to look into grey literature written from a practical point of view, since this is a lot easier to understand and implement than scholarly empirical literature. The eight-step model is presented in action points arranged in a practical sequence. The model is intuitive and relatively easy to accept since it is based on Kotter's real-life experiences and is well presented with examples. Finally, given the popularity of the book *Leading Change* as evidenced by its "best seller" status, one has to assume that the audience (change managers and stakeholders) feel directly addressed by its content. But academics have relied upon the findings as if they were tested and supported. This is one of the enigmas of this undertaking.

While Kotter's eight steps remain an excellent starting point for managers implementing change in their organizations, and applying the model is likely to improve the chances of success, the model should not be considered as something that guarantees success. In practice, it may be useful to account for contextual variables and adapt the model accordingly (Graetz and Smith, 2010; Dopson *et al.*, 2008). It may

also be constructive to combine Kotter's planned framework with some of the other leading change models such as emergent, contingency, or choice models and theories in change management literature (Todnem, 2005) and find the best mix based on the organization and the change being implemented.

In the prefix of his book *The Heart of Change*, Kotter and Cohen (2002) acknowledges that "many interesting questions were left unanswered" in *Leading Change*. In *The Heart of Change*, which is beyond the scope of this review, Kotter determines that the core problems people face while implementing his eight steps are never due to "strategy, structure, culture or systems" but rather are about "changing the behaviour of people" (Kotter and Cohen, 2002). This continues to be in evidence 15 years after the initial model was presented.

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#### Further reading

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