

Do change models **really** change?

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In my work with the Internet of Things Talent Consortium I have the opportunity to work with brilliant people every day. Our conversations force me to rethink long held ideas and to fundamentally alter the approach taken to solve the myriad of issues brought upon by what Professor and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum Klaus Schwab has labeled the ‘4th Industrial Revolution’ (1). Throughout my conversations with our member organizations, with industry practitioners, and academics a clear central theme has emerged, change.

I’ve been known to describe the change process as one of the most complex processes that face organizational leaders. Think for a moment just what must be considered for a successful change to be implemented. There are individual level factors such as moods, emotions, perceptions, motivations, etc. along with group level factors including cohesion, intragroup conflict, trust and purpose. We must consider the type and strength of the influence process, the leadership approached utilized, the effectiveness of our chosen communication media and of course there are the organizational level factors including structure, strategy, and culture. With such complexity it is no wonder why a ‘one size fits all’ model for change has never emerged. Or has one?

How Change Occurs

This perplexing question led me to reexamine some of the most influential models describing the change process.

An early model conceived in 1958 by the famed psychologist Kurt Lewin (2) suggests a 3-stage model of planned change; unfreezing, transforming, and refreezing. In short, an organization exists in a stable and unchanging state, i.e. frozen.

For change to occur, an outside force must ‘unfreeze’ the organization, thus allowing it to enter into the ‘transforming’ stage where a series of forces mold it into the desired state. When that desired state is reached, the organization is then re-frozen. Simple! Seeing shortfalls with Lewin’s model, Richard Beckhard crafted a model consisting of four processes (3):

- 1) Setting goals / defining a desired end state
- 2) Diagnosing the present condition in relation to the desired end state
- 3) Detail the transition activities and commitments necessary to reach the end state
- 4) Develop the strategy for implementing and managing the transition while considering the contextual factors likely to be at play



As clearly evidenced by this model, Beckhard saw great value in analyzing and planning as part of a successful change effort. Fast forward nearly 40 years (and past countless differing change models) and now we have, you guessed it, an even larger model. Kotter’s eight-step model (4) takes a profoundly different view from his predecessors and was conceived based upon the theory that successful change is a function of an appropriate sense of urgency. The model, as described in *A Handbook of Human Resource Management Practice* (5) is as follows:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency

- a. Examining market and competitive realities
- b. Identifying and discussing crises, potential crises, or major opportunities

2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition

- a. Assembling a group with enough power to lead the change effort
- b. Encouraging the group to work together as a team

3. Creating a vision

- a. Creating a vision to help direct the change effort
- b. Developing strategies for achieving that vision

4. Communicating the vision

- a. Using every vehicle possible to communicate the new vision and strategies
- b. Teaching new behaviors by the example of the guiding coalition

5. Empowering others to act on the vision

- a. Getting rid of obstacles to change
- b. Changing systems or structures that seriously undermine the vision
- c. Encourage risk taking and non-traditional ideas, activities and actions

6. Planning for and creating short-term wins

- a. Planning for visible performance improvement
- b. Creating those improvements
- c. Recognizing and rewarding employees involved in the improvements

7. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change

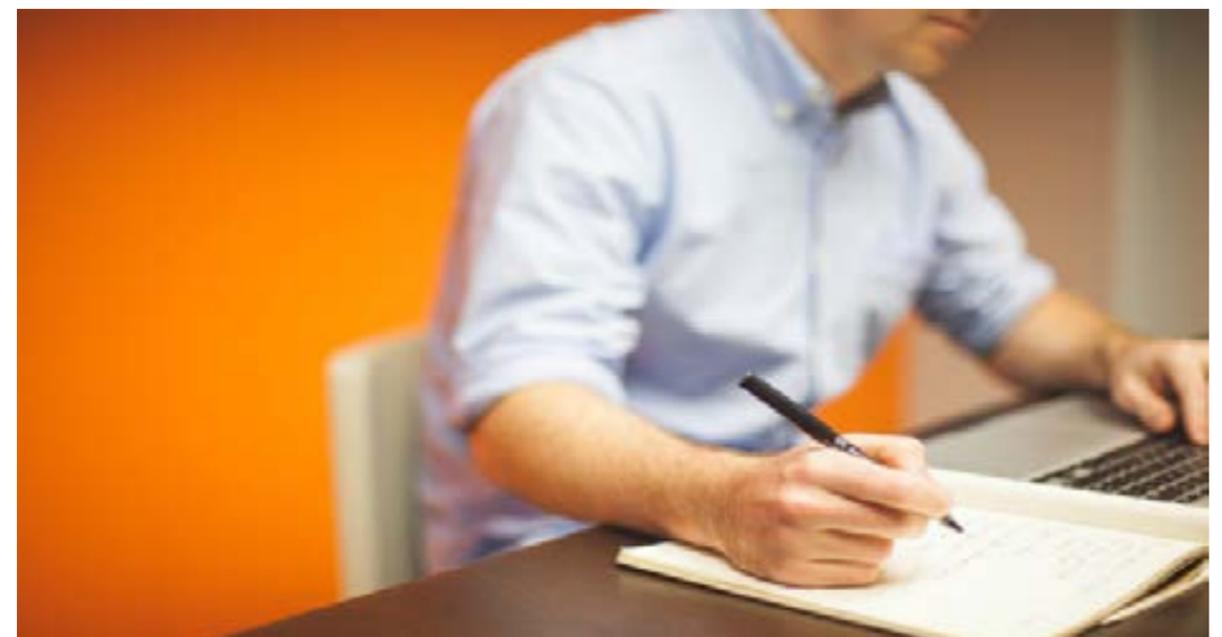
- a. Using increased credibility to change systems, structures and policies that don't fit the vision
- b. Hiring, promoting and developing employees who can implement the vision
- c. Reinvigorating the process with new projects, themes and change agents

8. Institutionalizing new approaches

- a. Articulating the connections between the new behaviors and corporate success
- b. Developing the means to ensure leadership development and succession

Is there a trend developing here? Could it be that as we learn more about organizational change we discover that the true complexity of change exists at much higher levels than we had originally thought? I could go on and on about all of the existing contemporary models for change like McKinsey & Company's 7-S Model (6), Prosci's ADKAR model (7) or Boston Consulting Group's Change Delta (8) but if you've made it this far, that is not what you are after. Instead, let's identify the key structural elements of all these models and begin to create our 'one size fits all' model for change.

After careful analysis it is clear that at the heart of any successful change management endeavor is a clear focus on people at the individual level. While change can (and perhaps should) be delivered in a top down manner, successful change implementation occurs from considerations that flow from the bottom to the top. This is to say that for organizational level change to occur that we must first have understanding and acceptance of such change at the divisional, or group level. For group level acceptance, however, we must first achieve broad (but perhaps not universal) acceptance at the individual level.





This conclusion is based upon two key considerations, Social Learning Theory (9) and the role of Self-Efficacy as an explanation of behavioral change (10). According to social learning theory, the majority of human behavior “is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action.” (9). This suggests that even the staunchest resistor to change is susceptible to a group who believes otherwise. So how do we create these groups of believers necessary for successful change? Self-Efficacy theory might hold the answer.

In his ground breaking research, Albert Bandura found that the level of personal efficacy was directly linked to the, among other behaviors, the amount of effort expended, and to what duration such efforts are sustained in the face of obstacles or adverse experiences. Even the most well thought out change effort is wrought with challenges, both planned and unplanned. However, if the individuals involved with the change effort believe in their ability to overcome such challenges they will meet these obstacles with the requisite level of veracity until such a time as the challenge has been overcome.

What does all of this mean for the development of our change model? In the most simplistic form it produces a model where top leadership forms a vision of a desired end state, carefully ensures that such a vision is shared across the organization, and then empowers the organization to make the desired end state a reality. As individuals witness their peers overcoming the inevitable obstacles that will be faced, they begin to learn that they, too, have the ability to achieve the desired end state even if they were not wholly convinced prior to the start of the change effort. However, if an individual is left unempowered to deal with obstacles and faces failure early on in the change process, we can only expect that the overall level of efficacy within the organization will then begin to decline. And with that decline in efficacy, so comes the decline of effort, perseverance, and desire to reach any end state different from what is currently known.



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