John Kotter on Training and Change

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I recently had the pleasure of talking with Professor John Kotter at his Harvard Business School residence, overlooking the beautiful Charles River in Cambridge, MA. John is the world’s foremost authority on organizational change having conducted years of research on the subject and having written the seminal book, Leading Change. His new best-selling book, Our Iceberg is Melting, co-authored with Holger Rathgeber, piqued my interest with its storytelling, fable approach.

I was introduced to John through Entelechy’s relationship with Linkage, Inc. in creating training materials to support their highly acclaimed Management and Leadership series of broadcasts. I came to the interview prepared to discuss with John his thoughts on two related subjects:

1) What is the impact (or potential impact) of training on organizational change?
2) How important is the role of mid-level and front-line management on change?

Impact of Training

John has been in education for many years, but only recently has come to see another side of the educational process. John’s vocation as university professor and avocation as speaker, author, and thought leader have helped him hone his presentation techniques to a razor’s edge. However, he as come to realize that information alone does not drive change.

Several years ago, Kotter was approached by Holger Rathgeber for permission to use Kotter’s 8-Step Change process in an innovative, creative, and compelling way. “I knew Rathgeber was on to something.” The two collaborated on The Iceberg is Melting, a fable about change featuring a cast of penguins, some convinced of the need for change and others less enthusiastic for change.

In the process of writing the compelling fable and in working with a company to create training to support the book, John has gleaned some insights into the impact of training on organizational change AND what makes for impactful training.

Referring to his success as a speaker, author, and professor, Kotter states that up until a few years ago, “This training stuff wasn’t my specialty. I wanted to provide training that was more than simply information. I wanted to change behavior.”

To change behavior, Kotter has three suggestions for trainers and the training they create:

1) Appeal to the emotions. Impact feelings.
2) Turboboost the training by ensuring that attendees are able and inspired to take action.
3) Train everyone.

**Appeal to Emotions and Feelings**

Kotter believes that “with any training program that is not trivial, the feeling component is huge. Some things can seem so logical, yet people don’t change.” He points to a healthcare example – eating habits. “One of the most extreme motivators one can think of is death. Yet, when subjected to a logical presentation of information linking heart attacks and death to poor eating habits, most people choose NOT to change their eating habits even though they KNOW that their behavior is directly contributing to death.” Clearly KNOWING something isn’t sufficient in changing behavior.

Kotter believes – and research in neuroscience supports – that feelings and emotions, especially positive feelings and emotions, play a significant role in changing behavior. In the healthcare example, a heart attack will scare most patients into changing eating habits, for a while; studies indicate that old habits slowly creep back until another heart attack ensues. Fear – a negative emotion – will work for a while. Sustained change, however, comes with positive emotions. Enjoying life more, participating in physical activities, feeling better, and looking more attractive may be more influential in creating lasting change.

Likewise, non-trivial training should appeal to the positive emotions and feelings associated with the new behaviors if change is expected to last. Examples aren’t enough; Kotter believes that stories – “war stories” – appeal more strongly to people’s emotions and help people see themselves in this new way of behaving.

**Turboboost Training**

John is convinced that most corporate training results in insignificant behavior change because there are few mechanisms to ensure that participants are able to learn and apply what they learned.

Effective training is memorable training. “You need to get participants engaged. You need to make the training memorable; if people can hold onto something memorable, other things associated with that memory stick as well.” Information is usually not memorable. “The aim of training is NOT transfer of knowledge, but change of behavior.”

Kotter also suggests brevity. “We’re all busy and have little time to devote to long training, regardless of how well done. Shorter is better than longer.”

Additionally, effective training creates an eagerness and confidence in participants to try on the job what they learned in the classroom. “And I’m not talking about your typical action planning,” suggests Kotter. “Participants need to be inspired to take action. They need a turboboost of confidence that they CAN and WILL succeed.”

**Train Everyone**

Like excited atoms tend to create more excited atoms in a molecule, the more people who receive similar training tend to create increasing levels of excitement and energy around
the topic. Additionally states Kotter, “There’s an exponential increase in efficiency since we have a common vocabulary and common frames of reference.”

