ESSAY

A Review and Application of
John Kotter's *Leading Change*

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Seminal sociology scholar Norbert Elias (1970) suggested that sociology seeks to develop an understanding of individual behavior as it relates to the thoughts and actions of the broader environment. Only when we see ourselves in the context of others do we cultivate a sociological understanding of the individual and his/her relationships to family, community, and nation In reviewing John Kotter's groundbreaking text, *Leading Change* (1996), we recognize several similarities between Elias and Kotter. In addition to emphasizing the importance of individual versus group behavior, both scholars put forward a structural framework highlighting ways to better understand how individuals and groups are influenced when being impacted by change. While Elias focuses more on human social systems, Kotter is interested, primarily, in business and industry systems.

The Elias model, as discussed in his foundational work *What is Sociology?* (1970), illuminates the individual's socio-personal experiences (ego-experiences) in comparison to family, school, state, community, and industry. The Kotter model, which was discussed at length in *Leading Change*, is one of the most respected, utilized, and replicated change models in the world (Wentworth, Behson, and Kelly 2018). It highlights eight prescribed stages of socio-organizational change. The steps are pre-established to serve as a strategic guide-map, and are created to address both the individual and collective behaviors of the group. What follows here is an examination of the general underpinnings of the Kotter's steps along with a practical application touchpoint. The practical application segments will be based on a fictitious church-based organization (ABC Church).

While there is limited research focusing on church management and social change, some studies highlight the inability of churches to plan, manage, organize, and lead in an effective manner. According to Irwin and Roller (2008), a large percentage of pastors and church staff lack the required managerial skill to lead their respective institutions. As a result, many of these churches struggle with fiscal oversight, operations, and administrative efficiency. Another study conducted by Broekmann (2001) claims that many Christian church managers do not feel comfortable implementing managerial/business principles at churches and places of worship. The study goes on to suggest a need for a newly developed set of contemporary church management approaches created to fill the current gap. To address the gap, the

following segments of this study will apply the Kotter change model to a fictious church-based organization entitled ABC Church.

Establishing a Sense of Urgency

In his first stage, Establishing a Sense of Urgency, Kotter suggests that all planned change efforts must be partnered with a sense of energy and exigency. In *Our Iceberg Is Melting*, Kotter and Rathgerber posit that promoting urgency is about helping "others see the need for change and the importance of acting immediately" (2006). In *Leading Change* (1996), Kotter reminds us that the proposed change must be more than a managerial proclamation. It should also be grounded in action and activity. Only then will the change stick. A review of contemporary change research supports Kotter in this regard. Heim and Sardar-Drenda (2020) note, for example, that an emphasis on urgency and positive group relationships lead to successful change initiatives. Urgency becomes a precursor to competitive advantage and effective group dynamics.

Practical Application: A church-based organization in ABC Church provides its employees with a 20-item survey instrument. The survey questions delve into the complexities of employee motivation and worker morale with respect to the organization's work teams. The survey results denote that 65% of the workforce reports low to average levels of employee motivation. Moreover, 75% of employees report low levels of morale. After reviewing the results, the ABC Church change-team promptly coordinates an all-employee meeting to discuss the study and potential problems associated with low morale and employee motivation. An initiative is established to uncover and meet the work needs of employees. The initiative is inclusive, immediate, and created to cultivate an improved work culture. Urgency is established.

Developing a Strong Coalition

Leading Change reminds us that nothing can be accomplished without the right people. Employees/group members are the driving force of any change initiative, and it is through the integration of their collective efforts that positive change occurs. In addition to selecting group members that are suited for the planned change effort, Kotter (1996) explains that organizations should construct environments conducive to autonomy and self- empowerment. Putting the team together is important, but it is also critical that the team is both respected and supported by leadership. Such an action can best be accomplished by seeing and utilizing all the talents of every employee regardless of where they reside on the organizational chart (Wentworth, Behson, and Kelly 2018). The point here is that powerful coalitions are developed through creative motivation and supported involvement. Contemporary research studies, such as the work of Onyeneke and Abe (2021), reiterate, for instance, that effective communication

and meeting the behavioral needs of the group is key. Employees that experience high levels of autonomy tend to be more productive and effective.

Practical Application: The ABC Church leaders select a multidisciplinary team charged with addressing issues of low employee morale and employee motivation at the church (pastor, rector, elder, youth pastor, music director). The change-team will be provided with the decision-making authority it needs to develop applicable policies and procedures.

