

Case Study on Organizational Change

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Authors Note

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Abstract

Kotter's model is one of the most frequently cited guides for implementing organizational change. This model is widely used across many industries and contexts, including higher education, outdoor expeditions, and hospital settings. In this paper, we describe how we can use Kotter's model as a guide when embarking on understanding best practices and analyzing three case studies related to the change management literature. We also attempt to incorporate a Christian worldview and integrate biblical elements and the scholar and secular literature.

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

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Introduction

As far back as biblical times and King Solomon's reign, we have been in pursuit of change. When considering the Merida (2015) text, we can see that Solomon is a clear example of listening when it comes to change. Ecclesiastes 2:16 (NIV) tells us that “for the wise, as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool.” Today, millennia later, research on organizational change is a much-debated topic and one of much reverence. Change has an impact on personal lives, family firms, large corporations, and Main Street businesses. Interestingly, the literature about organizational change points out associations between organizational change attributes and well-being at work and makes the exploration of the topic timely for this paper. (Quinlan, 2007; Quinlan, Bohle & Mayhew, 2001; cited in de Fátima Nery, Franco, & Neiva, 2020)

The purpose of this paper will focus on the best practices in the change management literature and apply them to real-world concepts through the review of several case studies as they related to Kotter’s eight-stage model and, where possible, use a Christian worldview. The field of organizational behavior has long credited communication of the change method as a driver of change readiness among employees (Armenakis et al. 1993; as cited in Raftery, 2018) and perhaps the most crucial role is that of the change agent, defined in the organizational literature as internal champions of change who act as an official transition team to guide the transition. (Hunsucker and Loos 1989; Kanter 1983; as cited in Lines, 2017) This understanding of what, who, how, and why will allow us to disseminate timely information and better understand how scholars like Kotter develop their models that can be applied to today’s

organizations based on the premise that dates back to biblical history. Like then, we still are striving to be a little better at what we do.

Best Practices in Organizational Change

Kotter (2012) describes an eight-stage model for implementing significant change as a process that includes building strong collaborative teams with a solid strategy, creating effective communication channels, supporting staff empowerment, using a phased and strategic approach, and securing the change within an organization's culture. To facilitate effective change, there are best practices listed in the literature that should support and expedite a successful change management initiative. They are choosing the right change agents; making change desirable; making change relevant; communicating the change on all levels; timing the change process right; ironing out the kinks before the process is released; recruiting help from within; fully integrate the change; keep checking in, and give the change process time to develop.

The change process, especially in its initial stages, can be challenging and unpredictable. An organization must plan to select the right change agents that will support the change process and keep it running smoothly from the outset. Kotter (2012) postulates that significant change is often said to be impossible unless the organization's head is an active supporter. Kotter describes building a powerful coalition. Within that coalition should be an individual with strong communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills and the capacity to work effectively in various situations. Specht, Kuonath, Pachler, Weisweiler, & Frey (2018). describes change agents as sponsors that promote change initiatives in organizations, actively construct their environment, and act as a catalyst in convincing their organization to support relevant issues. To give a specific example, Specht et al. (2018) examined how change agents implemented projects to improve teaching climates in a university setting with a strong research tradition and found

that if a change agent can successfully motivate stakeholders, they can keep them engaged and shape the environment.

For change to be effective, it must be desirable. A successful change management campaign should help the stakeholders understand the organization's change by effectively communicating problems with the current system and soliciting advice in making the transition successful. Greeny (2013) describes this as engaging formal and influential leaders. The author goes on to argue that the CEO's should develop specific plans to ensure that they regularly teach, model, praise, and hold those that are responsibly accountable for behaving in new and better ways. (Greeny et al. 2013, p. 163) This desirability toward change is where an actionable vision comes into play as well. King, Hopkins, & Cornish (2018) postulate that creating a desirable and compelling message about what the change is intended to achieve will create an identity among the stakeholders and develop an understanding of what will be delivered to service users.

Next, the change proposed must be relevant. The organization must present the big picture (or vision) to the stakeholders by outlining its goals and illustrating how the change system will achieve them. In practice, this process should break down the benefits and how they apply to the stakeholders. Just as Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NIV) describes the change as a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens, the literature shows that a change plan must be in place. Wentworth, Behson, & Kelley (2018; 2020;) argue that it is impossible to move forward without a goal because the organization's members must know what comprises the new plan and why it is vital to be implemented successfully.

