

Leading Organizational Change: Concepts, Processes, and Implications of Modern Theories

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## Leading Organizational Change

In the face of pressing societal needs, humans have traditionally relied on leaders to mobilize groups and communities towards action that results in the resolution of difficult problems and ultimately the progress of mankind (Bass & Bass, 2008). Every society has had leaders who have endeavored to grapple with the problems of their time. Many of these societies' problems, however, have remained unresolved due to the failure of the leaders to successfully initiate effective change processes (Black & Gregersen, 2008). According to Luscher and Lewis (2008) in many instances, "the problem is not the problem; the problem is the way you think about the problem" (p. 227). Leaders may be obligated to alter their thinking so as to achieve the results that their organizations and the wider community expect from them (Senge, 2006). Leaders of organizations sometimes need to go in new directions but may be unwilling or incapable of making the commitment. This paper explores current thinking on leading change, examining different concepts and processes along with their implications for modern leaders.

Understanding and influencing change is a key element in the formation of a leader's thought processes (de Caluwè & Vermaak, 2003). Research has indicated that many leaders and followers struggle with implementing and embracing change (Bruckman, 2008; Ford & Ford, 2009). Why is this so? What factors lead to resistance? Is change too complex for leaders? Is there a strategy that works best? More than 500 years ago, Machiavelli (1515), lamented:

Nothing is more difficult to take on, more precarious to lead, or less uncertain of success, than introducing new things, because the person introducing them makes an enemy of those who fared well under the old situation and those that might fare well under the new

situation do not (yet) defend it zealously (as cited in de Caluwè & Vermaak, 2003, p. 83, emphasis in source)

### **Understanding Organizational Change**

Defining organizational change has historically proven difficult for researchers, scholars, and practitioners (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995) resulting in “a theoretical pluralism that has uncovered novel ways” (p. 510) of defining the construct. The oft told story of six blind men describing an elephant for the first time is instructive in better understanding the innovative definitions that have been advanced. In this fable each of the men touches a different part of the animal and gives it a completely different description. This story epitomizes the diversity of theoretical perspectives that have been put forward by different scholars. In one version of the elephant story, a wise man approaches the six arguing blind men and tells them, “All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently [sic] because each one of you touched the [sic] different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all those features what [sic] you all said” (Elephant and the Blind Men, n.d., para. 9). Van de Ven & Poole (1995) embrace a similar indiscriminate perspective, contending that any integration of the diverse perspectives should “preserve the distinctiveness of alternative theories of organizational change” (p. 511).

Amidst the diversity of theories the researcher must settle for one definition that accurately captures a capacious expanse of the elements of organizational change. The view of organizational change as “a difference in form, quality, or state over time in an organizational entity” (Poole and Van De Ven, 2004, p. xi) has been selected for this paper because it indicates change as evolutionary (Mezias & Glynn, 1993) with the alterations taking place over time. Unpacking this definition is an excellent way to summarize the key concepts in organizational change: taxonomies of change, sources and effects of change, elements that comprise the change

effort, and a process that takes place through different phases. These concepts aid in the development of an accurate understanding of organizational change.

### **Taxonomies of Change**

The ability to lead change is essential if leaders are going to run effective organizations that are meeting society's pressing needs. If what leaders really do is lead change, (de Caluwè & Vermaak, 2003, Kotter, 1999; O'Toole, 1996) why do some struggle in bringing about and managing change processes? Black and Gregersen (2008) suggested that leaders are "programmed *not* to change" (p. 3, emphasis in original). Part of the problem, however, might be what Van de Ven and Poole (1995) identify as a "theoretical pluralism" (p. 510) in the conceptual understanding of change theories. Diverse theories have been advanced on change but each offers limited insight into the true nature of change.

According to Van de Ven and Poole (1995) these diverse theories can be categorized into a typology that includes: life cycle, teleological, dialectical, and evolution theories. Life cycle theories view change as orchestrated by underlying mechanisms that move the entity towards a predetermined end. Some stage theories of change (e.g. Kotter, 1996) fall into this category. Teleological theories assume entities to be orderly and flexible in constructing, implementing, and monitoring intended outcomes. Theories in this category, for instance, the colors of change approach (de Caluwé & Vermaak, 2003) do not prescribe a sequence of stages. Dialectical theories address the changes that take place as an entity experiences competing internal and external goals or values that conflict with its own purpose. In the See, Move, Finish model, Black and Gregersen (2008) argue that the first barrier to change is a failure to see and the key to overcoming this barrier is to create both high contrast and high confrontation between sets of issues that face the organization. Evolution theories view change "as a recurrent, cumulative,

and probabilistic progression of variation, selection, and retention of organizational entities” (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995, p. 518). Change, in a sense, has an effect on the organization.

