

A Summary, Reflection, and Application of Kotter's Change Model

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A Summary of Kotter's Change Model

The Change Problem and Its Solution

In the first part of the book, John P. Kotter (2012) showed that successful change depends on leadership, behaviour, alignment, and culture. However, leaders commit eight errors that can be avoided with awareness and skill, turning these errors into linear steps into a framework that can guide understanding of organizational transformation. He emphasizes that resistance to change is natural because “Whenever human communities are forced to adjust to shifting conditions, pain is ever present” (p. 4).

Transforming Organizations: Why Firms Fail

In chapter 1, John P. Kotter (2012) explained why many organizations fail when they try to change. He highlighted the need for change, which includes globalization, competition, costs, and technology. Failures are usually not due to bad plans but to leadership errors in handling urgency, vision, culture, and communication.

Kotter Views Eight Errors that Cause Failure:

Allowing Too Much Complacency: Complacency emerges from past success, lack of visible crisis, weak feedback systems, and comfort with the current situation. Kotter said:

“Transformations always fail to achieve their objectives when complacency levels are high” (p. 4).

Weak Guiding Coalition: Change needs a team with authority, credibility, and influence. Kotter said, “Individuals alone, no matter how competent or charismatic, never have all the assets needed to overcome tradition and inertia” (p. 6).

Underestimating the Power of Vision: A clear, simple, and motivating vision guides change. Kotter said, “Without an appropriate vision, a transformation effort can easily dissolve

into a list of confusing, incompatible, and time-consuming projects” (p. 8). He also provides a practical evaluative rule: “Whenever you cannot describe the vision driving a change initiative in five minutes or less... you are in for trouble” (p. 9).

Undercommunicating the Vision: Leaders must repeat the message and act consistently. Kotter said, “Communication comes in both words and deeds. The latter is generally the most powerful form” (p 10).

Permitting Obstacles to Block the New Vision: Barriers like old policies or resistant managers can stop progress.

Failing to Create Short-Term Wins: Early successes keep motivation and credibility. Change takes years, and premature celebration might cause a reversal of progress. Kotter said, “Most people won’t go on the long march unless they see compelling evidence within six to eighteen months” (p. 12).

Declaring Victory Too Soon: Change must become part of the culture, or it can fail. Kotter said: “Until changes sink down deeply into the culture... new approaches are fragile” (p. 13).

Failing to Anchor Change in Culture: New behaviours and leadership must become the current practices that are integrated into organizational culture. Kotter argues: “Change sticks only when it becomes the way we do things around here” (p. 14).

Successful Change and the Force That Drives It

In this chapter, John P. Kotter (2012) explained that successful organizational transformation is possible. Failure is not unavoidable. Organizations fail because they are not prepared for transformational challenges. The real problem is not change itself, but weak leadership.

Globalization as the Catalyst for Change: Kotter (2012) says globalization is the main reason organizations must change. In the past, companies believed, “If it is not broken, do not fix it” (p. 20). But today, competition, technology, market maturity, and political shifts force organizations to improve quickly. Change is no longer optional. It is externally imposed. Even local institutions are affected. Organizations must increase productivity, quality, and innovation in short time periods. From successful cases, Kotter (2012) identifies two key patterns: Change follows a multistep process. And change is driven by leadership, not just management. Therefore, transformation is a leadership problem.

The Eight-Stage Change Process: Kotter (2012) presents his eight-stage model: Establish urgency. Create a guiding coalition. Develop vision and strategy. Communicate the vision. Empower action. Generate short-term wins. Consolidate gains. Anchor changes in culture. The first stages “defrost” (p. 20) the old system. The middle stages introduce new practices. The final stage institutionalizes change. He warns that sequence matters. Skipping steps weakens the process. Transformation is complex, dynamic, messy, and sometimes scary.

Projects Within Projects: Large transformation includes many smaller projects. Each project moves through the eight stages at different speeds. Change is not only rational planning. It requires more than analysis and decision-making.

