

# The relevance of kotter's and cohen's eight steps for implementing change initiat...

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Throughout my career, I have encountered continuous and constant change. Regardless of my assignment, I could always count on change, whether in people, technology, equipment, mission, or war. Successfully leaders and units were always able to handle change well, could adapt, get the unit headed in the right direction, overcome obstacles and ultimately accomplish the vision and mission of the commander. While some units handled change efforts well, others did not, John Kotter and Dan Cohen have developed an eight step method that successfully guides an organization through the change process. The eight steps consist of (1) Increase Urgency, (2) Build a Guiding Team, (3) Get the Vision Right, (4) Communicate for Buy-in, (5) Empower Action, (6) Create Short-Term Wins, (7) Don't Let up, and (8) Make Change Stick (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p 15).

John Ivancevich outlines in his textbook, *Organizational Behavior and Management*, that organizational change is a significant undertaking that managers should approach in a systematic way (2011, p. 531). Ivancevich further discusses the field of organizational behavior, empowerment, organizational processes, communication and organizational change. In this integrative paper, I will discuss the interrelationships between Kotter's and Cohen's change process and Ivancevich's organizational behavior concepts by expanding on three steps: Increase Urgency, Communicate for Buy-in, and Create Short-Term Wins (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p 15). Additionally, I will discuss the relevance of these steps and Ivancevich's concepts to my professional experience while serving in military organizations. Step 1 - Create a Sense of Urgency. According to John Kotter and Dan Cohen (2002),

“ In successful change efforts, the first step is making sure sufficient people act with sufficient urgency” (p. 15).

This is the first major step in Kotter's and Cohen's eight stages of successful large scale organizational change (2002, p. 3). Increasing urgency is critical for energizing colleagues and team members, otherwise large scale change will be extremely difficult (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 15). In order to have urgency as Kotter and Cohen suggest, you also must have commitment by leaders and subordinates of the organization. Ivancevich proposes that management and those involved in implementing change “ must have high and visible commitment to the effort” (2011, p. 530). Management must remain committed to the effort throughout the process of organizational change. Therefore, urgency along with high and visible commitment are necessary for successful organizational change efforts. Ivancevich further contends that in the decision making process, the leader or decision maker evaluates the significance of a problem (2011, p. 406).

Urgency is one of the key considerations when determining the significance of an issue, without this, the attention and importance required by managers and subordinates will be insufficient (Ivancevich, 2011, p. 405). Kotter and Cohen assert that a sense of urgency is the first critical step to organizational change, while Ivancevich contends that without urgency, leaders will not provide the appropriate attention or importance to the change effort. As a military Soldier, I have had multiple deployments overseas, to include Iraq and Afghanistan. While in Afghanistan, my assigned unit was responsible for the United States (US) detention facility at Bagram

Airbase, north of Kabul. The US held many Afghan detainees that were captured by US forces while conducting combat operations. The US detention facility was well built, highly secure, appropriately manned and well maintained. The US agreed to transfer all detainees to the Afghan government, once their national detention facilities were repaired or constructed and their soldiers trained.

As we started this transition, the Afghan military leadership clearly lacked urgency as they preferred “ the Americans” to continue supporting the US detention facility for as long as possible. We (US) had a plan, vision, and process to begin the transfer of thousands of detainees to Afghan control, but encountered a huge obstacle, urgency by the Afghan military. Without this urgency, the plan would fail. As I reflect on Kotter's and Cohen's first step of urgency and my experience in Afghanistan, I can fully understand the statement: “ without enough urgency, large-scale change can become an exercise in pushing a gigantic boulder up a very tall mountain” and in my case a very tall Afghan mountain (2011, p. 15). Kotter and Cohen also discuss four sets of behaviors that commonly stop the launch of much needed change (2002, p. 17). One of these behaviors is immobilization or self-protection driven by fear or panic (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 17).

