

Leading change: Why transformational efforts fail

John P. Kotter, Harvard Business Review, March 1995

The organizational change process goes through a series of phases that are often time-consuming. If we skip some steps, we may delude ourselves into believing that the process is moving fast. But, the results will not be satisfactory. Moreover, critical mistakes made in any of the phases can slow down the process and nullify hard-won gains. The author points out eight important mistakes made by organizations while driving change:

Not establishing a great enough sense of urgency: It is important to examine the market and competitive realities, and identify potential crises and untapped opportunities. We must also convince our managers that the status-quo is more dangerous than the unknown. While trying to build a sense of urgency, we should not underestimate the difficulty of getting people out of their comfort zone. Many managers are happy to continue working as they are.

Not creating a powerful enough guiding coalition: We should assemble a group of committed people who are powerful enough to spearhead the change. We should exhort them to work together as a team, ignoring hierarchical positions.

Lacking a vision: Creating a vision, and developing strategies to achieve it, are key to marshalling a change effort. However, the vision should not be too complicated. It should be straightforward enough to be conveyed within fifteen minutes.

Under-communicating the vision: We must use every means possible to communicate our vision, and the strategies for achieving it. We should teach new behaviours by taking the example of the guiding coalition.

Not removing the obstacles to the new vision: We should do away with, or modify, systems that undermine the new vision. We should encourage risk-taking and unconventional ideas. It is also important to weed out powerful individuals who oppose the change effort.

Not systematically planning for, and creating, short-term wins: It is necessary to define and engineer improvements in performance. We should reward employees who contribute to these improvements. We must score hits early on in the change effort.

Declaring victory too soon: We should not stop progressing at the first signs of success. We should instead use the increased credibility from early successes to reduce opposition to change. We must focus on attracting and retaining competent employees who can implement the vision. We should infuse renewed fervour into the change process with fresh people and projects.

Not anchoring changes in the corporation's culture : It is important to highlight the connection between the company's success and the new vision. We must also create leadership development and succession plans that are in line with the new approach. We should create a culture that resonates with the new vision. We must refrain from promoting people who do not subscribe to the new approach.

Concluding notes

Even successful change efforts are messy and full of surprises. But a clear vision of the change process reduces the error rate. Fewer errors can be the difference between success and failure.