

# The Soft Side of Leading Change

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Stage	Actions Needed	Pitfalls
1 Establish a sense of urgency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Find potential crises and untapped opportunities</li> <li>■ Convince &gt;75% of leaders that status quo is more dangerous than the unknown</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Underestimating difficulty of getting out of comfort zone</li> <li>■ Becoming paralyzed by risks of change</li> </ul>
2 Form a powerful guiding coalition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Assemble committed and powerful change leadership group</li> <li>■ Encourage working outside the normal hierarchy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Poor teamwork at top</li> <li>■ Leader of change effort does not have sufficient clout</li> </ul>
3 Create a vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Create a vision that will direct the change effort</li> <li>■ Develop strategies to implement the vision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Vision is too complicated to be communicated in 5 minutes</li> <li>■ Vision is too vague to be actionable</li> </ul>
4 Communicate the vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Use wide variety of methods to communicate vision and implementation strategies</li> <li>■ Change leadership group teaches new behaviors by example</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Under communicating</li> <li>■ Not “walking the talk”</li> </ul>

You've determined that the organization, whether your project team or the entire division, has the necessary capability to change. Now, what must you personally do to lead that change? In his famous article "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail," John Kotter lists the actions that a change leader must take during each of the 8 stages of a major organizational change. Kotter focuses mainly on change initiated from the executive suite, such as boosting overall quality or reversing a death spiral in the business. However, I've found that the same principles apply to less sweeping changes, such as on an individual program or project.

These eight actions set a high bar. Each one by itself is difficult, and doing them all consistently for a long period of time, while also juggling our other work, is very challenging. Kotter says, "Too many of us don't realize that transformation is a process, not an event ... Under pressure to accelerate the process, we give in to the temptation to skip stages. But shortcuts never work. Equally troubling, even the most capable among us make critical mistakes – such as declaring victory too soon – in at least one stage. Result? Loss of momentum, reversal of hard-won gains – and devastation of the entire transformation effort." (Kotter, p. 1)

Some of my thoughts on each stage:

1. **Establish a sense of urgency.** You may be totally convinced of how important the change is, but you can't make it happen alone. Unless most of the key influencers are also convinced the effort will die from apathy or outright resistance.
2. **Form a powerful guiding coalition.** This group will keep pushing the change forward even when you can't.
3. **Create a vision.** Change hurts. To buy in to the cost, people must be able to visualize the end state and why it is worthwhile.
4. **Communicate the vision.** I frequently overestimate how thoroughly I communicate key messages to my program and project teams. Just about the time I'm sick of saying the message, it is just starting to sink in for most hearers.

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5 Empower people to act on the vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alter or remove systems and structures that undermine the vision</li> <li>Encourage risk taking and non-traditional ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Failing to counter powerful change resistors</li> </ul>
6 Plan for and create short term wins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engineer highly visible quick performance improvements</li> <li>Visibly reward people who contribute to the improvements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Depending on chance rather than systematic planning to achieve quick wins</li> <li>Not enough early successes</li> </ul>
7 Consolidate gains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Re-invest the credibility from early wins to tackle bigger changes</li> <li>Invest in people who will carry out the vision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Killing momentum by declaring victory prematurely</li> <li>Sabotaging further changes by declaring that the war is won</li> </ul>
8 Institutionalize new approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clearly show how the change initiative has caused improved performance</li> <li>Create leadership development plans that reinforce the new approaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not creating new norms and values that reinforce the changes</li> <li>Adding leaders who do not embrace the new approach</li> </ul>



Adapted from "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail" by John P. Kotter

Jeff Oltmann

The last 4 stages:

- 1. Empower people.** Quality pioneer W. Edwards Deming frequently reminded people that quality problems often can be fixed only by improving systems and processes. Similarly, existing systems, processes, and structures are often obstacles to the change you're looking for. You must empower people to change them, and not take "we've always done it that way" as an answer.
- 2. Create short term wins.** With all the chaos in the typical workplace, employees have a short attention span and low patience. They'll become discouraged or lose interest in the change if they don't see frequent wins with concrete payoffs.
- 3. Consolidate gains.** Build on your early victories to get enthusiasm for doing more.
- 4. Institutionalize the change.** Get it so firmly embedded in the way things are done that it will survive even if you're gone. It is even better if employees forget that it was your idea and claim it as their own.