Light the fires

How can leaders apply John Kotter's eight steps
to successful change in today's fast-moving world?

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Harvard Business School professor of leadership emeritus, John P Kotter, originally presented eight steps to successful organisational change in his famous article in the *Harvard Business Review* titled 'Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail'. He then included them in a book, *Leading Change*, published in 1996. *Leading Change* remains the authoritative work on change leadership and was named by *Time Magazine* as one of the 25 most influential business management books ever. So, given the changes that have taken place over the past few years, is Kotter's model still relevant? Is it sufficiently dynamic? And what needs to change?

Kotter's eight-step change model

Kotter's original method describes eight sequential steps. These are: establish a sense of urgency; create the guiding coalition; develop a vision and strategy; communicate the change vision; empower broad-based action; generate short-term wins; consolidate gains to produce more change; and anchor new approaches in the culture. Kotter's original blueprint was a systematic approach where organisations complete each step before moving on to the next. The approach assumed that a strong core team (the guiding coalition) led change. When it was written, most business organisations relied on traditional hierarchies to get things done. Many still do.

Kotter updated his original eight-step change model in 2014, recognising there had been an evolution in organisational needs for driving change. His book, *Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster-Moving World*, applied the same core principles as before but changed the model of implementation to use eight 'change accelerators'. There are three main differences between the original eight steps and the eight change accelerators:

1 Change accelerators are intended to be applied concurrently and continuously rather than completed in sequence.

2 The new change delivery system envisages an organisation-wide army of volunteers to drive change.

3 While the eight steps were designed to work effectively in traditional hierarchies, and still do, the 'change accelerator' model is intended to suit a more agile, networked approach.

In summary, the 'new' change model was more opportunistic and better suited to modern organisations operating in uncertain and less predictable environments. Kotter's eight accelerators are:

ENGAGE MORE PEOPLE IN THE CHANGE CONVERSATION

Accelerator 1

Create a sense of urgency

Increasing urgency is about overcoming comfort with the status quo. Leaders need to take risks by being more transparent and willing to engage early to discuss concepts and unformed ideas. Your aim should be to engage more people in the change conversation without relying on hierarchy. Some elements of your organisation have been designed with strength and stability in mind, so may naturally try to avert the risk associated with change. Take a decentralised approach with less emphasis on centrally managed communications and engagement opportunities, and make more use of formal and informal networks to create a sense of urgency.

Accelerator questions
- How can your organisation use informal and flexible networks to challenge the status quo and create continual, but positive, pressure to change?
- How can you focus people's hearts and minds on a shared sense of purpose that promotes the need for urgent change?

Accelerator 2

Build and maintain a guiding coalition

A carefully chosen team of leaders that guides change processes must be replaced by distributed leadership. When things are moving fast, and leadership is remote from teams on the ground, decision-making and communication tend to be slow. Strong and consistent executive sponsorship remains vital, but the 'guiding coalition' can no longer be centralised. It must be widespread, based on networks with reach across the organisation, and include leaders at all levels.

Accelerator questions
- Who are the key opinion formers and influencers (the network leaders) within your organisation? How are you leveraging their active support to drive change?
- Where is the resistance to the influence of informal networks within your organisation? What specific things can you do to nurture and empower business and social networks?

Accelerator 3

Form a strategic vision

Vision has enduring power, but in this context, we recommend a statement of intent. A bit different and more powerful, intent sets out ➡

the rationale and emotional case for change. It should describe what success looks like, why it's important and be focused on the big opportunity. Its purpose is to clarify a single unifying purpose, to help people see the effort as worthwhile and appealing. We recommend signposting the route by describing, in outline, major strategic opportunities to be addressed and challenges to be overcome to achieve the vision.

Accelerator questions
- Do you have a clear view of the context and compelling need for change?
- Can you describe a 'rich picture' of what success looks like and why it's important?

Accelerator 4

Communicate for buy-in and attract a growing volunteer army

Gaining widespread buy-in to the change vision remains the single most important responsibility of the guiding coalition. It is no longer possible to rely on single executive sponsors or change teams, however; it requires a network. Kotter suggests it doesn't take many volunteers to get a network launched – as few as 10% of the population will do. If he's right, you need 200 volunteer change champions to accelerate change in an organisation of 2,000. Putting more resources into the change team doesn't achieve the same result. A volunteer army can catalyse organisational support, but needs nurture and affirmative support. Change leaders must provide ongoing clear communication about intent and adequate opportunity for feedback on what is happening 'in the field', so they know quickly what's working and what isn't, and identify changing situations.

Accelerator questions
- How does your organisational ecosystem help (or hinder) a volunteer army to operate effectively?
- Does your volunteer army have the power to act, interact, form and reform to deliver change?