Creating a Vision

In conjunction with the transformation steps discussed thus far, Kotter's book proposes that desired organizational change is a direct byproduct of visionary efforts. It is the viability, construction, and implementation of the change vision that ultimately determines how successful a particular change initiative will be. It is important, according to Kotter (1996), that the vision is applicable to the change request, well-structured, and concise.

Practical Application: The ABC Church change-team establishes the following change-vision statement: In response to recent survey results, the ABC change-team will enhance the work-morale and motivation of its employee base by cultivating a workplace that allows for autonomy, communication / dialogue, and team cohesiveness. As a target, the motivation and morale survey results will increase by 10% within a six-month timeframe.

Communicate the Vision

It is important that a vision be cultivated in such a way that followers comprehend completely the leader's general purpose (Kotter 1996). Kotter insists that visions are properly communicated when all parties are involved, and change agents are able to remove barriers. During this segment of the text, Kotter (1996) discusses a specific business case focusing on a fledgling telecommunication firm undergoing internal change. The details of the case are explained with clarity, thus allowing the reader to better understand why it is critical to ensure that group members must comprehend what the change consists of and why communication plays a critical role in the change process.

Practical Application: The ABC Church change-team will develop a detailed power-point presentation mapping out the strategic milestones of the proposed change initiative. During an all-employee meeting, the milestones will be reviewed as a group. Each milestone will be partnered with scheduled dates, strategic deliverables, and procedural action steps. In addition to reviewing each change stage with employees/group members, the change-team will elicit feedback from employee members and respond to any questions concerning the change plan.

Empower Others to Act on the Vision

Kotter goes to great lengths in his text to highlight the importance of employee/team member empowerment. For example, he drills down on ways to motivate team members to

take an active role in the change. However, he does this by pointing out barriers to empowerment, such as misaligned organizational structures, lack of leader support, and poor management.

Practical Application: The ABC Church change-team will develop a three-point empowerment and incentive program designed to inspire team members associated with the proposed change initiative. The three-point plan is as follows:

1. While working on the ABC change-team, all team members will be given permission to alter their work schedule to meet the requirements of the proposed change initiative. A plan will also be put in place to ensure that employees undergoing the change will have input into work schedule alterations as well.
2. A monetary incentive plan will be awarded to all employees working on the ABC change-team. All team members will be provided with a 3% pay raise throughout the duration of the change project.
3. Members of the ABC change-team will meet with upper management throughout the change initiative to ensure their questions and concerns are addressed.

Plan For and Create Short Term Wins

One of the most challenging segments of organizational change, according to Kotter's text, occurs when employees or team members begin to lose momentum. Most change initiatives do not happen overnight, and it is not uncommon that employee/team members become fatigued with the process. To circumvent this problem, Kotter (1996) suggest that a reward system be established that allows for short term wins. As team members continue to satisfy these short -term objectives, they are more likely to continue the initiative with confidence and commitment.

Practical Application: The ABC Church change team will celebrate each change related milestone. The celebrations will highlight the sequential progress of the team and outline how far the change initiative has evolved.

Consolidate Improvements and Institutionalize New Approaches

Once change has been established throughout the organization, it is vital that employees remain creative and open minded (Kotter, 1996). By examining and re-addressing various change related issues, leaders improve the chances of success. Consolidating improvements and fostering innovation is about making sure that the change process is proceeding at an appropriate pace. In most cases, the pace of the change is impacted by employee group member resistance. New Approaches (as highlighted in the practical application segment) should focus on ways to manage the various types of resistance.

Practical Application: The ABC Church change-team will take the following steps to ensure that resistance to the proposed change initiative remains limited.

- All parties involved in the change process take part in the development and administration of the proposed change.
- All parties involved in the change process will be encouraged to discuss and highlight issues that arise in the change process.
- All parties involved in the change process will be privy to data, information, and milestone results throughout the change process.

Since its inception, the Kotter Change model has become one of the most respected social science/organizational leadership models in the world. Although it has experienced a few iterations over the years, its general approach continues to remain effective. Each step in the process, beginning with a focus on urgency and ending with anchoring new approaches, ensures that teams/groups have a workable framework with change-related challenges. More importantly, however, the Kotter model reminds us that individual behavior must be discussed in relation to broader social systems.

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