

Change Scenario

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Authors Note

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Abstract

This paper presents an organization that needs change. Dreamchaser Leadership offered an expedition in Alaska in 2020, and it was replete with problems from the start. Using Kotter's eight-stage change model, a review of the literature was conducted. A proposal was developed on the best practices to be used to implement change in the organization. The literature supported how Kotter's model can be used effectively in this organization and provide insight and understanding of what it takes to make the real organizational change effective and separate this organization from others in an industry that is excited about new ideas.

Keywords: change management, Kotter's eight-stage process, organizational change

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Introduction

Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV) tells us that, “for I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” This passage tells us that Christians can comfort in knowing that God promises to be there for us. For this paper, this author examined an organization that he is involved in. It is called Dreamchaser Leadership, and in 2019-2020 they planned and executed an expedition across Alaska that re-traced the 1925 serum run. When Forto took over the organization, it was replete with problems. Having only a basic understanding of the processes required to implement organizational change, the organization floundered throughout the expedition. This paper will examine Kotter’s eight-stage model by reviewing the literature and providing a methodology to implement change in the organization.

The Organization

It was Robert Forto’s dream since he was a teenager to move to Alaska and run a team of sled dogs to Nome. He started running sled dogs in Minnesota in the early 1990s while he was still in college and eventually moved to Colorado, where he met his soon-to-be wife, Michele, and soon they would form a business, a sled dog team, and start racing. By 2010 the family had decided to move to Alaska to run sled dogs and run the infamous Iditarod Sled Dog Race, which runs over 1000 miles from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska. Shortly after he arrived, he worked in a sled dog kennel for two winters and found out about a non-profit organization called Norman Vaughn’s Serum Run ’25. It was an expedition where they would organize a trip of like-minded adventurers that would follow the route and re-create the experience, from a historical perspective, from Nenana to Nome that delivered life-saving diphtheria serum to the residents of

Nome in 1925. As it was called, this ‘race for mercy’ was a dog sled relay where dog team drivers, called mushers, would leap-frog down the trail with the precious cargo. The serum made it to Nome in just over a week to much fanfare, in a time where radio, telegraphs, and newspapers were in their heyday.

A 2020 Expedition

In 2011 the last Norman Vaughn Serum Run ’25 was run. The trip was a success, but the organization was in shambles. Shortly after the trip, Forto was offered to continue the trip in future years by the organizers, but he could not use the name or the legal identity of the non-profit. The organization's original members moved on to different things but promised they would-be consultants, to Forto if he ever needed advice. He agreed to start gathering a team and rebuilding the organization based loosely on what was left of the non-profit.

It took almost nine years to get the organization organized, and Forto even went so far as returning to college to learn outdoor leadership. During his sports management degree, with an emphasis in outdoor adventure sports at Liberty University, he realized what he thought would be the methodology and nuisances that he would need to plan and execute an expedition of this magnitude. Forto’s master’s degree internship was just that; to conduct an expedition to Nome. In June 2019, he began building a team, and five coordinators were put in place. It would be the job of these five to plan the trip and make sure it was a success. Forto formed a new organization, Dreamchaser Leadership, along with this group of five. Forto’s role would be the expedition leader. His role was to empower people, build a guiding coalition, create an appropriate vision, and remove as many barriers as possible. These steps are outlined clearly in the Kotter (2012) text and part of his eight-stage process for creating significant change. Up to this point, Forto thought he was doing everything right. This could not be further from the truth.

Over the next several months, a group of fifteen adventurers would be picked based on a rigorous application process, and they became part of the organization's planning committee for the expedition. The group met monthly virtually and over hours-long conference calls, which resulted in little progress and quite a bit of frustration. By February 2020, the team arrived in Nenana, Alaska, to embark on the trip. From the very first moment, the organization was in shambles. The need for change was imminent, and the leadership for the expedition floundered day by day. Twenty-one days later, less than half of the original group made it to Nome and the organization all but disbanded. Wounded and nearly destroyed, the organization's future cannot continue without a thorough examination of what went wrong and how to rectify it if they ever want to rerun the trip. This exercise is so timely and will be an excellent tool to examine what can be done in the future.

