

Book Review on
“Leading Change”
by John P. Kotter

(Review by Gary Tomlinson)
Business Leader Magazine – August 2006 Issue

By any objective measure, the amount of significant change in organizations has grown tremendously over the past two decades. In fact, many experts say there’s been more change in the last twenty years than in the last two hundred. More and more organizations will be pushed to reduce costs, improve the quality of products and services, locate new opportunities for growth, and increase productivity. The rate of change is not going to slow down anytime soon. For these reasons, I’ve chosen John Kotter’s *Leading Change* for this month’s book review.

Kotter says that people of his generation or older did not grow up in an era when transformation was common. With less global competition and a slower-moving business environment, the norm back then was stability and the ruling motto was: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Change occurred incrementally and infrequently. Well, that’s no longer the case.

The challenges we face are different. A globalized economy is creating both more hazards and more opportunities for everyone, forcing organizations to make dramatic improvements not only to compete and prosper but also to merely survive. Kotter says that no one is immune to these forces. Even companies that sell only in small geographic regions can feel the impact of globalization. The problem is that most managers have little to no history or legacy to guide them through all of this change. Kotter believes that successful change transformations takes 70 to 90 percent leadership and only 10 to 30 percent management. Yet for historical reasons, many organizations today don’t have much leadership. And almost everyone thinks about the problem here as one of managing change, not leading change.

Kotter believes that managing change is important. Without competent management, the transformation process can get out of control. But for most organizations, the much bigger challenge is leading change. Only leadership can motivate the actions needed to alter behavior in any significant way. Only leadership can get change to stick by anchoring it in the very culture of an organization.

In his book, Kotter shares his eight-stage change process, each of which is associated with one of the eight fundamental errors that undermine transformation efforts. The steps are:

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency
2. Creating the Guiding Coalition
3. Developing a Vision and Strategy

4. Communicating the Change Vision
5. Empowering Broad-Based Action
6. Generating Short-Term Wins
7. Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change
8. Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture.

The change problem inside organizations would become less worrisome if the business environment would soon stabilize or at least slow down. But most credible evidence suggests the opposite: that the rate of environmental movement will increase and that the pressures on organizations to transform themselves will continue to grow over the next few decades. Kotter believes the only rational solution is to learn more about what creates successful change and then to pass that knowledge on to increasingly larger numbers of people.

Just as organizations are going to be forced to learn, change, and constantly reinvent themselves in the twenty-first century, so will increasing numbers of individuals. He goes on to say that as the rate of change increases, the willingness and ability to keep developing, that is to keep learning, become central to career success for individuals and to economic success for organizations.

Although Kotter's book first came out in 1996, it's as relevant today as it was a decade ago. This is a fantastic book on what it takes to lead change. The examples of the eight mistakes of managing change as well as the eight-step change process can be extremely helpful in learning how to lead change throughout one's organization. Enjoy this month's selection, *Leading Change* and share it with others in your life because as Alvin Toffler says; "*The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.*"