

John Kotter's "Stages of a Successful Change Process" Model¹

Have you ever made a plan with steps leading to a particular outcome, assigned responsibilities, and set due dates for completion of specific actions and have it end up collecting dust on your desk, in a drawer or on a shelf? Unfortunately, this happens all too often with our plans. Even the best leaders with the best intentions can find themselves in this situation.

Professor John P. Kotter of Harvard University has identified six common causes for change efforts to fail and suggests eight steps to keep these six errors above from occurring. The first four stages are meant to "prepare the soil" so that it can accept "the seeds of change." The next three steps provide a set of new practices that will help establish the desired new status. The final step is to make sure that the change is sustainable over time

The six common causes of failure he identified are:

1. **Allowing too much complacency:** When people feel that things are going well enough, and when there is no clear urgency for the proposed change, it is hard to mobilize people to do the change work that is needed.
2. **Failing to create a sufficiently powerful guiding coalition:** When key authority figures are absent from the team that has responsibility for implementing the change, it is hard to get others to join forces and take the work seriously.
3. **Underestimating the power of vision:** Formal goals and specific steps are important, but not enough to motivate and
4. **Under communicating the vision by a factor of 10 (or 100 or even 1,000):** Even when there is a vision, senior managers either neglect to communicate it at all, or do it in ways that is neither compelling nor inspires people to make the sacrifices that are called for.
5. **Permitting obstacles to obscure the new vision:** When real or perceived obstacles remain in place, and little or no effort is made to remove them, people often consider the proposed change "not really all that serious."
6. **Failing to create short-term wins:** When employees do not see any positive effect in the short term, it is hard to keep them engaged.

¹ Kotter, John P. *Leading Change*. Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 1996.

Kotter's 8 Stages

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency

We need to communicate that the need for change is **unavoidable**. The confrontation with reality leaves us no room for hope that we can continue working as we always have. A sense of urgency entails starting to move in the direction of the change. When, in an organization, people say that change is urgent, but actions are not congruent with those words (for example, there is no budget for the changes that are needed, or people don't come to meetings because they feel that they have more important things to do), then the sense of urgency is undermined. A change process initiated under those circumstances will be so fragile that any resistance will block it.

2. Creating the Guiding Coalition

Who should be included in such a guiding coalition? Mobilizing an organization to support a profound change will undoubtedly generate resistance from those parts of the system that fear a serious loss. Some of these groups or people may be very powerful. Thus, the coalition that is guiding the change process needs to be able to counteract measures of sabotage or other forms of resistance. Its members must have both the credibility and the authority to make decisions, remove obstacles, and obtain necessary resources. This means that key decision-makers as well as informal leaders need to be part of the coalition and that these people represent different parts of the organization.

3. Developing a Vision and Strategy

Generate a point of reference in the future. The vision of “where are we going and how are we going to get there” has to be compelling and clear, containing enough overall direction and enough appealing details to get people moving together in the same direction. A good vision aligns people and departments, but only if it can be communicated easily. If the vision statement is very long, confusing, or abstract, it will do little to invite individuals to align their personal visions with the organizational one. Ideally, a vision is created by all the key stakeholders, so then it becomes a shared vision. Strategy tells people how the organization is most likely to realize the vision. Strategy anchors the desired future state in a thorough knowledge of current reality (strengths, weaknesses, threats, opportunities, and trends) and indicates the best ways to move into the future.

4. Communicating the Change Vision

Articulating the vision and strategy is important, but not sufficient. If we want to encourage people to take initiative, if we want to unleash the organization's creative potential, people have to share the vision, and that requires careful communication. You cannot just announce the vision in a bulletin or letter from the director, or post it on signs on the walls. The vision needs to be “invoked” at every important meeting, at every important discussion, in every key decision.

5. Empowering Broad-Based Action

Getting to this point requires having achieved a certain level of success with each of the previous stages. Otherwise, the change will fail here and, in fact, this is the point at which many changes do fail. When people

get excited about the change and mobilize, they begin to take initiative and, in doing so, solve problems, take risks, and innovate. It is important that people are encouraged to do this and are rewarded for it. If existing procedures, structures, or behaviors squelch such initiatives, the guiding coalition needs to take steps to remove the obstacles so that the right signals are sent. It is very easy for initial enthusiasm to turn into frustration and to sap people's energy.

6. Generating Short-Term Wins

People need concrete reinforcement. If you want them to remain engaged and motivated, they have to feel that they are moving in the right direction. Visions are always grand and long-term, and they cannot be accomplished in six months. It is therefore important to aim for some short term victories that can be celebrated, to convince people that the change is happening, and that the change is good.

7. Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change

Although concrete accomplishments are important because they encourage people, the risk is that they may seduce an organization into declaring victory too soon. If people believe that, with those accomplishments, they have succeeded, the tendency is to go back to "normal" work, as if the change initiative was only an interruption. People need to be engaged in more projects, work with new themes, and include new change agents to create other accomplishments, each with more depth or breadth. If changes have occurred in some units, they need to be replicated in other units. If certain work practices have changed, they need to be converted into a more permanent system that formalizes the new procedures as part of a new way of working.

8. Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture

You may think that if you've come this far, there's no way to reverse the change. But many organizations, after four or five years of profound change, have learned that if the change has not become part of the organization's culture, an action in the general director's office can stop it, and even reverse it. Anchoring the change in the culture means making it part of "how we do things here," so that the strength of the culture will prevail if new decision-makers try to undo the changes.