Management versus Leadership: The most important idea in this chapter is the difference between management and leadership. Management focuses on planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem-solving. Leadership focuses on direction, alignment, and inspiration. Kotter (2012) states that successful transformation is 70 to 90 percent leadership and only 10 to 30 percent management (p. 28). Management maintains systems. Leadership transforms systems.

Successful organizations often become bureaucratic and inward-focused. Over time, they: overestimate their performance, ignore external signals, and resist innovation. Kotter (2012) calls these organizations “overmanaged and underled” (p. 32). This culture makes transformation very difficult. Kotter (2012) criticizes the idea of simply “managing change” (p. 33). Overmanaged change: pushes people instead of inspiring them, uses checklists instead of real leadership. limits participation. relies on coercion. But transformation requires motivation, dedication, and creativity.

Kotter (2012) said: “Only leadership can blast through the many sources of corporate inertia” (p. 33). Leadership is not about one heroic person. It is shared and distributed. Many individuals must contribute to drive transformation.

The Eight-Stage Process

Establishing a Sense of Urgency

In this chapter, John P. Kotter (2012) argued that establishing a strong sense of urgency is the first and most critical step in successful organizational transformation. Without urgency, change initiatives are “dead on arrival” (p. 39). A major change requires extraordinary effort from many people, and this effort will not happen if employees believe the current situation is acceptable. Urgency is not panic or drama; it is a shared conviction that change is necessary.

Kotter (2012) explained that complacency is the main barrier to urgency. Organizations can decline without a visible crisis. Leaders may discuss problems calmly, blame others, or engage in “happy talk” (p. 44), which hides real performance issues. Complacency is structural and cultural, supported by factors such as weak performance standards, lack of honest feedback, internal focus, and human denial. These forces protect the current situation and quietly block transformation.

To raise urgency, leaders must take bold actions. They may create visible financial pressure, expose uncomfortable data, set high performance targets, confront dissatisfied customers, and stop defensive communication. While a crisis can create urgency, waiting for a crisis is dangerous. Effective leaders are proactive and sometimes create constructive pressure to prevent stagnation (Kotter, 2012).

Kotter (2012) said that about seventy-five percent of management must feel urgency, and almost all top executives must be committed (p. 51). Urgency can also begin with middle managers, but without sufficient support from the top, efforts may fail. Establishing urgency is the foundation for all other stages of change.

Creating the Guiding Coalition

In this chapter, John P. Kotter (2012) explained that successful organizational transformation cannot be led by a single heroic leader. Although figures such as Lee Iacocca, Sam Walton, and Lou Gerstner are often highlighted, Kotter argues that major change requires a powerful guiding coalition. This coalition must include people with position power, expertise, credibility, and leadership.

Kotter (2012) said, "A guiding coalition made up only of managers, even superb managers who are wonderful people, will cause major change efforts to fail" (p. 61). Kotter shows that change fails when a chief executive officer works alone or when organizations create weak committees without authority. In complex and fast-moving environments, transformation requires a trusted leadership team that can process information quickly and gain broad commitment. Trust and a shared goal are essential for an effective coalition. Members must work collaboratively and commit to organizational excellence. Kotter (2012) concludes that

organizations often underestimate the need for a strong guiding coalition, but without it, transformation efforts usually fail.

Developing a Vision and Strategy

In this chapter, John P. Kotter (2012) explained that vision is important for successful organizational transformation. A good vision eliminates endless debate by answering one simple question; is this in line with the vision? (p. 71). Authoritarian orders and micromanagement may maintain systems, but they rarely create real change. A clear vision inspires people and helps organizations move toward a better future. Kotter (2012) defines vision as a picture of the future that explains why people should work to achieve it. Vision helps clarify direction, motivate sacrifice, and coordinate action. Leadership creates vision and strategy, while management develops plans and budgets to support implementation.

