

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF KOTTER'S CHANGE LEADERSHIP MODEL: RELEVANCE, LIMITATIONS, AND INTEGRATION WITH CONTEMPORARY MODELS

UNA REVISIÓN CRÍTICA DEL MODELO DE LIDERAZGO DEL CAMBIO DE KOTTER: RELEVANCIA, LIMITACIONES E INTEGRACIÓN CON MODELOS CONTEMPORÁNEOS

Adolfo Carreño Sepúlveda

Universidad de Salamanca, España

[adocarreno@gmail.com] [<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3393-1584>]

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ABSTRACT

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change management, leadership, organizational transformation, agile, Kotter's model

This paper critically reexamines John Kotter's Eight-Step Model for leading organizational change, exploring its enduring relevance and limitations in the context of today's dynamic, technology-driven business environment. While Kotter's framework has become a foundational reference in leadership education and change management practice, its linear and top-down orientation faces challenges when applied to continuous transformation efforts requiring agility, cross-functional coordination, and decentralized decision-making. By contrasting Kotter's model with contemporary approaches such as Agile, Lean, and adaptive leadership, the analysis highlights areas where the framework must evolve to remain effective. The paper draws on both scholarly literature and applied frameworks from major consulting firms to examine how Kotter's principles have been embedded, adapted, and extended in practice. It also explores theoretical intersections between Kotter's leadership emphasis and modern paradigms such as servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership, arguing that these approaches enrich Kotter's original model by promoting distributed authority, continuous learning, and systemic responsiveness. Through this updated lens, the study proposes a hybridized view of change leadership that integrates Kotter's structured process with flexible, people-centric strategies to address the current realities of business transformation. The result is a nuanced perspective on how organizations can pursue sustainable change by balancing strategic discipline with adaptive capacity, preserving the strengths of Kotter's vision while enhancing its practical relevance.

RESUMEN

Palabras clave:

gestión del cambio, liderazgo, transformación organizacional, agile, modelo de Kotter

Este artículo reexamina críticamente el modelo de ocho pasos de John Kotter para liderar el cambio organizacional, analizando su relevancia continua y sus limitaciones en el contexto del entorno empresarial actual, caracterizado por su dinamismo y orientación tecnológica. Aunque el marco de Kotter se ha convertido en una referencia fundamental en la formación de liderazgo y en la práctica

de la gestión del cambio, su enfoque lineal y jerárquico enfrenta dificultades cuando se aplica a procesos de transformación continua que requieren agilidad, coordinación interfuncional y toma de decisiones descentralizada. Al contrastar el modelo de Kotter con enfoques contemporáneos como Agile, Lean y el liderazgo adaptativo, el análisis pone de relieve las áreas en las que dicho marco debe evolucionar para seguir siendo eficaz. El artículo se apoya tanto en la literatura académica como en marcos aplicados desarrollados por grandes firmas de consultoría para examinar cómo los principios de Kotter han sido incorporados, adaptados y ampliados en la práctica. Asimismo, explora las intersecciones teóricas entre el énfasis de Kotter en el liderazgo y paradigmas modernos como el liderazgo servicial, transformacional y adaptativo, argumentando que estos enfoques enriquecen el modelo original al promover la autoridad distribuida, el aprendizaje continuo y la capacidad de respuesta sistémica. Desde esta perspectiva actualizada, el estudio propone una visión híbrida del liderazgo del cambio que integra el proceso estructurado de Kotter con estrategias flexibles y centradas en las personas, con el fin de abordar las realidades actuales de la transformación empresarial. El resultado es una perspectiva matizada sobre cómo las organizaciones pueden lograr un cambio sostenible al equilibrar la disciplina estratégica con la capacidad de adaptación, preservando las fortalezas de la visión de Kotter y, al mismo tiempo, mejorando su aplicabilidad práctica.

Introduction

John P. Kotter, in his influential article *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*, noted that “a few of these corporate change efforts have been very successful. A few have been utter failures. Most fall somewhere in between, with a distinct tilt toward the lower end of the scale” (Kotter, 1995). This candid observation set the stage for what became one of the most referenced models in the field of organizational change management. Based on a decade of research across over 100 organizations, Kotter introduced an eight-step framework aimed at addressing the frequent shortcomings in transformation initiatives (Kotter, 1996; 2012).

