

## What Leaders Read 1

# John P Kotter on What Leaders Really Do

## John P Kotter

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John Kotter is the Konusuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership at Harvard Business School. He is best known for his 1996 publication 'Leading Change' about the role of leadership in the strategic implementation of organisational transformation.

*John P Kotter on What Leaders Really Do* is a collection of his most important works on leadership, written originally as articles for the Harvard Business Review. The six articles were published between 1979 and 1997 and form six of the seven chapters of the book. The other chapter is the introduction, and is based around Kotter's own reflections on over 30 years' study of "those who run businesses". Having conducted numerous studies and surveys, as well as over 1,000 interviews, Kotter concludes that organisations lack the leadership they need for today's fast-moving, competitive environment. He refers to the need for substance rather than style, and observes that many organisations ignore leadership potential, providing no training: "People say leadership, but talk about management...talk of communicating style, but serve up speeches". The book comprises 184 pages and was published in 1999.

The book has been divided into two parts after the introductory chapter. Part One focuses on leadership and change, whereas Part Two shows how managerial work is more about dependencies and less about power. The two parts are deemed to "connect the actions that more change demands more leadership" and places managers in a "complex web of interaction". Kotter argues that leaders need to live comfortably in a web of relationships and use them to formulate and communicate a vision to "inspire and control". However, there is still confusion over what leadership means, and it is often confused with management. Kotter also addresses this issue.

### Part One: Leadership and change

Part One, on leadership and change, begins with a 1979 article, co-written with Leonard A Schlesinger, entitled 'Choosing Strategies for Change'. Though written over 20 years ago, and although the overriding theme is about the transformation of organisations based on constant changes in the markets, environment and other factors, it would appear that certain fundamentals of the change process remain constant, and these are dealt with in the article.

Kotter and Schlesinger look at diagnosing and dealing with resistance to change, before moving on to discuss determining choice of strategy. Being aware of the reasons why people resist change (parochial self-interest, misunderstanding and low tolerance for change are examples), provides awareness to managers for them to enable ways they can positively influence individuals or groups. Managers often underestimate the variety of ways people react to change. From educating and communicating, facilitating and support on the one hand, to manipulation,

control and coercion on the other, successful change requires the use of a combination of approaches to suit the situation. The authors regard the use of just one approach, regardless of the situation, as a big mistake. The choice of strategy will depend on a number of factors. One particularly common mistake is to move too quickly and involve too few people.

In the second article, 'What Leaders Really Do', published in 1990, Kotter writes that most US corporations are over-managed and under-led; however, strong leadership with weak management can be worse.

The difference between leadership and management is discussed, and is regarded as "two distinct but complementary systems of action". Management is about planning, leadership is about direction; management is about organising, leadership is about aligning. Kotter is quite clear on the distinctions, and he advocates the creation of a culture of leadership in organisations, beginning with selection and recruitment, but continuing with developmental programmes throughout the careers of executives. "Institutionalising a leadership-centred culture is the ultimate act of leadership."

The book as a whole, and this article particularly, is punctuated with anecdotes and short, highly readable case studies exemplifying the points raised. These observations serve to graphically enhance the text. In particular, Kotter provides three case-study examples of individuals who successfully brought about change in American Express, Eastman Kodak and Procter & Gamble, each representing a role model of leadership.

The third and last article in Part One is 'Leading Change – Why Transformation Efforts Fail', published in 1995. Kotter writes that he has observed over 100 companies in the previous 10 years "try to remake themselves into better competitors" using a number of methods – such as total quality management, re-engineering, right size and culture change – each with the same purpose of making the organisation better able to cope in new market environments. Most are less successful, and this article highlights eight of the errors that occur most often in these organisations. But the lesson from the most successful is that "the change process goes through a series of phases that take a considerable time". Each of the eight principal errors is defined under the following titles:

1. not establishing a great enough sense of urgency
2. not creating a powerful enough, guiding coalition
3. lacking a vision
4. under-communicating the vision by a factor of ten
5. not removing obstacles to the new vision
6. not systematically planning for, and creating, short-term wins
7. declaring victory too soon
8. not anchoring changes in the corporate culture

## Part Two: Dependency and networks

The first article in Part Two was published in 1977 and is based on a study of 26 diverse organisations, incorporating interviews with 250 managers. It is entitled 'Power, Dependence and Effective Management'. Kotter remarks that Americans tend to distrust those who seek power and, as a consequence, power lacks attention in textbooks. This article asks three questions:

1. Why are the dynamics of power an important part of the management process?
2. How often do effective managers acquire power?
3. How and for what purpose do effective managers use power?