Ivancevich also affirms that “ the more significant the change in structure, task, technology and human assets, the more intense the fear, anxiety, and resistance” (2011, p. 510). It was clear that the Afghan military lacked urgency due to fear in their ability to assume the significant duties of a detention facility similar to the Americans. We could sense this in their

actions, behaviors, and updates to the US military leadership. We looked at ways to reduce their fear and increase their urgency and commitment for this critical transition. So we (US) reworked the transition process, contracted engineers to help construct and repair their detention facilities, developed a training plan for the Afghan soldiers, and teamed up with their logisticians as resupply, food, and clothing were their immediate concerns. Once we informed the Afghan military leadership of these adjustments, we observed an immediate change in their behavior. The Afghan's fears and concerns became less apparent and we sensed they were ready to move-out and go forward with the transition.

We had increased a sense of urgency with the Afghan military, but we soon encountered another obstacle, the Afghan judicial system. Step 4 - Communicate for Buy-In. In successful change efforts, the vision and change strategies cannot be locked in a room with your team (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 83). They must be communicated with as many people as possible, who in turn buy-in and accomplish your goal: "to get as many people as possible acting to make the vision a reality" (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 83).

Communication is also the glue that holds any organization together.

Communication assists organizational members to develop long-range strategic plans, respond to changes in the organizational environment, manage internal talent, goals, and engage in virtually all organizationally relevant behaviors (Ivancevich, 2011, p. 367). Thus, Kotter, Cohen, and Ivancevich each highlight the importance of communication in organizational change.

Without planned and focused communications, goals will not be accomplished and the change effort will not become a reality. Another area addressed by Ivancevich is "multicultural communication" and as the name implies, this is communicating with individuals from different cultures and can impact change efforts (2011, p. 381). Previously, I discussed my experience in Afghanistan and the transition process of detainees in the US detention facility in Bagram to Afghan control. To be successful, we had to be aware of multicultural communication challenges that included words, space, time, and behavior (Ivancevich, 2011, p. 381). Additionally, we had to be careful not to exhibit "ethnocentrism" which is the tendency to consider the values of one's own country superior to those of other countries (Ivancevich, 2011, p. 392). We were mindful of these challenges as we moved forward with this change effort. This US-Afghan transition process not only included the transfer of detainees to an Afghan prison, but the entire Afghan judiciary process of these detainees. From the Afghan perspective, what were their crimes, how long should they be confined, and should any of them be released? To be viewed as legal and legitimate to the Afghans, each detainee would face a trial in an Afghan court system.

So we instructed the Afghan Ministry of Justice to begin the judiciary process and immediately start holding court. To an American, this process would be viewed as relatively routine, however, in Afghanistan it was anything but routine. The Afghan court system was simply under resourced and not placed in high esteem with the Afghan people. As a result, the Afghan national and local judges were not buying our vision and plan to transition detainees from the US detention facility to Afghan control. Thus, the judges

became a big obstacle in the transition process. We had to somehow communicate our vision and strategy to the Afghan court system as well as the Afghan military. After much thought and deliberation, we (US) decided to construct an Afghan Supreme Court House and justice center at Bagram Airbase, to include family housing for the judges. Their current court house in downtown Kabul was old, small and in disrepair.

The judges were also fearful of retribution from the tribes and families of those found guilty and sentenced to prison. We directed the US Corps of Engineers to build one single court house at Bagram as soon as possible, with marble floors, court rooms, executive furniture, waiting rooms, offices, restrooms and a break area. After about 4 months, the court house was built and ready for use. We then assembled the Afghan judicial and military leaders and provide them a tour of the facility. This was followed by a ribbon cutting ceremony, which included media, to hand over the court house to the Afghan Judicial Ministry. The effect on the Afghans was very powerful. The Afghan judges had a safe, secure, functional and pristine court house and were eager to facilitate the transition process. Media also played the story over local and regional TV throughout the country.