The model's structured sequence, from establishing a sense of urgency to embedding new practices into the organizational culture (Kotter, 2012), has since been widely applied in both corporate and public sectors (By, 2005; Yi, 2025). Its impact on managerial thinking and strategic execution remains significant, offering a repeatable structure for navigating complex change (Abumohor, 2025). Over time, it has become a foundational reference for leaders seeking to drive change in structured, often hierarchical, environments (Vale et al., 2022).

Central to Kotter's argument is the notion that sustainable transformation cannot be achieved through planning or communication alone; it requires strong leadership, clear vision, and a deliberate process to overcome inertia and resistance (Appelbaum et al., 2012). His framework was conceived at a time when change was often episodic and led from the top, making it particularly effective in stable, well-defined settings (Yi, 2025). However, the context in which organizations now operate has shifted dramatically.

As organizations grapple with rapid technological change, evolving work arrangements, and shifting customer demands, questions have emerged about whether Kotter's linear model can still keep pace with the complexity of modern transformation (Carreño, 2024). The urgency for organizations to be agile, responsive, and inclusive in how they lead transformation has prompted the adoption of alternative methodologies. Approaches such as Agile and Lean emphasize iteration, decentralized execution, and feedback loops, offering a more fluid model for change (Womack & Jones, 2003; Koudriachov, Tam, & Aparicio, 2025). Recent studies suggest that successful transformations increasingly rely on continuous sequencing, disciplined leadership, and adaptive capacity rather than one-time structural overhauls (Mankins & Litre, 2024).

This paper critically examines Kotter's eight-step model in light of these evolving demands. It assesses the framework's enduring value and explores how it may be reinterpreted or augmented to better align with the current challenges and conditions for organizations facing change.

Background and context: The evolution of change management

The field of organizational change management has evolved alongside shifts in markets, technologies, and stakeholder expectations (Burnes, 2017). One of the earliest and most influential models is Kurt Lewin's three-stage process (unfreezing, changing, and refreezing), developed in the 1940s. This model conceptualized change as a linear, top-down process designed to embed new behaviors into an organization's cultural framework (Lewin, 1947). Although foundational, Lewin's model reflects assumptions of

environmental stability and managerial control that have become increasingly challenged in today's fluid contexts (Yi, 2025).

As organizational environments grew more complex in response to globalization and technological acceleration, change management frameworks began to shift away from purely structural interventions (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012). Among these, Prosci's ADKAR model, introduced in the 1990s, reframed change through an individual lens. It emphasized the importance of personal transitions by focusing on five essential elements: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. This framework recognized that employee readiness and participation are critical to achieving lasting transformation (Hiatt, 2006).

Building on the growing recognition that change efforts require more than task execution, John Kotter introduced his 8-Step Change Model in *Leading Change* (1996; 2012), offering a structured process rooted in leadership, vision, and momentum-building. Kotter's model emphasized the need to create urgency, form powerful coalitions, and secure early wins to drive large-scale transformation. Widely adopted across both private and public sectors (Appelbaum, 2012), the model became emblematic of what Yi (2025) classifies as a classical change model, one that assumes a sequential, top-down flow of decisions and actions. These classical models, according to Yi, are designed for well-structured environments and emphasize managerial authority, strategic planning, and controlled execution.

However, Yi (2025) also notes the limitations of classical approaches when applied to environments characterized by ambiguity, rapid change, and decentralized decision-making. The rise of transitional and transformational models, which stress feedback loops, employee empowerment, and adaptive capacity, reflects a broader shift in organizational thinking (By, 2005). These models respond to the need for flexibility and continuous learning, particularly in settings driven by business and digital transformation and global interdependence.

As organizational environments grow increasingly volatile and digitally driven, newer change approaches advocate for continuous transformation over episodic initiatives. Rather than treating change as a bounded project, these models emphasize adaptive cycles, dynamic capabilities, and sustained alignment across evolving priorities (Azagury & Close, 2024).

In this evolving landscape, Kotter's model remains a critical milestone but must now be reconsidered in light of frameworks that prioritize adaptability and emergent strategy (Appelbaum et al., 2012).

Kotter's Eight-Step Model

John Kotter's eight-step model has come to define one of the most structured and actionable approaches to leading organizational change. Each step builds upon the previous one, ensuring a comprehensive strategy that addresses the common challenges of organizational change. Below is a detailed breakdown of each step, emphasizing the critical roles of leadership, communication, and strategic planning.