### **Sources and Effects of Change**

Porras and Silvers (1991) posit that “organizational change is typically triggered by a relevant environmental shift that, once sensed by the organization, leads to an intentionally generated response” (p. 52). Human action may lead to differences in an organization’s state; those that are “consciously conceived and implemented by knowledgeable actors” (Poole, 2004, p. 4) are referred to as planned changes while those that are not are viewed as unplanned changes. Planned change requires preparation or careful plotting by the change agents or actors and is developed in a deliberate and intentional manner (Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992) whereas unplanned change is “a consequence of the inherent potential for development associated with every entity” (p. 9). Planned change has its source as the actions of human agency and can be controlled or managed, while unplanned change is rooted in the natural unfolding of new states, of which humans have little control and may not be able to intervene (Poole, 2004).

Leaders may resist change because of a desire to retain or conform to old cultures (Bass & Bass, 2008). According to Kanter (1991) the implication of change as “an abrupt disjunction, a clean break - does not always match the reality of change” (p. 8) within the organization. Every organization is unique and has a particular culture (Schein, 2004) that drives its processes, a consistent pattern of behavior that reflects its “prehistory of change” (Kanter, 1983, p. 18). Change that alters the organization’s prehistory is transformational in its effects whereas change that does not alter the organization is “cosmetic, temporary, and uncertain in its effects” (Kanter et al., 1992, p. 11). Weick and Quinn (1999) state that the effects of change can be episodic, that is “infrequent, discontinuous, and intentional” (p. 365) or continuous, meaning that change is

“ongoing, evolving, and cumulative (p. 375). These distinctions guide a change actor in determining which elements to include in a change process.

### **Elements of change**

Planned change, which underlies the philosophy of this paper, depends on diverse elements. Poole (2004) argues that “several fundamental issues face all theorists of organizational change and innovation...people, space, and time – the ‘least common denominators’ of change and innovation theory” (p. 16). People, as change agents, drive planned change efforts. Schein (2004) developed a model of change in which people determine change processes which become embedded in the culture of the organization. Kotter (1996) views a “guiding coalition” as essential to the change process. Space refers to the “levels of analysis in organizational change” (Poole, 2004, p. 17). Changes within the units of an organization impact other units differently. Dansereau, Yammarino, and Kohles (1999) point out that a longitudinal analysis of change enables an understanding of altering patterns of relationships. Time enables the analysis of change and facilitates implementation and measurement of change (Poole, 2004).

A splendid analysis by de Caluwè and Vermaak (2003) identifies six elements of change: outcome, history, actors, phases, communication, and steering that are “equally relevant to all change processes” (p. 70). Effective change in organizations is attained through the “realization or facilitation of intended outcomes” (de Caluwè & Vermaak, 2003, p. 73). Schaffer and Thomson (1992) have argued that successful change begins with the outcomes, hence the need for a results-driven approach. In developing new outcomes, leaders should consider the entity’s past and why it triggered change and those who will be involved in the change effort. Those involved, the change actors, include initiators who generate the idea, sponsors who legitimize it, orchestrators who set up the change, implementers who share responsibility, and champions who

coordinate the change effort “in multiple successive phases” (de Caluwè & Vermaak, 2003, p. 86). Progress through phases is an important phenomenon in the analysis of change processes.

### **The Process and Phases of Change**

Cohen (2005) suggests three phases of change based on Kotter’s (1996) eight-step process: “(1) creating the climate for change, (2) engaging and enabling the whole organization, and (3) implementing and sustaining the change” (p. 2). These three phases correlate with Lewin (1947) who argued that change goes through a three-step phase: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Cohen (2005) conducted field work using practical methods, assessments, and diagnostic tools based on many large-scale transformation assignments, uncovering the three phases. The first phase, creating the climate for change includes Kotter’s (1996) first three steps: increase urgency, build guiding teams, and get the vision right; the second phase, engaging and enabling the whole organization, includes the next three steps: communicate for buy-in, enable action, and create short-term wins; and the third phase, implementing and sustaining change encompasses the last two steps: don’t let up, and make it stick (Cohen, 2005, p. 3).

