



Vincent and John P. Kotter: Leadership and Change

[John P. Kotter](#) is the Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership, Emeritus, at the Harvard Business School and an internationally respected speaker and author on the topic of leadership and change.

Living in 17th Century France, [Vincent de Paul](#) was no stranger to societal changes, periods of war and internal conflict. Yet, as a study by Margaret Posig, Ph.D., reflects, Vincent appears to have had an understanding of how to lead effective change that mirrors many elements of Kotter's change process, described in his book, [Leading Change](#).

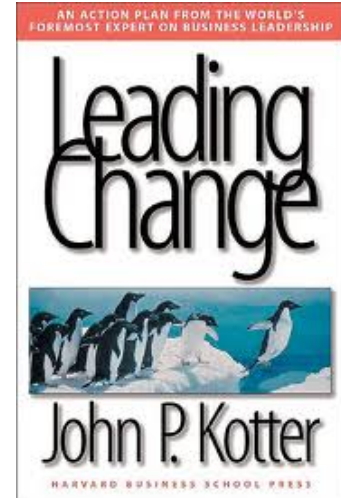


Kotter begins his book by citing errors common to leaders who fail to negotiate successfully a major change effort. Among these are:

- Allowing too much complacency
- Failing to create a powerful guiding coalition
- Underestimating the power of vision
- Poorly communicating the new vision
- Failing to create short-term wins
- Neglecting to firmly anchor changes in the culture

After making these observations about why many change efforts fail, Kotter lays out eight steps for success in leading major change. The eight steps are:

- Establish a sense of urgency
- Create a guiding coalition
- Develop a vision and strategy
- Communicate the change vision
- Empower broad-based action
- Generate short-term wins
- Consolidate gains and expand the change
- Anchor the new approaches in the culture



Change will not happen, says Kotter, without “a sense of urgency.”

Creating this mood of urgency requires leaders to have a sense of the bigger picture; to be able to see and name the pending crisis or opportunity that is about to precipitate the need for change. It then requires being able to language and communicate that knowledge in a convincing manner.

Initially, this communication effort understandably may find resonance only with a few individuals. Leaders must quickly identify this change-minded group of people, and begin to mold them into a cohesive team. Kotter calls this team the “Guiding Coalition.” It will serve to lead the change effort.

Kotter offers three steps to ensuring an effective Guiding Coalition:

- Find the right people
- Create trust
- Develop a common goal

Finding the right people means those from within the organization who have high credibility, appropriate expertise, and strong position power. They also must have strong and effective leadership and management skills.

Creating trust in the coalition and its message also is critical. According to Kotter, trust happens primarily through effective and ongoing communication. It may even require carefully crafted off-site events, where the coalition communicates its new vision in a way that is both “sensible to the head, and appealing to the heart.”

Working together, the members of the Guiding Coalition must identify and develop a common goal, expressed as a vision supported by specific strategies and action steps that will bring that vision into reality.

It also is important for the members of the Guiding Coalition to begin to “live” the new vision, modeling it in their behaviors. This behavioral message is one of the many ways in which the coalition must clearly and continually communicate the new vision across the organization.

Vincent de Paul as Leader of Change

Posig notes that Vincent de Paul and his collaborative partner, [Louise de Marillac](#), shared a vision “that spoke to a higher purpose” with a power that motivated others to join them in their work. As Christians, for Vincent and Louise this vision centered on a belief that they could most effectively love and serve Jesus Christ in the very person of the poor. Vincent and Louise worked with others who shared this vision and dedication to the poor, and “the team’s synergistic efforts enabled the growth of its individual members into servants themselves.”



Vincent also worked to create a sense of urgency and build support for his movement by various means. Posig notes that he published accounts of the desolated provinces touched by the Thirty Years War, and for a time even produced a periodical newspaper, “Le magasin charitable.”

Another strategy integral to leading successful change, according to Kotter, involves removing obstacles, whether they exist in the form of outdated systems and structures, or as people who will work to undermine the change. At the same time, the Guiding Coalition must work to encourage risk-taking, and support new ideas and actions.

In addition, integral to Kotter’s successful change strategy is mindfully creating short-term wins, and rewarding those people who make them possible. This strategy helps to boost support for the overall change effort.

As the change effort gains ground, there are two more strategies identified by Kotter which help keep the transition moving forward. One of these is identifying, hiring, and promoting people who are behind the change vision and can help to promote it. At the same time, leadership needs to examine current systems, structures and policies, and make appropriate adaptations or remove those that do not support the new structure.

Biographers report that both Vincent and Louise excelled in communicating their vision to the men and women with whom they worked. Vincent consistently reinforced his vision and attended to details of its implementation through written rules, letters and memos, as well as conferences.

Finally, all of the previous stages culminate in the need to anchor the new approaches firmly in the culture of the organization. This again primarily involves communication, but also employee education, training and development. This latter point leads Kotter to a reflection in his last chapter on the connection between leadership and lifelong learning. Kotter says all lifelong learners possess the willingness to:

- Seek new challenges, and
- Reflect honestly on successes and failures

Lifelong learners themselves, Vincent and Louise both engaged in developing educational programs that improved the effectiveness of their followers. Their strategies made it possible for the attitudinal and structural changes in social services which they implemented to last for nearly 400 years.

As in the time of Vincent and Louise, ours is a time marked by dramatic social upheaval and change. We realized in our lunchtime conversation that it is possible to examine the potential for success of the movements for change presently taking place in the Middle East in light of the strategies proposed by Kotter and exemplified in the achievements of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marrillac. It will be interesting to watch how these latest movements for change unfold.

Reflection Questions

When was the last time you were involved in significant change, either organizationally or personally?

What helped to make that change come about successfully?

What blocks or obstacles did you encounter?

How did you make the change become permanent?

What has to change next?

Resources:

Posig, Margaret, ["Saint Vincent de Paul as a Leadership of Change: The Key Roles of a Higher Purpose and Empowerment,"](#) *Vincentian Heritage Journal* Vol. 23-25, No. 2, Vol. 26m No. 1, *Vincentian Studies Institute*. 2005. 27-41.