Table 1
Kotter's Eight Steps for Leading Organizational Change

Step	Description
1	Establishing a Sense of Urgency
2	Forming a Powerful Guiding Coalition
3	Creating a Vision
4	Communicating the Vision
5	Empowering Others to Act on the Vision
6	Planning for and Creating Short-Term Wins
7	Consolidating Improvements and Producing Still More Change
8	Institutionalizing New Approaches

Note. Source: Adapted from Kotter, J. P. (2012). *Leading change*. Harvard Business Review Press, p. 23.

Establishing a sense of urgency

The change process begins with cultivating a genuine sense of urgency that is not confined to leadership circles but shared throughout the organization. This urgency must be grounded in a clear-eyed assessment of current realities: shifting market dynamics, emerging threats, performance gaps, or missed opportunities. When these factors are left unarticulated, complacency can take root, weakening the momentum for change before it even starts.

Employees at all levels must grasp why change is not just necessary but imperative. This means moving beyond abstract messaging and directly engaging with the risks of inaction and the potential value of transformation. Urgency becomes effective only when it prompts reflection, sparks motivation, and connects individual roles to broader strategic needs.

Without a strong sense of urgency at the outset, even well-designed change efforts are likely to face resistance, hesitation, or disengagement. As a result, progress may stall before meaningful transformation can begin.

Forming a powerful guiding coalition

Driving meaningful change requires more than senior sponsorship. It demands a cohesive alliance of individuals with the credibility, influence, and trust needed to lead across the organization. This coalition should span multiple levels, incorporating executives, middle managers, and informal influencers who can collectively represent the organization's diverse perspectives.

Beyond formal authority, the strength of the coalition lies in its ability to shape the narrative, model the desired behaviors, and maintain alignment through periods of uncertainty. As the transformation unfolds, this group must remain dynamic, adjusting to emerging needs while continuing to project unity and resolve.

When such a coalition is absent, or lacks internal legitimacy, efforts to mobilize the organization can falter. Without a strong, aligned leadership core, change initiatives risk becoming fragmented, with competing priorities eroding focus and trust across teams. Establishing a resilient coalition from the outset is not optional; it is the structural backbone of sustained change.

Creating a vision

At the heart of any successful transformation lies a vision that not only clarifies direction but also evokes purpose. More than a slogan or goal statement, the vision serves as an organizing principle employees can connect with, interpret through their own roles, and work toward collectively.

Kotter underscores the importance of simplicity and clarity in this step. The vision must articulate a realistic yet aspirational future, one that aligns with strategic priorities while remaining accessible to employees at every level. When well crafted, it becomes a source of momentum, offering coherence amid disruption and giving meaning to the effort required.

Importantly, the process of shaping the vision should not occur in isolation. Involving a broad mix of stakeholders brings in vital perspectives, increases relevance, and builds early ownership. A vision developed this way is more likely to endure, as it reflects the organization's realities and resonates across its culture. Without it, change initiatives may proceed, but without the cohesion or energy needed to sustain them.

Communicating the vision

For a vision to guide meaningful change, it must be communicated in ways that reach, engage, and mobilize the entire organization. This involves more than simply stating objectives. It requires sustained, deliberate effort to ensure the vision is understood, remembered, and acted upon.

Communication should be continuous and multichannel, combining formal messaging with informal conversations, leader behaviors, and everyday decisions. Consistency matters, not just in words, but in tone, timing, and alignment between what is said and what is done. When leaders embody the vision through their actions, they reinforce its credibility and significance.

To foster genuine engagement, communication must also leave space for dialogue. Creating opportunities for feedback and open discussion allows employees to clarify doubts, express concerns, and connect the vision to their own experience. Emotional resonance matters as much as rational clarity; the vision should inspire as well as inform.

Moreover, how the message is delivered should reflect the diverse contexts and roles across the organization. Tailoring communications to specific audiences increases relevance, while sustained exposure helps embed the vision into the cultural fabric. Without this level of intentionality, even the most compelling vision risks being lost in the noise of daily operations.

Empowering others to act on the vision

For change to move beyond intention and into action, individuals throughout the organization must be equipped and trusted to contribute meaningfully. Empowerment, in this context, is an operational necessity and not merely a leadership posture.

