



Choosing Strategies for Change

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By John P. Kotter, Leonard A. Schlesinger

The Idea in Brief

Faced with stiffer competition and dizzying technological advances, companies often must change course to stay competitive. But most change initiatives backfire. That's because many managers take a one-size-fits-all approach to change. They assume they can combat resistance, a notorious obstacle, by involving employees in the design of the initiative. But that works only when employees have the information they need to provide useful input. It's disastrous when they don't. Also, managers often don't tailor the speed of their change strategy to the situation. For instance, they may apply a go-slow approach even when an impending crisis calls for rapid change.

To lead change successfully, Kotter and Schlesinger recommend:

Diagnosing the types of resistance you'll encounter--and tailoring your countermeasures accordingly. To illustrate, with employees who fear the adjustments the change will require, provide training in new skills.

Adapting your change strategy to the situation. For example, if your company must transform to avert an imminent crisis, accelerate your initiative--even if that risks greater resistance.

The Idea in Practice

The authors suggest these steps for managing change successfully:

1. Analyze Situational Factors

Ask yourself:

- "How much and what kind of resistance do we anticipate?"
- "What's my position relative to resisters--in terms of my power and the level of trust between us?"
- "Who--me or others--has the most accurate information about what changes are needed?"
- "How urgent is our situation?"

2. Determine the Optimal Speed of Change

Use your analysis of situational factors to decide how quickly or slowly your change should proceed. Move quickly if the organization risks plummeting performance or death if the present situation isn't changed. But proceed slowly if:

- Resistance will be intense and extensive
- You anticipate needing information and commitment from others to help design and implement the change
- You have less organizational power than those who may resist the change

3. Consider Methods for Managing Resistance

Method	How to Use	When to Use	Advantages	Drawbacks
Education	Communicate the desired changes and reasons for them	Employees lack information about the change's implications	Once persuaded, people often help implement the change	Time consuming if lots of people are involved
Participation	Involve potential resisters in designing and implementing the change	Change initiators lack sufficient information to design the change	People feel more committed to making the change happen	Time consuming, and employees may design inappropriate change
Facilitation	Provide skills training and emotional support	People are resisting because they fear they can't make the needed adjustments	No other approach works as well with adjustment problems	Can be time consuming and expensive; can still fail
Negotiation	Offer incentives for making the change	People will lose out in the change and have considerable power to resist	It's a relatively easy way to defuse major resistance	Can be expensive and open managers to the possibility of blackmail
Coercion	Threaten loss of jobs or promotion opportunities; fire or transfer those who can't or won't change	Speed is essential and change initiators possess considerable power	It works quickly and can overcome any kind of resistance	Can spark intense resentment toward change initiators

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Further Reading

Articles

Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail

Harvard Business Review

January 2007

by John P. Kotter

Dealing with resistance is crucial to successful change management, but there other things leaders must do in addition. Kotter lays out eight stages you need to manage in order to give your transformation effort the best chance of succeeding: 1) Establish a sense of urgency, 2) Form a powerful guiding coalition to lead the effort, 3) Create a vision to direct the change initiative, 4) Communicate the vision, using every vehicle possible, 5) Empower others to act on the vision; for example, by encouraging risk taking, 6) Create short-term wins (visible performance improvements) to whip up enthusiasm, 7) Consolidate performance improvements and produce more change, and 8) Institutionalize new approaches developed during the initiative.

Cracking the Code of Change

Harvard Business Review

April 2001

by Michael Beer and Nitin Nohria

To lead change successfully, managers must balance two seemingly incompatible approaches. "Theory E" change emphasizes economic value, as measured only by shareholder value. "Theory O" change stresses developing organizational culture and human capability. You can balance these two approaches along several dimensions, including goals, focus, and reward systems. For example, the CEO of U.K. grocery chain ASDA boosted economic value through painful structural changes, such as removing top layers of hierarchy and freezing wages. He also fostered transparency and egalitarianism throughout the organization, making ASDA "a great place for everyone to work." A culture of trust and openness developed, and shareholder value increased eightfold.

The Hard Side of Change Management

Harvard Business Review

October 2005

by Harold L. Sirkin, Perry Keenan, and Alan Jackson

Leading change isn't just about dealing with "soft" issues such as resistance. You also need to deal with "hard" elements. The authors identify four: 1) *Duration*: Review complex change projects every 2 weeks; more straightforward initiatives, every 6-8 weeks. 2) *Integrity*: Assemble a change team comprising people who have problem-solving skills, are results oriented, can tolerate ambiguity, possess organizational savvy, and disdain the limelight. 3) *Commitment*: Visibly endorse the change effort--no amount of public support is too much. 4) *Effort*: Ensure that no one's workload increases more than 10% in implementing the change. If necessary, remove nonessential regular work from employees with key roles in the transformation project.

About the Authors

John P. Kotter is the Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership, Emeritus, at Harvard Business School and the author of *A Sense of Urgency*, forthcoming from Harvard Business Press.

Leonard A. Schlesinger has been named the 12th president of Babson College, in Babson Park, Massachusetts.

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