Again, a case study provides a clear example to present the context of the subject area, and recognises that even CEOs depend on others to do their jobs effectively. It is further recognised that managers need some control over others, and it is observed that successful managers cope with their dependence on others by being sensitive to it, avoiding unnecessary dependence, and establishing power over others.

The author discusses establishing power in relationships, and names four different types of power over others, before going on to look at how successful managers use power to influence others. The article concludes by examining the generation and use of power.

The second article in Part Two, 'Managing Your Boss', was co-written with John Gaborro and published in 1993. Though much more recent, this espouses similar values of gain and self-interest, even though the authors declare that they are not referring to personal or political reasons in the introductory section. They claim this is a process of "consciously working with a superior to obtain the best possible results for you, your boss and your company". The conclusion is that effective managers manage their relationships with their bosses, as well as their subordinates; indeed, with everyone they depend on.

The article covers topics such as misreading the boss, understanding the boss and understanding yourself. Developing and managing relationships through being aware of work styles, expectations, information flows and resources, as well as dependability and honesty, are all discussed and recommendations put forward. There is even a checklist for managing your boss, which you can use to monitor your progress by ticking boxes.

Part Two concludes with the illuminating 'What Effective General Managers Really Do', written in 1982. From the author's own studies, this article begins with a chronologically detailed account of the events in a typical day of a general manager (GM), including all the minor conversations with numerous individuals. Kotter lists 12 observations from this account, which include, for example, "GMs ask a lot of questions", "discussions often involve topics that are a waste of time" and "they work long hours". He concludes from this that planning and organising is not systematically done, and it is "hit and miss" how planning and organising manifest themselves in the daily behaviour of executives.

One interesting point in this article is what Kotter refers to as the "efficiency of seemingly inefficient behaviour", and cites a two-minute conversation between the GM and a subordinate, from which is achieved effective relationship building, information gathering, decision-making and planning. Very effective for what might be deemed "reactive" behaviour.

Emphasising the daily activities of an executive gives rise to the consideration of how effective executives approach their jobs, and specifically the twin dilemmas of 'figuring out what to do' and 'getting things done'. The focus then turns to agenda setting and network building. Successful executives develop an agenda of short and long-term plans containing sometimes unconnected goals and plans, while at the same time establishing a network of co-operative relationships which can be used for influence and information.

## **Discussion**

In his introduction, Kotter refers to these 6 articles and uses hindsight to make 10 interrelated observations about managerial behaviour, each one reflecting important changes that continue to occur. The introduction section, entitled 'Leadership at the Turn of the Century', is largely concerned with the stating of those observations and subsequent discussion of each. This presents an insightful opening to a book which reads almost like a greatest hits of the author's work. The essence of a greatest-hits format is that it covers the old and the new, a cross-section of the work of the author. As a whole, the book is an interesting read; however, as Kotter himself points out in his reflective notes in the introduction, "I stress a little less MTB (managing the boss) and a little more effort to help customers. I talk a little less about manipulation and a little more about new product development." The implication here is that the author himself has modified his thinking in the light of continued research, study and reflection. It must be borne in mind, therefore, that the older articles represent the thinking of the time and not necessarily the prevalent thinking of today.

Kotter, as he prescribes, achieves a clear connection between the articles of the two parts of this book. However, those occurring in Part Two are about management and managerial actions as distinct from leadership, at times leaving the reader feeling a little adrift from the core subject of leadership per se.

These articles do present an interesting contextual read, and the scholar of leadership in organisations, as well as the practising manager, should find plenty to stimulate further thought.