An effective vision must be imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible, and easy to communicate. Kotter (2012) also notes that creating vision is a collaborative and complex process that usually involves the guiding coalition. Without a strong vision, transformation efforts often fail. Kotter (2012) highlighted five reasons that make the difficulty in creating the vision, both head and heart are required; most of us know something about using our heads, but little about using our hearts (p. 84).

Communicating the Change Vision

A change vision is effective only when many people understand and believe in it. If only top managers understand the vision, transformation will not happen. Many organizations fail because they undercommunicate the vision, use complicated language, or act in ways that contradict their message (Kotter, 2012).

Employees often question how the change will affect them, so leaders must give them time, repetition, and dialogue to understand the vision. Kotter (2012) explained that communication should be simple, repeated, and delivered through many channels, such as meetings, speeches, and informal conversations.

Leaders must also lead by example, because actions communicate more strongly than words. They should address inconsistencies honestly and encourage two-way communication so employees can ask questions and express concerns. Kotter said, "When the top five or fifty people all live the change vision, employees will usually grasp it better than if there had been a hundred stories in the in-house newsletter" (p. 97).

Empowering Employees for Broad-Based Action

Kotter (2012) discussed the popular term "Empowerment" and concluded the meaning of empowerment by giving employees the power and ability to implement the change vision. Even when urgency and vision exist, change will not happen if employees feel powerless. As John P. Kotter (2012) explained, leaders must remove barriers that prevent employees from acting on the vision. Kotter (2012) identifies four main barriers: organizational structure, lack of skills, unsupportive systems, and resistant supervisors. Rigid structures and too many management layers can limit employee action. Organizations must also provide training so employees gain the skills needed for new responsibilities. Kotter illustrated that to implement the vision, leaders must ensure employees have the authority, training, and systems aligned to the vision.

Systems such as performance evaluation, promotion, and rewards must also support the vision. If these systems reward old behaviors, employees will continue working the old way. In addition, some supervisors may resist change, which can block progress. Kotter (2012) concluded, "further investigation also shows that management information systems haven't

changed much to help the transformation; likewise, the strategic planning process, which still focuses much too much on short-term financial information and much too little on market competitive analysis” (p. 115).

Kotter (2012) explained that removing barriers empowers employees to take action and helps many people participate in the transformation. He said, “whenever structural barriers are not removed in a timely way, the risk is that employees will become so frustrated that they will sour on the entire transformational effort (p. 110).

Generating Short-Term Wins

Kotter (2012) notes that vision alone is insufficient; short-term wins provide evidence that a transformation is working. Kotter said, “Most of the rest of us expect to see convincing evidence that all the effort is paying off. Nonbelievers have even higher standards of proof. They want to see clear data indicating that the changes are working and that the change process isn't absorbing so many resources in the short term as to endanger the organization” (p. 123).

The importance of short-term – visible, unambiguous, and clearly linked to the change effort – wins justifies the sacrifices, rewards change agents, tests strategy, undermines cynics, maintains executive support, and builds momentum. Short-term wins help build necessary momentum (Kotter, p. 128). Without them, morale drops and transformations stall. Therefore, in small organizations need wins in 6 months, and large ones in 12-18 months (Kotter, 2012, p. 126). Kotter concluded that successful transformations do not hope for short-term wins; however, they plan for them (p. 129). However, gimmicks or cosmetic wins or accounting tricks should be avoided because they undermine trust.

Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change

Kotter (2012) warns that celebrating early success too much can kill momentum: “short-term wins are essential to keep momentum going, but the celebration of those wins can be lethal if urgency is lost” (138). In addition, resistance never disappears; it waits for any drop in urgency. Regression can happen quickly because culture is fragile and modern organizations are highly interdependent; a change in one area affects many others.

