



# Kotter's Eight Steps





*If the rate of change on the outside exceeds the rate of change on the inside,  
the end is near*

JACK WELCH

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## What's it all about?

John Kotter is a leading consultant and writer on leadership and organisational change. His books *Leading Change* (1995) and *The Heart of Change* (2002), introduced an eight-stage model for managing change. In developing his approach, Kotter studied over 100 companies going through change processes. He found that there were a number of common errors that contributed to change programmes failing:

- Allowing too much complacency
- Failing to engage a core coalition of support
- Underestimating the need for a clear vision of the end result
- Under-communicating the vision
- Permitting obstacles to block the new vision
- Failing to create short-term wins
- Declaring victory too soon
- Neglecting to anchor the changes in the organisation

## What's it for?

The tool is based on a key principle relating to responses and approaches to change. People see, feel and then change as opposed to analyse, think and then change. Kotter argues that to manage change effectively there is a need to change behaviours. This is less likely to happen if the focus is solely on facts, analysis and thinking. It must also take account of feelings and emotions as illustrated below (adapted from Kotter 2002: 11):

**Almost always the core method is: see-feel-change**

Help people see: help others visualise the issues, problems, progress or solutions

*As a result*

Seeing something new hits the emotions: visualisations hit people at a visceral level and evoke emotions

*As a result*

Emotionally charged ideas change behaviour or reinforce changed behaviour

**Rarely the core method is: analysis-think-change**

Give people analysis: information is gathered and analysed. Reports are written and presentations given about problems, issues and solutions

*As a result*

Data and analysis influence how we think:

Information and analysis change people's thinking. Ideas not consistent with the needed change are dropped or modified

*As a result*

New thoughts change behaviour or reinforce changed behaviour

## Using the tool

Kotter acknowledged that the model might not cover everything and he put forward his approach somewhat tentatively. He did, however, stress the need to approach the process sequentially. Kotter acknowledged that the model might not cover everything and he put forward his approach somewhat tentatively. He did, however, stress the need to approach the process sequentially. That said, do not worry if you repeat some stages, when Kotter first introduced his model the nature of change was different. In the current volatile and uncertain operating context your process might be more cyclical than linear.

Increase urgency – inspire people to move, make objectives real and relevant	<b>Defrosting the status quo</b>
Build the guiding team – get the right people in place with the right emotional commitment, and the right mix of skills and levels	
Get the vision right – get the team to establish a simple vision and strategy. Focus on the emotional and creative aspects necessary to drive service and efficiency	
Communicate for buy-in – involve as many people as possible. Communicate the essentials to appeal and respond to people’s needs. De-clutter communications: make technology work for you rather than against you	
Empower action – remove obstacles; enable constructive feedback and lots of support from leaders. Reward and recognise progress and achievements	<b>Bringing in new practices</b>
Create short-term wins – set aims that are easy to achieve, in bite-sized chunks, with manageable numbers of initiatives. Finish current stages before starting new ones	
Don't let up – foster and encourage determination and persistence – ongoing change. Encourage ongoing progress reporting. Highlight achieved and future milestones	
Make change stick – reinforce the value of successful change via recruitment, promotion, new change leaders. Weave change into culture	<b>Consolidating the change</b>

What you can do to follow the eight steps:

### Urgency

- Identify potential threats. Develop scenarios that illustrate what could happen in the future
- Examine the short and long-term opportunities that could be exploited
- Undertake a range of honest discussions internally and/or externally based on the above. Get people talking, visualising and thinking (there are other tools in this toolkit that can help, like ‘Rich pictures’ and ‘Attribute Listing’)

- Request support from customers, audiences, stakeholders and peers to test the opportunities you have identified

### Find your change leaders and build a project group

- Identify the true leaders in your organisation. You might use relationship-mapping tools. These are not always the people who occupy senior roles in the business
- Create a project group and get their commitment to the project
- Check that the team has the balance of skills, knowledge and experience you need
- Work on building the team

### Get the vision right

- Determine the values that are core to the change
- Develop a short summary of what you 'see' as the future of the organisation (you could try the 'future perfect' technique)
- Create a strategy to execute that vision
- Ensure the team can articulate the vision quickly and clearly
- Practice the 'vision' speech

### Communicate for buy-in

- Talk often about the vision for change
- Openly and honestly address concerns and anxieties
- Tie everything back to vision from marketing through to finance
- Lead by example, model the change

### Empower action

- Identify the key people who will deliver the change
- Look at structure, roles and systems to ensure they are in line with the vision
- Find ways to recognise and reward people for making the change happen
- Act quickly to remove barriers

- Understand resistance and work with it

### Create short-term wins

- Look for sure-fire projects that you can implement without help from any strong critics of the change
- Don't choose early targets that are expensive. You want to be able to justify the investment in each project
- Thoroughly analyse the potential pros and cons of your targets. If you don't succeed with an early goal, it can hurt your entire change initiative
- Reward the people who help you meet the targets

### Don't let up

- After every win, analyse what went right and what needs improving
- Set goals to continue building on the momentum you've achieved
- Learn about continuous improvement
- Keep ideas fresh by bringing in new change agents and leaders for your change coalition

### Make change stick

- Talk about progress at every chance you get. Tell success stories about the change process, and repeat other stories that you hear
- Include the change ideals and values when hiring and training new staff
- Publicly recognise key members of your original change coalition. Make sure the rest of the staff – new and old – remember their contributions
- Create plans to replace key leaders of change as they move on. This will help ensure that their legacy is not lost or forgotten

## What's Next?

Think about a project or business that you have experienced which contains some or all of the steps above. Describe what happened during the process and why it worked for you. What role did you play in the process? Was it an analyse-think-change or see-feel-change flow?

# Quick tips

- The steps imply a rational and orderly process and, as we all know, life is seldom like that. Treat the stages as a process that may change direction. Treat them as a pattern rather than a prescription
- Understand your communication systems
- Remember that your focus is on behaviour change. This does not mean you should be cynical or manipulative. If you are not genuine in your approach, people will spot it immediately
- Use relevant

# References

Kotter, J., P. (1995). *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*: Harvard Business Review.

Kotter, J., P. (2002). *The Heart of Change: Real Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Publishing.



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Would you tell me, please,  
**WHICH WAY**  
I ought to go from here?

*That depends a good deal on*

**WHERE**

*you want to get to.*

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