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Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail (Harvard Business Review)



Synopsis

Businesses hoping to survive over the long term will have to remake themselves into better competitors at least once along the way. These efforts have gone under many banners: total quality management, reengineering, rightsizing, restructuring, cultural change, and turnarounds, to name a few. In almost every case, the goal has been to cope with a new, more challenging market by changing the way business is conducted. A few of these endeavors have been very successful. A few have been utter failures. Most fall somewhere in between, with a distinct tilt toward the lower end of the scale. John Kotter is renowned for his work on leading organizational change. In 1995, when this article was first published, he had just completed a 10-year study of more than 100 companies that attempted such a transformation. Here he shares the results of his observations, outlining the eight largest errors that can doom these efforts and explaining the general lessons that encourage success. From the January 2007 issue of Harvard Business Review.

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Customer Reviews

"Over the past decade," John P. Kotter writes, "I have watched more than a hundred companies try to remake themselves into significantly better competitors. They have included large organizations (Ford) and small ones (Landmark Communications), companies based in United States (General Motors) and elsewhere (British Airways), corporations that were on their knees (Eastern Airlines), and companies that were earning good money (Bristol-Myers Squibb). Their efforts have gone under many banners: total quality management, reengineering, right-sizing, restructuring, cultural change, and turnaround. But in almost every case the basic goal has been the same: to make

fundamental changes in how business is conducted in order to help cope with a new, more challenging market environment. A few of these corporate change efforts have been very successful. A few have been utter failures. Most fall somewhere in between, with a distinct tilt toward the lower end of the scale. The lessons that can be drawn are interesting and will probably be relevant to even more organizations in the increasingly competitive business environment of the coming decade."In this context, John P. Kotter lists the most general lessons to be learned from both (I) the more successful cases and (II) the critical mistakes as follows:

- I. Lessons from the more successful cases:
 1. Establishing a sense of urgency* Examining market and competitive realities* Identifying and discarding crises, potential crises, or major opportunities
 2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition* Assembling a group with enough power to lead the change effort* Encouraging the group to work together as a team
 - 3.

John Kotter is a business professor at Harvard University who writes "Leading Change" as a guide to business leaders, helping them to transform their stagnant, ineffective, hierarchical companies into more effective, responsive, team-oriented ones. To help companies and leaders make this transition, he presents eight sequential steps that must be followed in order and done well. These eight steps are:

1. Establish a sense of urgency (fight complacency)
2. Create a guiding coalition (both influential leaders and effective managers)
3. Develop a widely inspiring vision and strategy for achieving it
4. Communicate the vision, communicate the vision, and communicate the vision even more
5. Give the employees authority to creatively experiment concerning how to best make the vision a reality
6. Make sure you point out things to celebrate as you make progress toward your goals; it rewards appropriate behavior and, besides, people need to celebrate once in a while.
7. Understand Bowen Family Systems Theory--that when you change one thing, everything else changes with it. Systemic change is difficult work that produces a whole lot of anxiety and unintended consequences.
8. Make sure that, once the changes are made, they become engrained in the new culture of the company; make them "the way we do things around here."

Kotter does get credit for being comprehensive and for being among the first to write a leadership book of this sort (copyright 1996). He appears correct in all of his arguments and this reader has difficulty finding flaws in his eight steps. He appropriately balances task-orientation and relationship-orientation and distinguishes between leading and managing.

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