

International Multidisciplinary Journal of Science, Technology, and Business

Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13122062>

Hierarchy of Steps in the 8-Step Process for Leading Change by John P. Kotter

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ABSTRACT: *Professor John P. Kotter has developed the change management theory: The 8-Step Process for Leading Change (Kotter, 1995/1996). The theory is widely used. The 8 steps are shown from start (step 1) to finish (step 8). The importance of each step compared to the other steps, has not been properly investigated. This paper sheds new information on the internal hierarchy of the steps in the process. The main conclusion is that step 1 is the most important, followed by two clusters of other steps.*

Key Words: *John P. Kotter, 8-Step Process, pitfalls, Change Management*

Introduction

John P. Kotter is a professor at Harvard University. He is particularly known for his 8-step Process for Leading Change, a process that is utilized by a large number of companies throughout the world. The process is built upon core processes for change.

Dr. Oern has investigated the 8-step process from 2 angles. The first was through a Bachelor thesis in 2004 (Oern, Leikanger, & Lunde, 2004), where large successful change processes in a major Norwegian insurance company in retrospect were checked with the steps in Kotter's change process. The aim was to establish if the company, without knowing the work of Kotter, had followed the steps in Kotter's process.

The second angle was through the dissertation "Alteration of John P. Kotter's 8-Step Change Process Based on Concepts from Jim Collins and Colleagues" (Oern, 2020), where one compared selected work from Jim Collins and colleagues (Collins, 2001), (Collins & Porras, 1994/1997), (Collins & Hansen, 2011), with the steps in Kotter's process, and tried to establish if the terms for «success» established by Collins could overlap with the steps in Kotter's process. The dissertation also tried to establish if any particular overlap could serve to strengthen any particular step in Kotter's process.

Jim Collins has published 8 books as of 2020, where 7 were covered in Oern (2020). The first one was in 1992 ("Beyond Entrepreneurship: Turning Your Business into an Enduring Great Company", together with William C. Lazier, and the last one - was in 2019, "Turning the Flywheel: A Monograph to Accompany Good To Great". His three most famous books are presented in this

dissertation (“Built to Last”, 1994; “Good to Great”, 2001; “Great by Choice”, 2011). “Built to Last” was written in collaboration with Jerry I. Porras, and “Great by Choice” was written in collaboration with Morten Hansen. As also is the case with books from John P. Kotter, Collins elaborates on the concepts from his three main books in other literature.

Collins is a part of the “Excellence tradition”, as pointed out in Dahlggaard-Park and Dahlggaard (2007). Other contributors to this tradition are Peters and Waterman’s eight excellence attributes (1982), Peters and Austin’s simplified excellence model (1985), Lists of Best Practices (1998), Xerox Excellence Models (1990, 2002), the European Excellence Model (1992), Dahlggaard-Park and Dahlggaard 4P model (2004), and Toyota’s 4P model (1990).

During work with the mentioned thesis and dissertation, certain knowledge applicable for publication appeared. This paper will look closer at the importance of each step in Kotter’s process (Kotter, 1996). Even though all steps are necessary to go through a successful change process, the hierarchy of the steps when it comes to importance has been debated. We will therefore shed light on which steps demand particular attention.

Discussion

Professor John P. Kotter, from Harvard Business School, has written several influential books on leading, and managing, change processes. A well-known part of these books is his 8-step process for successful change in companies (8 pitfalls to avoid), as published in the Harvard Business Review (HBR) (Kotter, 1995). The process was more thoroughly presented in his book “Leading Change” (Kotter, 1996). The process has been utilized by several companies, with success.

John P. Kotter updated his original 1996 framework in his 2014 book “Accelerate”, introducing the Dual Network, the 8-accelerators, and the Big Opportunity, thus establishing latitude for technological changes occurring from 1996 until 2014.

Kotter (1995) originally presented his 8-step process as errors/pitfalls to avoid. In 1996, he transformed these errors/pitfalls into the 8-step process.

As outlined in 1995, these are Kotter’s 8 pitfalls/errors (Kotter, 1995, para 4-46):

1. Not establishing a Great Enough Sense of Urgency (para. 4)
2. Not Creating a Powerful Enough Guiding Coalition (para. 12)
3. Lacking a Vision (para. 19)
4. Under communicating the Vision by a Factor of Ten (para. 25)
 - a. A good vision is communicated only by a single meeting/single communication
 - b. The CEO, alone, communicates the vision properly to employee groups
 - c. The vision is properly communicated in all channels, but visible senior executives do not behave according to the vision
5. Not Removing Obstacles to the New Vision (para. 32)
6. Not Systematically Planning For and Creating Short-Term Wins (para. 37)
7. Declaring Victory Too Soon (para. 41)
8. Not Anchoring Changes in the Corporation’s Culture ((para. 46)

As outlined in 1996, these are Kotter’s eight steps (Kotter, 1996, pp. 33-145):

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency
2. Creating the Guiding Coalition

3. Developing a Vision and Strategy
4. Communication of the Change Vision
5. Empowering Employees for Broad-Based Action
6. Generating Short-Term Wins
7. Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change
8. Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture

The importance of the vision – Pitfall 3

In *Leading Change* (1996), Kotter repeats the main points from his 1995 article in *Harvard Business Review*. Kotter (1996) states, in his first paragraph under pitfall 3: “Of the remaining elements that are always found in successful transformation, none is more important than a sensible vision” (Kotter, 1996, p. 7). Pitfall 3 is related to not having a proper vision/lacking a vision. In other words, Kotter is thus indirectly stating that pitfall 3 is the most important of pitfall 3-8. He does not specify the importance of pitfalls 1 and 2.

