

How to Effectively Lead Organizational Change

**Strategic Leadership Capstone
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Abstract

When we consider with what characteristics make a good leader, many people think of traits such as honesty, passion, courage, and patience. These are all significant traits to have as a leader, and they all are immensely valuable to any organization. In mentioning any kind of characteristics leaders must not only possess them. Rather, effective leaders must know how to put these traits to good use. To reach our fullest potential with our characteristics, we must understand that it is essential that we properly know how to effectively put them to use.

Regarding the many characteristics or traits that are important for a leader to have, there are several that are overlooked. Sometimes, we underestimate the importance of a certain quality. One of these characteristics that people seem to avoid and not consider to be as important is ability to work through change. Many people may argue, but change in an organization to be inevitable. Though many people dislike it and attempt to avoid it, leaders must be willing to accept change. It is only through the acceptance of change by the leader that the organization can see it through. If the leader is unwilling to take on the change and lead the organization, the likelihood that the company will see the change through is much lower. Commitment is important. Acceptance is important. Authentically committing to the acceptance of the change occurring throughout the organization only can increase the companies' chances in successfully completing the change it has taken on. Creating a change initiative is possible, however this does not mean it will always be successful. It takes a lot of work from not only the leader, but also the other members of the organization.

The Meaning of Change and Leadership

Though we may be different, one thing that all humanity has in common is that we all share opinions. These opinions with which we all have sometimes are based off our own experiences that we have been through in life. Our meaning of change and leadership in how we define it is the same way. The experience in what kind of change we have been through thus far in life and in what kind of leadership role we have either taken on or have experienced in the workplace can determine how we interpret the meaning of these phrases.

Since there is not one correct answer, in researching this topic more thoroughly, I have come to determine that change can be defined as the fragile process of altering a situation and creating a method which allows the modification with which you added to stick either temporarily or permanently. For this definition to be completely understood, briefly breaking it down can be a great help. Highlighting a few key points from the definition may help in this. To begin with, you may notice that I referred to it as a process. This is where patience is important. Change does not happen overnight; it is something that may lead over a longer period. There

must be a willingness to understand this and be able to accept that what may be desired, may not happen for an extended period of time. Secondly, I referred to change as “fragile.” This idea indirectly correlates with the third point that I will soon mention. In “The Heart of Change,” Kotter (2012) demonstrates the idea that change indeed can be fragile. The third and final key point to this definition is understanding that change must involve a plan. In order to create an effective change within an organization, there must be a plan set in place. This is where the idea that change being fragile comes in. There are several things involved in any plan that must go right for the plan to fully produce fruit and be a success.

Now onto leadership. Stephen P. Robbins and Timothy A. Judge put together a very informational read that mainly goes into deep detail and importance of behavior within an organization. The book is titled, “Essentials of Organizational Behavior.” Though this book primarily is centered around organizational behavior, it also briefly goes into detail on what leadership is. I thought that Robbins and Judge (2014) provided an educational definition of what leadership is, one that even those who aren’t as knowledgeable on the topic could understand. It is stated in their book that leadership can be defined as “the ability to influence a group toward the achievement of a vision or set of goals.” (Robbins and Judge, 2014. p. 178). This definition exhibits the true meaning of what it means to be a leader. As a leader, you aren’t necessarily “managing” a group of people. Rather, you are taking your skills and pushing and motivating either a person, or group of people in an organization to a specific goal. One point that I believe may be important to make known at this time in the paper is the idea of what an organization is. An organization does not need to be your official workplace. It is important to remember that we can find groups of people in other areas other than at our workplace. For example, many people have families, and as we know there sometimes is change needed in a family at one point or another. For a successful change, perhaps a parent or leader in the family may need to take on the leadership role in the scenario. Several people go to some sort of church. Regardless of religion, many people meet in a place to worship as a community. The church in a way could be considered an organization in terms of it being a business, but for many people it is also a place where they find happiness in the community with which they are involved. The whole idea is to understand that when we refer to leading change in an organization, we aren’t just talking about change in the workplace.

“Dealing with Change”

Before taking a deep dive into what I have found to be the most effective way in going about leading change in an organization, I think touching on the smaller areas in leading change would serve as a productive foundation in truly understanding the most effective ways into effectively leading in a time of change. Nick Tasler in 2016 authored an incredible article titled “How to Get Better at Dealing with Change.” This article emphasizes the smaller (but still extremely important) factors for effectively leading change. In this section, you may notice the several ways in how the smaller factors of leadership matchup with the eight-step process to leading change presented by Kotter (2012). This will be touched on shortly.

As mentioned, this will be brought up later in the paper, but one step that Kotter (2012) includes in his eight-step process to large scale change is the idea of creating short-term wins. In this article, Tasler (2016) does just that. The first way in dealing with change that Tasler (2016) expresses is that finding humor in a situation can help. Now, the article points out that finding humor in your own faults is what will benefit. Going about in trying to make humor of your co-workers' shortcomings will not help. Rather, taking your situation and turning it into something that may decrease the current tension may in a way relax you. Tasler (2016) goes on next to establish another very important point in dealing with change. He mentions how important it is to talk about the problems more than your feelings. Yes, it is important to express yourself, but in a time of change, that could add even more stress. This idea comes down to communicating well. For there to be swift change within any organization, there needs to be consistent and authentic communication with everyone. He states, "research shows that actively and repeatedly broadcasting negative emotions hinders our natural adaptation processes" (Tasler, 2016). This confirms that authentically communicating back and forth about the change, rather than about problems can help one deal with change.