This model is best illustrated in Appendix A and discussed using an ongoing planned change scenario involving an organization that will be named SKL Coaching. SKL is introducing “intervision groups” (de Caluwè & Vermaak, 2003, p. 235) for the firm’s trainers. The following three phase, eight step strategy details an approach that the initiator found useful.

#### **Phase 1: Creating the Climate for Change**

Planned change is driven by energized individuals with a passion for discovering new opportunities and resolving contentious problems (Dunoon, 2008; Kotter & Cohen, 2002). These individuals “pull together a guiding team with the credibility, skills, connections, reputations, and formal authority required to provide change leadership” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002,

p. 4.) To achieve lasting change they create a climate of urgency, teamwork, and shared vision (Kotter, 1996). This happens via a three-step process.

**Step one: Increase urgency.** The change initiator at SKL started with the objective of eliminating complacency. This required enlightening leaders on the disempowering power of the status quo and encouraging new approaches that cultivate a “let’s go” attitude in the organization. Urgency is increased when leaders demand “bold or even risky actions” (Kotter, 1996, pp. 42-43). Change leaders encourage followers to shed the desire for self-preservation and positively confront employees with the aim of provoking them to stretch out of their comfort zones (Black & Gregersen, 2003; Kotter, 1996). As urgency increased, the initiator motivated a guiding team that committed to providing direction on the implementation of intervision groups.

**Step two: Build the guiding team.** Kotter (1996) has argued that when there is an adequate sense of urgency, leaders will step up to drive the change process. At SKL Coaching, the guiding coalition is made up of trainers and board members who are ready to confront the organization’s training processes (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). Once the change initiator had identified a select group, these individuals were assigned different functions in relation to the change effort (de Caluwè & Vermaak, 2003). The functions included orchestrating the change effort, championing the change, and implementing specific aspects of the initiative. As the team coalesced, the initiator worked to ensure that the team had a clear understanding of the vision.

**Step three: Get the vision right.** Vision is “a picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create that future” (Kotter, 1996, p. 68). SKL’s change initiator made sure that the guiding team shared a strong vision that communicated the overall purpose of intervision groups, and demonstrated how the groups will benefit the organization. The initiator also motivated team commitment, leading to buy-in from



the organization's trainers (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). As the guiding team at SKL began to buy into the vision, the change actors started engaging the rest of the organization.

## **Phase 2: Engaging and Enabling the Whole Organization**

Communication of the vision amongst members of the guiding team and the organization settles the anxieties of the change actors, neutralizes anger, communicates credibility, and produces faith in the vision (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). This leads to group empowerment and enables the removal of obstacles, for instance, "structures, skills, systems, and supervisors" (Kotter, 1996, p. 102) that hinder change. These barriers prevent change actors from making the move. Group engagement sustains the change effort, leading to organization-wide buy-in.

**Step four: Communicate for buy-in.** The guiding coalition at SKL began using common terms, metaphors, and analogies (Kotter, 1996) that facilitate buy-in. A common term that was popularized amongst the guiding team is intervention groups. To ensure buy-in, change leaders use all avenues of communication, including new technologies like "satellite broadcasts, teleconferencing, webcasts, and email" (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 95) in the process of winning over stakeholders. Leaders at SKL will work to ensure that communication is a "two-way endeavor" (Kotter, 1996, p. 99), allowing all involved to offer feedback. To minimize the risk of a derailed change process, the change initiator will ensure that the guiding coalition consistently empowers trainers for "broad-based action" (Kotter, 1996, p. 100) that actualizes the vision.

**Step five: Empower action.** Black and Gregersen (2008) posit that leaders "change individuals...by remapping minds to see, move, and finish" (p. 154) on a change effort. At SKL this will require confronting resistors with a clear contrast between the past and the future, providing the training, resources, and rewards that inspire change, communicating the vision consistently with the goal of anchoring new mental maps at SKL, and encouraging change

champions who will promote the effort (Black & Gregersen 2008; Kotter, 1996). SKL's guiding team will generate short term wins that enable staff to stay motivated to the finish (Kotter, 1996).