Communication is one of the critical areas of importance in any change management plan. Kotter (2012) argues that a great vision can serve a useful purpose even if just a few people understand it. Still, the real power of a vision is unleashed only when most of those involved in

an enterprise understand its goals and directions. Baloh, Zhu, & Ward (2018) studied the importance of communication in a hospital setting change process and found that it was of utmost importance in determining if a team could communicate about hurdles. The study found that if obstacles could be transmitted along the way with a well-designed plan on overcoming the barrier, then the stakeholders had a much better chance of being successful. (Baloh et al., 2018)

When determining best practices, the time must be right. Kotter (2012) argues that employees tend to resist change more when introduced suddenly, and they have little time to adjust. It is essential in any change effort for the organization to release information as soon as possible and then roll out the change process in incremental steps. Grenny (2012) describes this as looking for crucial moments. Ecclesiastes 8:6 (NIV) shows us that there is a time for everything, and a wise man discerns when it comes upon him. Wentworth et al. (2018; 2020;) found that early success in an organization hinges on the time of a change process. Getting people on board promptly is pivotal in announcing and promoting change efforts. These methods can be used as a change model for an organization and demonstrate its effectiveness in the change process. (Wentworth et al., 2018; 2020;)

It is always a best practice to iron out any of the kinks before implementing any change effort and to make sure that systems are in place before an organization decides to implement a new system. What is more important is for an organization to recruit from within to manage change. A firm should choose widely respected individuals among their teams. Change agents should train these employees first and allow them to set a positive and encouraging atmosphere while guiding other employees through the change process. The literature recognizes that attitudes are a crucial driver of individual behaviors. (Ajzen, 2001; Glassman and Albarracian, 2006; as cited in Rafferty, 2018) Rafferty (2018) identified change readiness as a mediator of

relationships among the change beliefs and positive emotions about change and change supporting behaviors. There is precedent for this practice dating back to the biblical times and Elijah and Elisha's story in 1 and 2 Kings as described in Merida (2015) as the doctrine of God's electing grace should give encouragement to depressed servants. (p. 147)

Kotter (2012) argues that cultural change comes last, not first. One of the biggest impediments to creating change in a group is culture. (Kotter, 2012) Therefore organizations must follow the best practices of ensuring that the change process sticks. Helping employees adapt to the change faster and make sure new employees understand it right away is key to keeping a change effort in place. Change agents and other key stakeholders should continue to check in with their teams and encourage their employees to provide feedback on the modified operations and identify what is working and what is not. More importantly, change is a process, and it must be given time. Organizations should be flexible and collaborative, allowing them to perfect the change effort even if it looks different from when it started. As Kotter (2012) argues, if organizations are not prepared for a change in the future, they might be left behind in an ever-changing business environment.

In contrast, innovation is not the only reason for the change. An innovative organization and a robust culture within the firm will provide a nexus to remain relevant in the future. Influential leaders believe in improvement, and leaders should be able to articulate what they wish to see from improvement activities. (Crump, 2008; Kemp, 2006; Mazzocato et al., 2014; Micallef and Straw 2014; Millward and Bryan, 2005; as cited in By, Kuipers, & Procter, 2018) Simply, organizational culture is often seen as a building block, and the lean leader must ensure that culture is devoted to quality. (By et al., 2018).

Case Studies in Organizational Change

A Christian life includes a process of change. Change away from our self-centeredness and toward God-centeredness. The gospel of Jesus Christ makes this change possible, but it does not come easy. 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 earn comfort in knowing that God will be there for us. We can see that change is possible throughout biblical and modern history. The difference is a significant factor in the Merida text as well as throughout the scholarly literature. How change is interpreted and implemented on an organizational level can develop based on processes from the far distant past to include current research.

Let us look at three case studies. In our research of best practices, we discuss the need to make change relevant. It is no secret that change can be challenging, and as a leader, we must influence our stakeholders to commit to the process. Greeny (2012) postulates that most of us are mostly successful most of the time. This means our problems typically boil down to a few perfect storms when everything lines up against us. (Greeny 2012, p. 50) The behaviors we implement during those few crucial moments will help us succeed.