Leaders use early credibility to launch more projects, address structural issues, deepen cultural shifts, and run multiple initiatives simultaneously. Strong leadership ensures alignment, reduces conflicts, and improves coordination, while weak leadership leads to chaos. Kotter concluded, “With sufficient leadership from above and lots of delegation of both management and leadership activities, twenty change projects can be run simultaneously” (Kotter, 2012, p. 149). Eliminating unnecessary interdependencies simplifies future change and reduces bureaucracy, though it may temporarily increase the workload as current policies and procedures are reviewed.

Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture

Kotter (2012) highlights that behaviour can change without culture; for example, a division's strong performance reverted once leadership pressure ended because transformation changed the behaviour, but not the culture. Culture consists of deep norms and shared values; these norms and values operate subconsciously and are harder to change than formal systems. Without reinforcement, old practices reappear, like plants with shallow roots. Kotter (2012) said, “Because no one confronted this problem, little if any effort was made to help the new practices grow deep roots, ones that sank down into the core culture or were strong enough to replace it. Shallow roots require constant watering” (p. 155).

Kotter (2012) distinguished two types of cultural challenge: Compatible values, when new practices implemented as part of a transformation process don't align with existing cultures, they are susceptible to regression. Incompatible values, when new changes did not match some cultural values, were ignored and hidden by the strong leadership efforts to implement the changes.

Kotter presented a rule of thumb: “Whenever you hear of a major restructuring, reengineering, or strategic redirection in which step 1 is changing the culture, you should be concerned that it might be going down the wrong path” (p. 165). Thus, cultural change occurs last; first, new behaviours produce results, which then anchor norms. Cultural change comes last, rely on results, communicate links, replace misaligned leaders, and plan succession to sustain change.

Implications for the Twenty-First Century

The Organization of the Future

Kotter (2012) argued that traditional bureaucratic organizations are not suitable for a fast-changing world. Future organizations must be designed for continuous adaptation, not stability, because group norms and shared values often act as barriers to change. However, culture can support change if it values good performance, strong leadership, teamwork, and less bureaucracy. They must maintain a constant sense of urgency, with people staying alert and acting quickly. Kotter described urgency as action-oriented thinking: “Do it now” (p. 170). Organizations should also share performance data openly and encourage honest communication. Kotter (2012) emphasized the need for teamwork and developing leaders, not only managers, since no single executive can manage complex change alone.

Finally, organizations need the support and ideas of all employees to deal with fast changes in business. Without empowerment, workers' knowledge about quality is not used, and their energy for change stays inactive. Kotter (2012), "The hearts and minds of all members of the workforce are needed to cope with the fast-shifting realities of the business climate." (p. 175).

Leadership and Lifelong Learning

John P. Kotter (2012) explained that success in the twenty-first century depends on leadership and lifelong learning. Leadership is not limited to a few elites; people can develop leadership skills through continuous learning and experience. Kotter shows that leadership ability can grow over time. When individuals combine lifelong learning with competitive capacity. Kotter believed that "lifelong learning and competitive capacity increase skill and knowledge levels, especially leadership skills, which in turn produce a prodigious ability to deal with an increasingly difficult and fast-moving global economy" (p. 186). Small improvements in skills each year can create large long-term advantages. Continuous learning helps people become more capable over time. Lifelong learners usually take risks, reflect on success and failure, listen to others, seek feedback, and stay open to new ideas. These habits support growth and adaptability. Because modern careers are more dynamic, people who embrace learning and encourage others to grow can expand leadership capacity and help organizations succeed.

A Reflection on Kotter's Change Model

1. The Importance of Creating a Sense of Urgency

One of the most important ideas is that successful change begins with urgency. Many organizations fail because their leaders and employees feel comfortable with the current situation. When complacency exists, people do not see the need for transformation. Urgency motivates individuals to recognize problems and opportunities and act quickly. This concept is critical because without urgency, the entire change process cannot start. Key Quote:

“Complacency is virtually absent. People are always looking for both problems and opportunities, and in which the norm is ‘do it now’” (p. 170). This quote was highlighted because organizations today operate in fast-changing environments. Leaders must promote change because of ongoing shifts in technology, the environment, and the economy; they should not wait for crises.