Methodology and Plan for Implementation

Philippians 4:6-8 (NIV) gives Christians advice on implementing change. It says that we should not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present our requests to God. By doing so, the peace of God will transcend our understanding and guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, whatever is right, noble, and pure, scripture advises us to think about such things. Kotter (2012) argues that people who have been through difficult, painful, and unsuccessful change efforts often draw pessimistic and angry conclusions.

Kotter (2012) argues that successful transformations are based on one fundamental insight: that significant change will not happen quickly. Change can stall for a variety of reasons such as inwardly focused cultures, paralyzing bureaucracy, parochial politics, low level of trust, lack of teamwork, arrogant attitudes, a lack of leadership, and fear of the unknown. (Kotter,

2012) Looking back, surprisingly, every one of these reasons was involved in the 2020 expedition. How is that even possible that an organization can have that many hurdles and still find a way to function?

In hindsight, the 2020 expedition should have never started. In examining the errors listed in the Kotter text, the organization can honestly say they have every single one. It will be interesting to explore this process. By having a better understanding of Kotter's eight-stage process of creating significant change, it should enable and equip those involved in the future of Dreamchaser Leadership with the tools and strategies to move forward with a clear plan of action and have the ability to navigate each step in a coherent way in the future.

Establish a Sense of Urgency

As Kotter (2012) suggests, by far, the biggest mistake that people make when trying to change organizations is to plunge ahead without establishing a high enough sense of urgency in fellow managers or employees. This is what happened with the Dreamchaser organization. Everyone involved was excited about the prospect of this trip. To many of them, it would be a once in a lifetime trip. Forto will admit that complacency was high, and he did nothing to thwart it. There was no urgency in any of the organizational process. He and the others were all accomplished outdoor adventurers. All of them thought, how hard could this be? We can just show up at the start and do what we do best.

This complacency caused a rift that was difficult to overcome. New strategies were not implemented well. The basic assumption of a rational model toward change is that the organization and the employees' behavior are ordered and controllable. (AlManei, Salonitis, & Tsinopoulos, 2018) Steps one to three of the Kotter model will allow the organization to develop a climate necessary for change. Forto and his colleagues did not see this as a problem and thus

started the downward spiral that would continue through the planning and implementation processes of the 2020 expedition. The organization needs to convey the need for change, away from the laissez-faire leadership style, and engage the involved individuals.

Creating a Guiding Coalition

A significant change in an organization cannot occur unless the organization's head is a significant supporter. In this organization, Forto and his team thought that they could develop a group where everyone had a say on every decision and in every aspect of the planning. This error was one of the most obvious, looking back at the organization and the one that if they implemented a change early on would most likely have a much different outcome. As Kotter (2012) notes, efforts that lack a sufficiently powerful guiding coalition can make progress for a while, but countervailing forces will sooner or later undermine initiatives.

Kang's (2020) research shows that transparency is needed in communicating how and why an organization chose a specific system. Instead of having everyone in the organization be on an equal playing field than those in charge, Dreamchaser Leadership had no method of confronting personnel problems. Moving forward, the organization needs to implement buy-in from the start of the planning of any new expedition and engage all of the participants, and form sub-groups in areas where people can be most effective. The organization needs to understand the importance of creating a guiding coalition and not underestimate the difficulties of producing change.

Developing a Vision and Strategy and Communicating it to the Stakeholders

When the 2020 expedition was publicly announced, there was so much excitement. The outdoor adventurer community around the nation contacted the organizers and tried to find out how they can become involved. Remember, trips like this occurred for many years, and a lot was

known about the past expeditions. Where Dreamchaser Leadership failed is they failed to create a powerful vision. The organization sat on their coattails and used the format of what worked in the past as a blueprint of the future.

Once the participants were picked for the 2020 expedition, very quickly, everyone had their own idea on how the trip should be planned and take place. Instead of having a vision in place, the process dissolved into a list of confusing, incompatible, and time-consuming projects that went in the wrong direction. (Kotter, 2012) The participants began to manipulate the events behind the scenes quietly and purposefully avoiding any discussion, precisely as Kotter (2012) postulates in his text.

Moving forward, the organization must communicate their vision throughout the company and its internal and external stakeholders. This includes those involved in the planning process and those that are participating in the expeditions. This communication must consist of training and communicating to the stakeholders that will enable them to work on their projects through ownership and responsibility. (AlManei et al., 2018) For the 2020 expedition, the organization had a very detailed operation manual, but very few of the policies and procedures outlined were followed. This needs to change.