Accelerator 5

Accelerate movement toward the vision and the opportunity by ensuring the network removes barriers

Change always encounters friction. You need to assume things will go wrong and plan to encounter resistance and unexpected events. Structural blockers and power bases in the wrong place can obstruct change and the network's best efforts to implement solutions will fail without active executive support. Leaders need to encourage

LEADERS NEED TO AGREE, COLLECTIVELY, TO COMMIT TO THE CHANGE INTENT

and support network teams to identify barriers to action and propose resolutions, but ensure hierarchy responds rather than digging in its heels.

Organisational systems, processes and procedures provide predictable and unpredictable obstacles exerting unseen attractions to old ways of doing things. Leaders need to agree, collectively, to commit to the change intent or, if necessary, to 'disagree and commit' (an approach attributed to Jeff Bezos, founder of internet giant Amazon). Then they need to remove the impediments that are reducing the ability of individuals on the front line to implement change.

Accelerator questions
- Where is the primary resistance to change in your business?
- What are you doing to remove obstacles and alter existing practices, procedures and culture to enable change?

Accelerator 6

Celebrate visible short-term wins

Kotter identified that when organisations do not systematically plan for, and create, short-term wins, change fatigue sets in, progress goes unrecognised and people start to lose energy and belief in transformation. When the pace of change accelerates, people tend to focus on day-to-day fire-fighting and transformation goals seem far off. Soon, they become lost or seem irrelevant.

If change leaders do not identify meaningful short-term wins themselves, they must empower and support their change network to do so. Short-term success must be visible, communicated and celebrated to provide evidence of change, which encourages and emboldens the volunteer army. It will take effort – and a willingness to take risks – to give selected projects, workstreams or communities of practice both freedom and support to pilot change. Short-term wins are like fires – they draw

people in. So when they are celebrated effectively, they result in change contagion, providing positive momentum towards transformational goals.

Accelerator questions
- Where do you need to light fires to 'prove the concept'?
- What are you doing to enable and empower groups that are piloting change?

Accelerator 7

Never let up. Keep learning. Don't declare victory too soon

Kotter's later work stresses the need to maintain a sense of urgency around a big opportunity to sustain change. We've seen numerous examples of change efforts becoming diluted, usually when a switch of management diverts attention and resources to something new and shiny. It's tempting to declare victory too early, start the next change initiative, or stick rigidly to change initiatives that are no longer relevant to the changing situation.

Change leaders need to ensure the rationale for change remains relevant, visible and compelling. As change starts to get traction, more challenging goals can be set. The key is to maintain a bias for action and discovery, so that each step generates experience, recruits more willing volunteers and enables more progress.

Accelerator questions
- How does your organisation apply learning from ongoing change?
- How do you visibly reward people who serve the organisation by being champions of change?

Accelerator 8

Institutionalise strategic changes in the culture

Kotter's eighth, and final, accelerator states that no strategic initiative, big or small, is complete until it is incorporated into day-to-day activities. This step is often overlooked and organisations fail to make changes to the governance, resource allocation and people systems necessary to change culture. You can't blame people for reverting to their 'old ways' when organisations persist with practices that subtly reward, encourage or fail to eliminate 'old' ways of doing things.

Accelerator questions
- How are you reinforcing the value of the changes you've implemented via recruitment, promotion and succession?

VISIONARY CHANGE LEADERS ENERGISE TO GAIN ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT

- What additional structural, procedural and process changes will weave change into your organisation's culture?

Analysis of the eight steps

On the face of it, the eight steps and eight accelerators don't look much different. Kotter's 2014 work, *Accelerate*, updated change implementation to reflect the greater agility required in fast-paced and highly competitive environments. He envisaged the existing hierarchy operating in parallel with an agile and flexible network-like structure, able to keep the situation under review and free to adapt quickly as new opportunities and threats emerge. But this approach risks creating a power struggle between two systems, in which the hierarchy will win by suffocating the creativity of the change network, or by starving it of resources. This takes us back to the central theme of change leadership.

Changing the way in which organisations lead change

When situations are familiar and outcomes predictable, the eight steps model is as sound as it was when first described in 1995. The new change acceleration model reflects that many organisations are in a state of flux, needing to evolve rapidly to adapt to increasing complexity, new challenges and fleeting opportunities, but with a solid foundation enabling successful change delivery. For these organisations, an emphasis on change leadership is necessary to excite people about opportunities to participate in change and support them to do so. Visionary change leaders energise organisations to gain active involvement rather than passive buy-in. Successful change leaders:

1 Signpost the future and what success looks like.
2 Tolerate uncertainty.
3 Build powerful human networks connecting people, networks and information flows.
4 Bring together people, ideas and processes in collaborative engagement.
5 Promote rapid iteration as the change network tests ideas and learns.
6 Provide freedom to fail by protecting groups that are experimenting to find a way to the future.
7 Maintain effective and flexible communication with stakeholders to resolve any conflicts between change networks and the hierarchy.

They focus on leading change, rather than merely managing it. ▣
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