**Step six: Create short-term wins.** Short-term wins are communicative tools that reinforce team responsibility and provide evidence of progressive success. Wins enable an assessment of the vision, challenge cynics to join the effort, and harness the support of leadership. (Kotter, 1996). This sustains momentum within the organization. Given the longevity of a change processes, "people will get tired and lost during the interim" (Black & Gregersen, 2008, p. 86). Change agents at SKL identified an "order of projects" (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 134) that facilitated wins and ensured continuity in establishing change.

### **Phase 3: Implementing and Sustaining the Change**

This is the last phase of the process. One critical error leaders make is that of "declaring victory too soon" (Kotter, 1996, p. 12). This can become a momentum zapper, sapping all the energy for change from stakeholders and allowing "irrelevant traditions" (Kotter, 1996, p. 13) to creep back into the organization. Change agents must "create a new, supportive, and sufficiently strong organizational culture" (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 161) that builds on the accomplishments of the change initiative and motivates all participants to vigorously defend achievements. This happens through the last two steps of Kotter's (1996) strategy.

**Step seven: Don't let up.** Black and Gregersen (2008) suggest creating a "change performance dashboard" (p. 105) with five critical elements: the key measures to be attained, means for assessing each of these measures, the frequency of assessment, baseline indicators of success, and target performance levels (p. 106). The guiding team at SKL will monitor the goals and objectives of the intervention groups. Periodic reviews of the change process enable change agents to improve on their progress. This ensures continued "clarity of shared purpose" (Kotter,

1996, p. 143) within the organization. Continued clarity of purpose anchors the new approaches into the culture of the organization.

**Step eight: Make the change stick.** The change initiator will ensure that the guiding team understands that “changes in a work group, a division, or an entire company can come undone, even after years of effort, because the new approaches haven’t been anchored firmly in the group norms and values” (Kotter, 1996, p. 148). Leaders at SKL must recognize that people’s eyes “are full of what they have seen work so well in the past” (Black & Gregersen, 2008, pp. 117-118) and they will struggle at letting that go. Change does not stick unless culture changes and “a new way of operating has been shown to succeed over some minimum period of time” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 176). This triple phase, eight-step strategy will lead to the implementation of intervision groups at SKL Coaching. This scenario demonstrates that change is important to leadership in a variety of ways.

### **Importance of Change to Leadership**

The concept of change is a primary mechanism through which leaders embed the desired culture in the organization and create a climate that enables the organization to achieve its objectives (Schein, 2004). Leadership, after all, is about enacting changes that enable an organization to fulfill its objectives (Kotter, 1999). The leader’s challenge is to guide an organization from its current realities to a future desired state (Senge, 1996). Unplanned changes in an organization can be effective in revealing the values that leaders want to focus on (de Caluwè & Vermaak, 2003). In essence, this helps to clarify the leader’s vision and intentions for the organization.

The leader’s philosophy of change enables role determination in the change process and provides the insight for assigning roles to others on a guiding team (Kotter, 1996). This enables

the participants within an organization to be responsible for specific portions of the elements of change. The implication of this is that every participant in the organization should be a key player in bringing about change not a victim of change. Bellou (2008) states, “individuals who consider that the organization is inconsistent are more likely to withhold their contribution, either by wanting to exit or by avoiding engagement in extra-role behavior” (p. 785). The leader has an obligation to implement a change process that ensures group buy-in and action. Leaders cannot afford the leisure of not acting during critical moments of an organization’s existence.

### **Relationship and Impact of Change on Personal Leadership Philosophy**

The concept of organizational change relates to and impacts this writer’s philosophy of leadership in three critical ways. First, individual and group leadership is enhanced when leaders employ a sound process of change with explicit guidelines that harness the energies of all the members of an organization. Leadership is a force for change (Kotter, 1990). Second, the level of success in resolving organization-wide problems increases when leaders model a consistent willingness to tackle contentious problems. Lastly, the flexible team that considers different approaches to change, demonstrating openness to synthesizing alternative theories of change, increases its options for navigating change and is able to successfully navigate unplanned changes that could surprise an inflexible organization (de Caluwè and Vermaak, 2003).