Especially with non-trivial training, training that impacts an organization for example, the more people who receive training, the greater the benefit and the greater the return on investment.

Kotter confesses that, “I’m new to corporate training and many of my findings are probably obvious to those who have been in training. So, I’m not beating my chest saying that I have discovered valuable insights that no one has yet thought about.”

At the same time, it is valuable to recognize that Kotter, the world’s leading authority on change, views training as key to successful, sustained change:

> On basic issues that have to do with organizational performance, the more people you can help – as opposed to making it exclusive – the more you get some real power. To do that, you can’t do it the way we would teach at Harvard Business School, the teaching has to be done a different way. The more the experiences are seductive and engaging, and the more the training is based on theory that explains how people learn and apply what they’ve learned at work, the better.

### The Importance of Mid-level and Front-line Managers

“Mid-level and front-line managers are extremely important in affecting change. In the work that I do, it became clearer and clearer that firms that were managing change well, provided training at the mid-level and front-line management levels.”

Kotter’s 8-Step Process of Successful Change provides guidance for employees at all levels of a changing organization, but speaks to the need for vision and action, a direct call to mid-level and front-line managers:

**Set the Stage**

1. Create a sense of urgency.
2. Pull together the guiding team.

**Decide What to Do**

3. Develop the change vision and strategy.

**Make it Happen**

4. Communicate for understanding and buy-in.
5. Empower others to act.
7. Don’t let up.

**Make it Stick**

8. Create a new culture.

Mid-level and front-line managers, Kotter suggests, “Act as a lubricant for change. They translate vision into action and action into results. Managers communicate and empower
to produce short-term wins. Most importantly, in successful change initiatives, they act as a ratchet for forward progress, never letting up and always pointing forward.”

While the role of the mid-level and front-line managers sounds glorious, without proper training and support, the role quickly disintegrates and any change initiative – whether driven from the top or from the bottom – stalls. Effective mid-level and front-line managers know how to communicate effectively with employees, knowing what and how to say it. They know how to develop their employees and prepare them for a new future. And they know how to manage the performance of those who do not wish to participate in the new organization.

Kotter believes that “we have not provided the level of training these managers need to succeed” and may have justified it by being a bit elitist in our thinking. While millions have been spent on executive training – which is important – we may incorrectly assume that learning at the executive level will somehow trickle down to the lower levels of management. That just doesn’t happen.

And even if it did, Kotter believes, “It isn’t the type of skills that mid-level and front-line supervisors need to affect change at their levels.” Mid-level and front-line managers need to know how to translate vision into action, setting goals and communicating clear expectations. They need to know how to develop competence and instill confidence in their employees. And they know the importance of recognizing effort and, eventually, success – of the team and of each individual on it.

Bringing the conversation full circle, John reiterates the importance of providing training that is emotionally engaging, behavior-changing, and memorable, turboboosting participants into action – action that is supported by the organization.

Harvard Business School Professor John Kotter is considered the world’s premier authority on leadership and corporate change. He has authored 15 books on the topics of leadership and change including Our Iceberg is Melting (2006) and Leading Change (1996). Additionally, his educational articles in the Harvard Business Review have sold a million and a half copies.

Professor Kotter’s extensive expertise in leadership and change has earned him more accolades than any other writer on the subject. Professor Kotter’s honors include being named the number one leadership guru in America by Business Week magazine, an Exxon Award for Innovation in Graduate Business School Curriculum Design, and a Johnson, Smith & Knisely Award for New Perspectives in Business Leadership. In 1996, Professor Kotter’s Leading Change was named the #1 management book of the year by Management General.

Terence Traut is the President of Entelechy, Inc., a company providing customized training and performance solutions to today’s leading companies. Entelechy’s Coaching for Employee Engagement and Development embeds the instructional principles Dr. Kotter speaks about in this interview and targets the mid-level and front-line manager as
the critical link to organizational performance. Terence can be reached at 603-424-1237 or ttraut@unlockit.com or at Entelechy’s website: www.unlockit.com.