2. The Role of Leadership in Driving Change

Another key takeaway is that effective organizational change requires leadership. Leaders are accountable for facilitating transformation, motivating staff, and supporting organizations in adapting to new situations. Change is a challenge, and employees who lack strong leadership can resist new ideas or stay attached to old habits. Organizations must cultivate leaders who can motivate and guide others in implementing complex change initiatives. Key Quote:

“Development of leadership potential doesn't happen in a two-week course or even a four-year college program” (p. 174). The relevance of this quote is that leadership proficiency develops over time through experience, knowledge acquisition and practice.

3. The Power of a Guiding Coalition

One person can not implement change alone. Organizations need a guiding coalition, which is a group of leaders who work together to drive transformation. This coalition provides credibility, expertise, and support. Key Quote: “In a fast-moving world, teamwork is enormously helpful almost all the time” (p. 171). This concept is important because collaborative leadership increases the chances of successfully implementing change initiatives, especially when change is not a single project; it involves several projects that should take place at the same time.

4. Developing and Communicating a Clear Vision and Strategy

It is very important to develop a strong vision that provides direction and meaning for change. Without a clear vision, employees may feel confused about the transformation's purpose. The vision must be simple, clear, and inspiring so people can understand where the organization is going. However, good is not good enough; leaders must repeat the message and act consistently. Moreover, telling people about the vision and values must be accompanied by the leader's deeds. The leader must walk the talk. Key Quote: “Communication comes in both words and deeds. The latter is generally the most powerful form” (p 10). The relevance of this quote is that leaders must provide strategic direction for the organization.

5. Empowering Employees to Act

Empowering employees is crucial for successful organizations. Leaders can empower employees by removing barriers and giving them authority to make decisions. Empowerment increases innovation, accountability, and engagement among employees. Key Quote: “Even today, the best-performing firms I know... have employees who are empowered with the authority to manage their work groups” (p. 175). This takeaway is important because

empowerment allows employees to contribute actively to organizational success and take ownership.

6. Generating Short-Term Wins

Short-term wins are necessary and required to create motivation and credibility for change. Employees need to see evidence of early success so they believe in the vision and values and support the change process; they feel encouraged to continue the transformation.

Key Quote: “Most of the rest of us expect to see convincing evidence that all the effort is paying off. Nonbelievers have even higher standards of proof. They want to see clear data indicating that the changes are working and that the change process isn't absorbing so many resources in the short term as to endanger the organization” (p. 123). The importance of this takeaway is that it encourages the leader to evaluate the completion of phases, report them, provide positive feedback, and maybe reward people to increase their buy-in.

7. Anchoring Change in Organizational Culture

One way for change to become sustainable is to become part of the culture. This means new behaviours, values, and practices must be integrated into daily operations. Key Quote: “Truly adaptive firms with adaptive cultures are awesome competitive machines” (p. 180). This takeaway indicates that the reason for regression is that many organizations fail when they introduce new systems without changing underlying values or behaviours.

8. Building Adaptive Organizations for the Future

For organizations to be ready for the future, they must be flexible, innovative, and responsive to environmental changes. Organizations must move away from rigid hierarchical structures and develop adaptive cultures. Key Quote: “If environmental volatility continues to increase, as most people now predict, the standard organization of the twentieth century will

likely become a dinosaur” (p. 169). This statement highlights the importance of adapting to technological, economic, and social changes in the modern world before crises take place.

9. Leadership and Lifelong Learning

This statement is important because it promotes the lifelong learning for leaders. Leaders must continuously develop their skills, knowledge, and perspectives. Continuous learning helps leaders adapt to complex challenges and evolving environments. Key Quote: “These exceptions to the norm help us see that nothing inherent in human DNA prevents growth later in life” (p. 185). This takeaway indicates that great leaders are not born great; in addition, they are not the product of a few years in college. A great leader is born when they accumulate skills, education, experience, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

An Application of Kotter's Change Model

In his book *Leading Change*, John P. Kotter provided a practical framework for implementing change in schools. As an educator in Toronto, I will use this linear framework to implement sustainable change. Below are five specific ways that I will apply in my educational leadership practice.