This writer intends to continue using Kotter’s (1996) eight-step process as a paradigm for creating effective organizational change while connecting the approach to other philosophies of change. This facilitates the application of a proven approach and supports it with models that compliment the chosen approach. Kezar (2001) laments that “researchers have stayed away from the ambiguity of the change process” (p. 128) and points to the need for “more long-term and context-based research” (p. 132).

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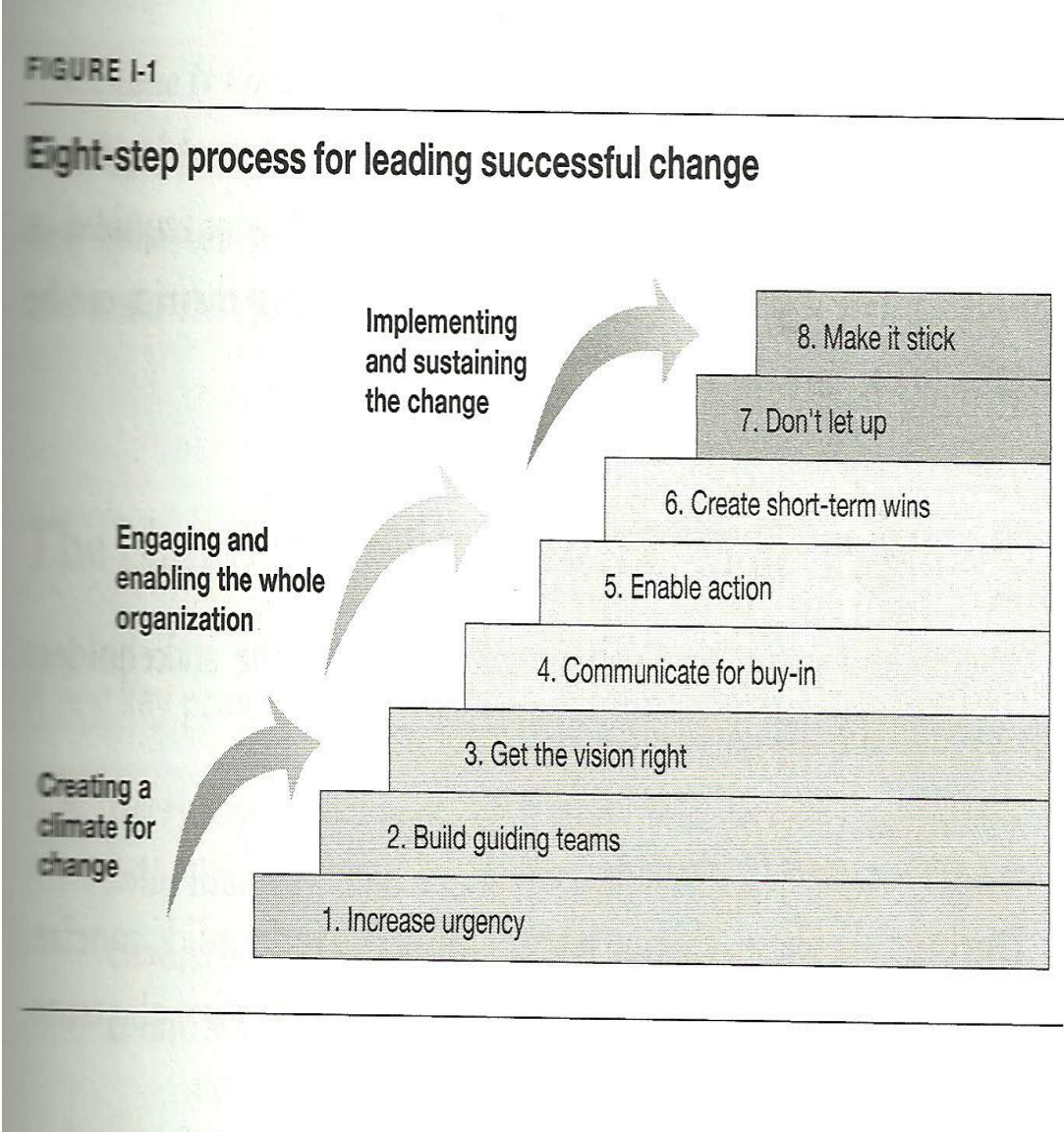
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Appendix A

Three Phases in the Eight-Step Process of Change



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