In addition to those ideas that Tasler (2016) brings about, he also emphasizes the importance in accepting the past, fighting for the future, and what change means regarding stability. As leaders, it is very important to remember where you came from. Many organizations have a history. Learning from that history and using it to better your future is a great approach to dealing with change. Avoiding your past will not help. Learning to accept and utilize your past for the future can make all the difference in effectively leading change. Stability is one thing that many people desire in life. Especially during change, we hope for things to go smoothly. However, sometimes change doesn't go as we have planned or hoped. With this said, it is important to not only see all possibilities, but it is also essential to pay close attention to the situation in where you possibly could have done something different. As a leader, in order to effectively lead change, it is important to be attentive to all detail. This will allow for the possibility for things to be stable through the process.

Approaching Change

Just like there are many ways in which we can compare dealing with change to the eight-step process for leading effective change, there too are several factors in approaching change that align with the eight-step process for effectively leading change.

The online program at Norwich University put together a unique article titled "7 Tips for Leading Through Change." This article indirectly specifies the importance of how to approach change. The first way that this article touches on approaching change is by demonstrating the value of remaining calm. Specifically, the article states in approaching change, it is important to "Fully know the details of the transitional process" (Norwich, 2017). Knowing what you are working with and the situation that you are involved in can make all the difference in at any

point in an organization. Not knowing the ins and outs of the change occurring could potentially lead to unsuccessful change within an organization.

Answering general questions about the change that is happening is also a great way to approach the situation. The article states that asking yourself questions like “What is required?” (Norwich, 2017), “what will help maintain momentum?” (Norwich, 2017), and lastly “What brings the greatest reward to an organization?” (Norwich, 2017) are all important questions to at least have a good idea in answering as you approach the change. Furthermore, asking these kinds of questions can only help you as a leader set your priorities and prepare for what is about to take place.

As a leader, it is not only important that you are approaching this change in the most efficient way possible. It is also best to ensure that everyone else in the organization is prepared. This is where communication may come in. Providing and encouraging educational opportunities on the organizational change and even investing in different materials such as programs or books is a way in which we can approach the change as leaders and provide others in the organization the opportunity to know what is coming as well.

Error in Leading Change

Before getting into the eight-step process for effectively leading in change, I would like to reference why many organizations fail in leading change. It was touched on lightly earlier, but a preface that I will make to mention beforehand is that in doing things with common sense or logical reasoning, it does not automatically guarantee that the plan will work and that the change will be a success. We cannot predict the future, which means that unexpected things happen. With this idea, it can be determined that we do not have control of everything. However, we do have the ability to control some situations during the change process. We already have covered how to deal with change and some effective ways in approaching it. It is now a good time to dive into what not to do, and the errors several organizations make while in

the process of change within their organization. All these errors or things to avoid that I will be introducing come from “Leading Change,” written by John P. Kotter (2012).

The first error that several organizations make in the process of going through change is not pushing urgency. In other words, many organizations allow a huge amount of complacency that it in a way shatters the whole plan at hand. As leaders, it must be known that when there is a drastic change in the organization the idea of being mellow must be avoided, there must be some sort of urgency. “Leading Change” states that “without a sense of urgency, people won’t give that extra effort that is often essential” (Kotter, 2012. p. 5). This thought allows us to realize that change must begin somewhere. Starting with ensuring that there is a sense of urgency according to Kotter (2012) is a great place to begin.

Another error that is commonly made by several organizations is that there is no plan or structure. One way several organizations plan change is by putting together a team. Having a team in many ways means you have a plan for what the outcome of the change should be. Referencing to the book, “Leading Change” again, it is mentioned that “guiding coalitions without strong line leadership never seem to achieve the power that is required” (Kotter, 2012. p. 7). Having a strong team of leaders and a plan paves a healthy path with which the change can evolve.

The last key error that many organizations make is celebrating the success too soon. Yes, in leading change there is a great amount of stress and once we, who have been leading the change get to a point where we think we have crossed the finish line and are convinced that we do not have that stress anymore, we can tend to become a little relaxed and declare a victory a little too soon. This is not to say that we cannot celebrate short-term wins because effectively leading change does in fact include the idea that short-term wins must be recognized. Rather, this just means that the leader must not yield in the process of change.

The Eight-Step Process

I would argue that in my research I have found not a better way to wrap this research paper up than by briefly explaining John P. Kotter’s eight-step process to effectively leading change in an organization. This process that Kotter and Cohen (2012) have put together takes all the data and research that was put into writing this paper and brings it together, hopefully to allow for the understanding in what it takes to effectively lead an organization into change. It is important to understand each step. This in turn will allow for a full understanding on this topic.