Empowering Broad-based Action

Sometimes the obstacle for change is in the organizational structure. Narrow job categories or responsibilities can undermine efforts to increase productivity. (Kotter, 2012) This is precisely what happened in the Dreamchaser Leadership organization. The organization did not have a firm grasp of an organizational structure's importance with distinct roles and responsibilities. Instead, they allowed every participant to have an equal voice. This system

quickly developed into the participants, and even some of the organizational five, to choose between the vision or lack of, and their self-interests.

Looking back, the organization failed to provide any resources in any form or fashion to make sure that the vision could become a success. Again, they naively thought that this was just another trip, and it could be done without any real understanding of the obstacles they may face. Moving forward, the organization must formulate self-driven teams and provide resources for projects. These resources could come in the way of delivering financial capital or expertise in other areas. (AlManei et al., 2018)

Generating Short-term Wins

Even though the group finished the expedition in Nome twenty-one days after it started, they limped into the village. In the end, more than half of the participants were no longer on the trip, including Forto, who had to pull out for several reasons. His snow machine was un-drivable, but that was only part of the reason for leaving. The expedition had become a toxic environment. The participants were continually bickering back and forth, and everyone was blaming everybody else for problems on the trail. This was fueled by many things, including the need to save money, makeup days missed because of delays, the constant pressure of the media, and the weather. In short, the organization failed to create short-term wins. Instead of celebrating the very fact that we were a team of like-minded adventurers doing what we loved to do in the outdoors, the participants were repeatedly frustrated.

Kotter places a strong emphasis on his stages occurring in sequential order, finding that failing to do so rarely works well, and it does not build naturally. (Hackman, 2017) Change comes across as contrived and forced, and little momentum is built. Looking back, Forto and his team tried to implement a system from day one that they thought would work. Instead, they were

continually putting out fires that built on the problems and errors created by not having a firm grasp on the leadership process for a group and expedition of this magnitude. Moving forward, the organization needs to recognize the necessity of celebrating short term victories, no matter how small or if they seem relevant at the moment.

Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change

Surprisingly, the 2020 expedition happened at all given all of its problems. As noted here, error after error was made from the onset and the formation of the organization. Many of these errors were made because of a lack of understanding of group dynamics and the group constantly arguing about who was right or wrong. This needs to change immediately if the organization ever expects to operate another expedition in the future. Moving forward, when a guiding coalition is formed, and they begin working unofficially in their new positions, it is then the time to consolidate gains and produce more change. (Hackman, 2017) Within this organization, this must be done as they move forward in their future expedition planning. As Kotter warns, critical momentum can be lost, and regression can follow. (Hackman, 2017) The organization needs to monitor their progress and make any necessary changes at crucial moments. (Baloh, Zhu, & Ward, 2018)

Making it Stick

Making any of the errors in the organizational change process can be detrimental to the organization. Remember that Forto took over an organization that had a rich history but also a lot of problems. All of these inherited problems were shadowed because he had a dream of planning a trip like this, but sadly those dreams were followed by not having a firm grasp on what was needed to organize an expedition of this magnitude. Instead, the organization must focus on what By, Kuipers, and Procter (2018) define as the team-organization nexus, where an organizational

philosophy is developed around decisions where team members impact the role and shape of the organization. Using this model and the steps outlined in Kotter (2012), our team can create a supportive, proactive, agile, adaptive, and flexible organization. Secondly, with this new understanding of the change process, Forto and the organization can take the advice of AlManei et al. (2018) and follow the model provided by Kotter to ensure sustained change.

Conclusion

As Hackman (2017) suggests, Kotter's eight stage change model provides a practical and workable structure for reorganization. For the Dreamchaser Leadership organization to move forward and offer expeditions in the future, they need to establish a sense of urgency, create a guiding coalition, develop and communicate a vision and strategy that comes from the organization's planners. This vision needs to provide an expectation that those involved, either in the organization or as participants on future trips, will be empowered to enact change, and their input will be valued. This commitment by the organization can be served to keep change moving forward. By following this model, it will allow the organization to grow and evolve and continue to progress. This organization can offer something unique. Trips and expeditions are in high demand, and there is real interest from people in the outdoor adventure community around the world. Having a firm understanding of what it takes to make the real organizational change effective can separate this organization from others in an industry that is excited about new ideas.

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