By building this court house, we communicated our vision and the importance of this transition to the Afghans. We got buy-in from the Afghan Ministry of Justice and Defense which in turn supported our change efforts. The effect was immediate and the transition process began to build momentum. We also met several of Ivancevich's techniques to improving organizational communications that included empathy, following-up,

encouraging mutual trust and effective timing (2011, p. 390). However, we would later encounter another concern by the Afghan military, meal time.

Step 6 - Create Short Term Wins. In successful change efforts, “ empowered people create short-term wins — victories that nourish faith in the change effort, emotionally reward the hard workers, keep the critics at bay, and build momentum” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 123).

Without early wins that are visible, timely, unambiguous and meaningful, change efforts invariably run into serious problems (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 123). To empower people as Kotter and Cohen suggest requires empowerment of others. Ivancevich addresses the concept of empowerment while discussing group behavior and interpersonal influence. Empowerment is “ sharing power and authority with subordinates to increase their confidence and effectiveness” (Ivancevich, 2011, p. 343). Ivancevich also suggests that in order to increase your effectiveness in empowering others you should delegate authority, be a partner, be supportive, share information and provide training opportunities (2011, p. 344). In order to create short term wins that promote the change effort, you must empower your subordinates and partners. Empowering others builds confidence and creates short-term wins that are critical to the change effort as was the case with the Afghan military.

As we moved forward with the transfer of detainees from the US detention facility at Bagram to Afghan control, we had increased a sense of urgency with the Afghan military and communicated for buy-in from the Afghan judges, however, we were losing momentum for the change effort. The



Afghan military was still not convinced they could handle the logistical load of feeding and supplying the Afghan guards and the thousands of detainees that would soon be transferred from the Americans. The US detention facility in Bagram had the luxury of contracted support for food and logistics, it cost millions of dollars per year, the Afghan military simply could not afford this support. We decided that the best course of action was to empower the Afghan's to develop a solution for their detention facilities. They would conduct a series of meetings, working groups and conferences to determine the best solution. We (US) would be a partner, be supportive, and share information the Afghans may require.

To our surprise, the Afghan's developed a very good feeding solution, one that we had not considered. They requested that we (US) build them large wood burning stoves and ovens in addition to basic heaters. Once they briefed the US leadership, we said OK, let's do that and see what happens. After about a month the ovens were ready at one of the detention facilities and what we witnessed was remarkable. The ovens continuously baked fresh bread, more like a large pita, along with rice, beans and some mixed in fresh meat. This is the basic Afghan meal and was modified based on their religious holidays. By empowering the Afghan's to determine a feeding solution as Kotter, Cohen, and Ivancevich suggest, the Afghan's developed a low cost, easy maintenance answer. It was a big win for the change effort that was visible, timely, and rewarding to the Afghans. They really started to believe they could handle this transition along with the logistics.

In conclusion, I have discussed the relevance and interrelationships between Kotter's and Cohen's change process and Ivancevich's organizational behavior concepts by expanding on three steps: Increase Urgency, Communicate for Buy-in, and Create Short Term Wins (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p 15). To increase urgency, you must address fears and concerns while demonstrating high and visible commitment from managers. To communicate for buy-in, your vision and change strategy must be communicated with as many people as possible while looking for ways to improve organizational communications. To create short term wins that promotes the change effort, you must empower your people to build confidence and effectiveness. Furthermore, I discussed the relevance of these steps and Ivancevich's concepts while deployed to Afghanistan.

First, by addressing the Afghan's fears and concerns, the US increased a sense of urgency with the Afghan military. Secondly, the US communicated for buy-in from Afghan judges by constructing an Afghan Supreme Court House. Third, the US empowered the Afghan military to develop the best solution for their logistical support that resulted in short term win. At the end of my Afghanistan tour, the US had transferred most of the detainees to Afghan control, court hearings were being held, detainees were getting sentenced or released, and the Afghan military and justice ministries felt proud and capable. With Kotter's and Cohen's eight step process for implementing change initiatives and Ivancevich's concepts for organizational behavior and change, organizations will find a successful, relevant guide for their change efforts.

## References

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