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency

I will establish a sense of urgency by explaining to teachers the importance of adapting teaching methods to meet the needs of twenty-first-century learners. Students today interact constantly with technology and digital information, so traditional teaching methods alone may not be sufficient to maintain engagement. I will communicate the importance of innovation in learning and assessment to the teachers. This includes encouraging the use of digital learning tools and interactive instructional methods to improve student engagement and learning outcomes.

2. Developing a Vision and Strategy

The school vision should be considered a living document; it serves as the school's north star. Therefore, it should be visited, reviewed, and developed before crises take place. It should be developed whenever the technology or environment changes. Therefore, I will always review and develop the vision, and make sure that it is simple, clear and includes current values. For example, "to inspire and prepare students to become confident, compassionate, and responsible global citizens through inclusive education, academic excellence, innovation, and strong community values". This vision should guide the strategies teachers use in the classroom. The strategy should align with inclusive instruction, academic excellence, innovation, and the development of strong community values. By consistently connecting the teacher role to this

vision, teachers will better understand their purpose and feel more motivated to participate actively.

3. Communicating the Change Vision

Effective communication is essential for successful change. I will communicate the school's vision clearly through whole-staff meetings, professional learning communities (PLCs), newsletters, the school website, and by posting the vision everywhere inside the school. I will explain why new learning methods, digital tools, and interactive activities are being introduced. When teachers understand the purpose of these changes, they are more likely to accept them and participate actively in the teaching process.

4. Empowering Employees for Broad-Based Action

In the professional development context, empowering teachers means giving them the tools, knowledge, and opportunities to actively enhance their instructional practice. I will provide training to my teachers to teach them how to use gamification, DigiExam, Exam.net, and interactive digital textbooks from McGraw-Hill Education effectively. This training will explain what gamification is, how it motivates students, and how digital platforms can support formative and summative assessments. I will also empower teachers to develop their own learning plans, homework, classwork, quizzes, and tests using these tools and gamification strategies.

With these digital tools, teachers can provide immediate, specific feedback to each student, helping prevent disengagement and increasing student success. By combining gamification, interactive content, and timely feedback, teachers can enhance engagement, foster innovation, and promote a more dynamic, inclusive learning environment. This approach ensures that students not only learn but also actively participate, construct knowledge, and remain motivated throughout their learning journey.

5. Generating Short-Term Wins

To maintain teacher motivation and buy-in, and increase their adoption of the new strategies, so that they feel their efforts are worthwhile. I will create systems that recognize and measure progress in implementing new instructional strategies such as gamification, DigiExam, Exam.net, and interactive digital textbooks from McGraw-Hill Education. I will measure teachers' compliance with embedding gamification and digital assessments in their teaching practices.

Teachers who are willing to share their positive practices will be invited to present their experiences during staff meetings and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). This sharing will allow teachers to learn from each other and encourage collaboration and innovation in teaching. Also, this will be considered as recognition of the staff who adopted the change.

Teachers who demonstrate strong implementation of these strategies will be recognized for their efforts. Their compliance and instructional innovation will also be reflected in the teacher evaluation form, and the December bonus will partially reflect their commitment to adopting these practices.

In addition, I will monitor student achievement data and compare student performance from these digital and gamified assessments with results from previous paper-based assessments. This comparison will help determine whether these new approaches improve student engagement, understanding, and academic success. These measurable improvements will serve as short-term wins, reinforcing motivation for both teachers and students and supporting continued innovation in teaching and learning.

Reference

Kotter, J. (2012). *Leading change*. Harvard Business Review Press.