Kotter's 8 Steps Change Model

Idea In Short

Kotter's 8 step model of change is one of the most famous and established organizational change models. The 8 steps in the change model are:

1. Create urgency
2. Build a guiding coalition
3. Form a strategic vision
4. Enlist volunteers
5. Enable action by removing barriers
6. Generate short term wins
7. Sustain acceleration, and
8. Institute change

In his 1996 book, Leading Change1, John Kotter opines that to effectively implement lasting change, organizations should focus on much more than just project management. Based on his work with many organizations, he says that to effectively lead change, organizations should consider group dynamics, organizational culture, communication strategies and their vision for the future, as well a being tenacious in their delivery. The eight stages of Kotter's change model are:

1. Create urgency
2. Build a guiding coalition
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Many organizations and change leaders follow some of the principles of this model. Many don't follow all of them, but apply what's helpful for them based on their specific context.

Create a sense of urgency

The first step of Kotter's 8-step change model is to create a sense of urgency. Urgency leads to action. Individuals and teams change most effectively when they see a clear and urgent reason to do so. It follows that the first step of any change program is to create this sense of urgency. A burning platform must be found identified around which to tell the story of your change and through which to engage people and explain the reason for change.

Build a guiding coalition

The second stage of this model is to build a guiding coalition to lead the change. This coalition should also be the face of the change. People only follow leaders and guiding groups or coalitions that they trust, that they feel represent them and that they feel have their best interests in mind. The best coalitions bring together a range of people with different skills, seniorities, voices and backgrounds. This diversity helps ensure the coalition has the ability to lead, and to connect with people and gain followers.

Form a strategic vision

The third stage of Kotter's 8-step model is to create a clear, vibrant, motivating and inspiring vision. This vision should paint a future that people will want to achieve. This is incredibly important as people will only move in a direction if they are clear on where they are heading, and if it's a destination that they would like to reach (see more on Vision and Mission statements).

Enlist volunteers

Big changes only happen when many people all work together to achieve a common goal. It follows that step four of Kotter's model is to enlist many volunteers and to create a movement. Leaders should help many people meaningfully contribute to the change program. This will help ensure their engagement, help move them along the change curve and help encourage others to support the change.

Enable action by removing barriers

The fifth stage of Kotter's 8-step change model is to remove barriers. Obstacles and barriers make it hard to do things. As soon as you have volunteers and teams working towards the new vision, the next key step is to remove as many barrier to their work and the change as possible. Friction is the enemy of change and must be fought. At this stage the change doesn't have much momentum. If people can't get things done, they may lose heart and stop trying to make change happen. To help remove barriers leaders should try to remove bureaucracy and other barriers. They should empower and trust teams to drive the changes forward. It might be worth considering bureaucracy busters.

Generate short term wins

By now, people have been engaged and are starting to put effort into delivering the changes. However, there isn't much momentum at this stage and the energy and enthusiasm of your change agents will be fragile. It's now essential to move to stage six where you build momentum and reinforce progress. To do this, ensure that a stream of small wins happen and recognize each of them. Celebrate the successes of teams that delivered them. People only continue to drive change if they feel they're making progress and are being recognized.

Sustain Acceleration

The short term wins in step six build credibility and confidence and make it possible to be more ambitious. It's important to build on that progress and accelerate your ambition and delivery. Step seven achieves this by ensuring leaders focus on scaling to larger and more challenging change initiatives or work-streams. Riding the ever growing wave of enthusiasm and achievement will make this possible. But, you must continue to celebrate successes and motivate teams along the way. Transformation starts moving slowly, but the pace should increase over time.

Institute Change

The last stage of Kotter's model is all about ensuring that the changes to behaviors and ways of working that have been achieved are sustained. The organization must embedded these changes into its culture for the changes to really last. Kotter suggests that the best

way to achieve this is by showing the link between success and the new behaviors. If leaders help their teams think, feel and believe that the new ways in which they are working are responsible for their new successes, then they are far more likely to maintain these behaviors.

Summary

John Kotter's eight step model is a very accessible and helpful model of organizational change. This model might be the best starting point for many organizations to initiate change programs. Each stage helps overcome some of the blockers to change. However, the real challenge in this model comes in its application in practice. Each stage takes considerable effort of thought, coordination and of implementation. In many instances organizations will find it hard to effectively follow the stages. Or, they may choose not to invest sufficiently to follow them. Nonetheless, if the model is followed through with the right levels of investment, it can yield great results.