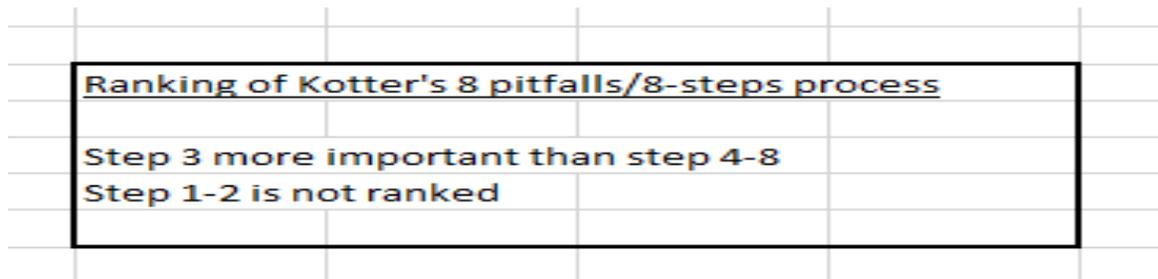


Figure 15. Importance of pitfalls/steps (own illustration)

In 1998 Kotter provided us with more information. His article “Winning at Change” is published in the 10th edition of “*Leader to Leader*”. Kotter (1998) states that four out of eight pitfalls are the source of the majority of failed change attempts (Kotter, 1998, p. 1). There is no ranking among these four pitfalls. The four pitfalls mentioned by Kotter are:

1. Pitfall 1: Not Establishing a Great Enough Sense of Urgency
2. Pitfall 2: Not Creating a Powerful Enough Guiding Coalition
3. Pitfall 4: Under Communicating the Vision by a Factor of Ten
4. Pitfall 7: Declaring Victory Too Soon

This leaves us with a revised ranking. Please note: Kotter (1998) indirectly states that pitfall 4 (and pitfall 1,2,7) is more important than pitfall 3,5,6 and 8. However, it will not be possible to under-communicate a vision without actually having a vision. Therefore it will be fair to include pitfall number 3 in line with pitfall 1,2,4,7 as more important than pitfall 5,6 and 8. Even though Kotter (1996) gives pitfall number 3 the highest priority, this priority is somewhat reduced since pitfall 3 is not explicitly included in his 1998 update. This gives us the following matrix:

Ranking of Kotter's 8 pitfalls/8-steps process	
Step/Pitfall	1,2,3,4,7
Step/Pitfall	5,6,8

Figure16. Importance of pitfalls/steps (own illustration)

In 2004 Kotter, in personal correspondence with Oern, stated that the now looks at step 1(Establishing a Sense of Urgency/Create a Sense of Urgency) in the 8-step process as the most important one. Kotter points out that “people make fatal mistakes here all the time” (J.P. Kotter, personal communication, April 30, 2004). This is in contrast to his main view from “Leading Change” (1996), where he considers step 3, creating a vision, to be the paramount phase. This leaves us with a revised matrix:

Ranking of Kotter's 8 pitfalls/8-steps process	
Step/Pitfall	1
Step/Pitfall	2,3,4,7
Step/Pitfall	5,6,8

Figure 17. Importance of pitfalls/steps (own illustration)

In his 2008 book, “A Sense of Urgency”, Kotter continues to emphasize the importance of pitfall 1/Step 1 over all others. The matrix is unchanged.

In the 2012 edition of Leading Change, Kotter wrote a new preface. In this preface, Kotter, among other things, stresses that the issue of complacency (step 1), and the power of urgency (step 1), are larger today than when the initial book was written. Kotter points out: “I truly believe it is impossible to overstate the severity of the challenges caused by an inadequate or unaligned sense of urgency” (Kotter, 2012, p. viii). The matrix is unchanged.

In the final chapter of Leading Change (1996), Kotter makes a transition to his dual network theory, as presented in Accelerate (2014). It seems clear that Kotter already 1996 had key items of his 2014 update conceptualized. We will address the dual network theory and the implications for the traditional 8-step process in our next paper.

Conclusion

We have in this paper looked at the 8-pitfall/8-steps in John P. Kotter’s 8-step process for change (Kotter, 1995/1996). We have established that while there originally was no priority related to the steps in terms of significance, various updates (Kotter, 1996/1998/2004/2008/2012/2014) have given a strong indication for a suggested hierarchy of importance. The paper concludes with Step 1 being the most important, thereafter steps 2,3,4, and 7, and finally steps 5, 6, and 8. Whether step 3

should be placed with steps 2,4, and 7, or just before steps 2,4, and 7 is somewhat debatable.

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