What to avoid in leading change was just mentioned. As you may remember that data came from Kotter’s “Leading Change.” You may find that some of these steps are the opposite of what to avoid. Additionally, as you read on into what these eight steps consist of, you may notice that some of what was covered earlier is mentioned. Discussing the dealing, approaching, and what to avoid in leadership aligns in many ways with what Kotter and Cohen (2012) have illustrated in the very well-known eight-step process to effectively lead change.

1 - Increase Urgency

When I mentioned an error that several organizations make in time of change, one of them that I brought up was the idea that several organizations do in fact allow too much complacency. The urgency is just not present. This is the first step. According to Kotter (2012), behavior “that looks for opportunities and problems, that energizes colleagues” (Kotter and Cohen, 2012. p. 15) is what is needed. Getting off on the right foot can make a huge impact on whether the change is successful or not.

2 – The Guiding team

It is important in any situation that you remain organized and have some sort of stability in the people who are in any kind of leadership position. The second step that Kotter and Cohen (2012) demonstrate is the importance of establishing a team of leaders, or in other words a team that will be able to guide the process. Many organizations, as you have read earlier fail to do this. Just about everything in the eight-step process can only be done based off the previous step. Kotter and Cohen state “A feeling of urgency helps greatly in putting together the right group to guide change and in creating essential teamwork within the group” (Kotter and Cohen, 2012. p. 37). Without a sense of urgency, forming the right group can be difficult, and if the right group isn’t formed, reaching the fullest potential in the next six steps may be difficult.

3 – Creating the Vision

The vision can be seen as a crucial turning point in the change process. Many organizations jump into change without realizing even what their plan is. Therefore, this is why forming the right group of people is so important. An effective way in creating a vision would be to at first make it to be as simplified as possible. As the vision is deliberated on, things will narrow out and something clear and understandable will evolve from it.

4 – Communication

Step two consisted of putting a group of people together. Though that group discusses and leads the change, they are not the only people who are kept up to date with what is going on. The importance of how we communicate during change was brought up earlier in and Kotter and Cohen (2012) confirm that fact just by including communication as a step in the process. There are some things that work more so than others in terms of communicating. Many organizations have several members who aren’t in charge of creating or leading the change. There may be some confusion by some of these people. Questions may come up. Part of effectively communicating the changes to the rest of the organization is clarifying and giving updates on any questions or concerns that they may have. Additionally, Kotter and Cohen (2012) bring up the idea that “doing your homework before communicating” (Kotter and Cohen,

2012. p. 100) is important as well. This only allows you as a leader to know what you are saying when it comes time for anything to be communicated.

5 – Empower Action

Step five can be seen as very important as well. This in a way is when several others in the organization are given more optimism and hope that the change that is taking place will turn out successful. At this point in the change, this is where the organization is currently seeking people who have experience in change and bolstering the self-confidence of others.

6 – Recognizing Short-Term Wins

Out of all eight steps, this step I would say has the greatest impact on the moral of the people in the organization. Change can be difficult. However, it is inevitable and possible to get through if the correct approach is taken. One way to lessen the stress of change is by fully participating in step six. Step six is all about creating short term victories during the process of the change. Being that change is unpredictable and some things aren't in our control, it is important to stay optimistic and focus too on the small things that are good for the change that is happening. These short term wins also can spark a little bit of faith and hope in those who may still be in question or doubt. Kotter and Cohen (2012) also state that "Wins build faith in the effort, attracting those who are not yet actively helping" (Kotter and Cohen, 2012. p. 125). It is certainly true that not everyone assists in the change as some people may oppose it. With that in mind, what Kotter and Cohen (2012) are saying is that seeing that there is actually good happening could allow for others to jump on board and actively participate in the change.

7 – Keeping it Up

In our human nature, sometimes we could be so close to something that we feel like we have already completed it. This is exactly what this step is all about. Avoiding the idea that you as a leader have been successful for six steps already could push you to let off the gas a little bit thinking that since you have come this far, it is impossible to now fail. Keeping up the urgency and allowing staying on track with your vision cannot be let up at this point.

Step 8 – Making the Change Stick

Chances are, an organization is going through a process of change to better itself. Kotter and Cohen (2012) mention in the final step that "we keep a change in place by helping to create a new, supportive, and sufficiently strong organizational culture" (Kotter and Cohen, 2012. p. 159). This step ensures that the change that was made is meant to stay. Keeping the right structure together and ensuring that the new employee orientations are accurate with the change that was made are ways that an organization can truly stick to the new change that has taken place in the organization.

Conclusion

We now know that change is inevitable as all organizations at some point go through it. We have taken an in-depth dive into dealing with change, approaching change, and what to avoid during change. All of the smaller key points and details from these specific topics are what it takes to effectively lead change in an organization. Several of these points that were made by Tasler (2016) and Norwich University (2017) even tie into the eight-step process that Kotter and Cohen (2012) have illustrated. All these ideas and reasons are what it takes to effectively lead change in an organization

Reference Page

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