The first case is personal to this author and shows how a change effort can fail if it is not appropriately implemented. In this organization, this author organized a multi-week expedition with adventurers across Alaska last February and March. The trip was a disaster on many levels. Still, one of the failures was that the leadership failed to communicate their vision effectively. The trip became a process dissolved into many confusing, incompatible, and time-consuming projects that went in the wrong direction. Moving forward, for change to be implemented effectively for this organization, communication must consist of training and communicating to

the stakeholders that will enable them to work on projects through ownership and responsibility. (AlManei et al., 2018) Stakeholder reactions to organizational change are affected by transformational leaders, who foster employees' readiness for and commitment to change and motivate them to act in support of the change. (Faupel & Sub, 2018) By doing so, the role of transformational leadership in this case of the expedition can help sensitize managers about how they can positively influence employees or, in this case, participants in the course of organizational change. (Faupel & Sub, 2018)

Next, let us look at a case of how Kotter's change model was used as a template for a successful organization-wide change at a mid-sized U.S. university. (Wentworth et al., 2018) The change involved implementing a new student evaluation system, used as part of an evaluation system for faculty tenure and promotion. (Wentworth et al., 2018) Although the change effort was successful overall, there were areas of concern. Two of those areas are that the university did not time the change process at the right time, and they did not iron out the kinks before rolling out the change process. In the university's case, the vendor they used was in the final year of their contract with the college, and even before the vendor moved over to a fully online system. (Wentworth et al., 2018) This confused the students taking the evaluation surveys and made the situation less than ideal. Moving forward, the university needs a better understanding of Kotter's change model as a guide for such settings. More information needs to be obtained to make sense of contextual factors that guide the change process. (Kang, Chen, Svihla, Gallup, Ferris, & Datye, 2020)

Lastly, let's examine how the process of change prescribed in Kotter's change model applies to implementing team hurdles in eight rural hospitals. In this study, researchers followed eight hospitals implementing team hurdles over two years, and they interviewed the teams

quarterly to inquire about the implementation process. (Baloh et al., 2018) The results showed that in half of the hospitals, change processes were congruent with Kotter's model, where performance in the initial phase influenced their success in subsequent steps. (Baloh et al., 2018) The change process was incongruent with the Kotter model and their success in the other hospitals depending on other factors outside of the change model process.

Kotter (2012) argues that successful change of any magnitude goes through all eight stages, usually sequentially. Skipping even one single step or getting too far ahead without a solid base almost always creates problems. (Kotter, 2012) This appears to be the case in the hospital study. More than half of the hospitals failed to implement their desired change. The study's findings support the need for the foundation and implementation of the process outlined by Kotter is particularly important in establishing a sense of urgency, in this case, why the hospitals needed to implement the hurdles. (Baloh et al., 2018) Secondly, the hospitals where the process failed did not form a guiding coalition (a team committed to implementing hurdles). (Baloh et al., 2018) Not following these steps outlined in Kotter's model, it is nearly impossible to settle on a more detailed process moving forward. (Kotter, 2012) By not following the process and skipping steps, the change effort rarely works well because it does not build and develop naturally. (Kotter, 2012) The strategy comes across as contrived and forced and often does not build the momentum needed to move forward.

Conclusion

Organizational change is not an easy process. It can be replete with complexities and challenges. Kotter's eight-step model for implementing meaningful change can be used to develop a strategy for organizations to use as a roadmap to create a process of what they want, how they want it, and why and when to do it. Change management has been the focus of study

from as far back as biblical time and focuses on much research in the secular and scholarly literature. Having a better understanding of the change process can allow the leader to achieve true success moving forward within their organization and motivating their people, teams, and clients that a culture they develop will be a driving force in the future.

In short, the change should focus on people. As Kotter (2012) maintains, we should never lose touch with the human element when we embark on organizational change. When businesses are looking to change behaviors, they need to motivate, engage and include those affected by the process. This has held firm as far back as Solomon, Elijah, and Elisha, to the teachings of Jesus Christ, and onward to modern organizations such as outdoor expeditions, universities, and hospitals. As Kotter notes, if we fail to change, we fail to thrive in the future.

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