Removing barriers to action is essential. This may involve flattening hierarchies, simplifying approval processes, or addressing cultural norms that discourage initiative. Leaders must ensure that the necessary tools, information, and authority are distributed to those responsible for executing change at the ground level.

True empowerment also requires a shift in mindset, from control to trust. When employees feel confident that their decisions are aligned with the broader direction, and when they are encouraged to experiment without fear of blame, participation deepens.

Cross-functional collaboration and decentralized problem-solving often emerge as a result, accelerating momentum and uncovering innovation from within.

Rather than pushing change from the top, empowerment allows the vision to take hold at every level, transforming it from a directive into a shared endeavor.

Planning for and creating short-term wins

Early achievements are critical to building the case for change. When transformation efforts yield visible, meaningful results in the short term, they create momentum and demonstrate that progress is not only possible, but already underway.

These wins should be intentionally designed, targeting areas where success can be clearly observed, quickly realized, and directly tied to the broader vision. They serve a dual purpose: validating the strategy and energizing the workforce. When people see real improvements, confidence grows, resistance softens, and broader engagement tends to follow.

Short-term gains also function as strategic checkpoints. They allow organizations to assess what is working, adjust where needed, and reinforce behaviors that align with the desired future state. Publicly recognizing these outcomes boosts morale and sends a clear message that the change effort is not abstract, but it is delivering.

Consistently sharing these wins across the organization helps sustain interest, keeps goals visible, and counters the fatigue that often sets in during longer transformation journeys.

Consolidating improvements and producing still more change

Initial victories, while energizing, mark only the beginning of meaningful transformation. Real change requires persistence beyond early success. Declaring the effort complete too soon risks a return to old habits and erodes the credibility of the initiative.

To maintain momentum, organizations must build on what has worked. This means systematically extending successful practices into other areas, tackling root causes of inefficiency or resistance, and reinforcing behaviors that support the new direction. As transformation deepens, attention must shift from isolated improvements to structural alignment, ensuring that processes, policies, and performance systems support the desired change.

Leadership presence remains vital during this phase. Strategic recalibration, ongoing communication, and visible commitment signal that the transformation is not a one-off campaign but a sustained shift. The consolidation of gains sets the stage for additional progress, helping the organization move from episodic change to continuous evolution.

Institutionalizing new approaches

Lasting change is not secured until new behaviors become part of the organization's cultural fabric. This final stage requires more than formal procedures. It demands reinforcement at every level. Leaders must exemplify the desired ways of working, ensuring that policies, systems, and daily practices all reflect and support the transformation.

Embedding change means aligning performance management, incentives, and decision-making with the new approach. Recognition systems should reward behaviors

that reflect the vision, and structural changes must remove legacy practices that risk pulling the organization backward.

Sustaining change also hinges on leadership continuity. Preparing future leaders who understand and uphold the transformation ensures that progress endures across cycles of turnover or external disruption. Through regular communication, institutional memory, and cultural reinforcement, new approaches evolve from initiative to norm.

Kotter's model concludes not with closure, but with continuity, positioning change as a capability rather than a phase. Sustained transformation depends not only on execution but on the extent to which new behaviors are lived by leaders and woven into the cultural fabric of the organization, a focus central to the framework's enduring impact. It invites organizations to treat change not as a project with an endpoint, but as a capability that must be nurtured, adapted, and preserved over time.

Critical analysis of Kotter's framework

While widely recognized for its influence on modern change management, John Kotter's eight-step model warrants critical examination when applied in diverse organizational contexts. Celebrated for its structured progression and emphasis on leadership, the framework has shaped how many organizations approach transformation. Yet, its effectiveness depends not only on the clarity of its design but also on how well it adapts to varying conditions, cultures, and complexities. The following analysis explores both the model's core strengths and the potential limitations that emerge in practice.

Strengths

Despite its age, Kotter's framework has become a widely adopted framework for leading change, and continues to offer enduring value in navigating organizational change. Its continued relevance must be evaluated in light of evolving organizational realities. The strengths of Kotter's framework lie not only in the structured logic of its sequential steps but also in its strong emphasis on leadership, clarity of purpose, and broad applicability. These characteristics have made it a go-to reference for practitioners seeking order and direction in times of uncertainty. The following are the most widely recognized contributions to the practice of change management:

Structured process with strategic clarity

One of the enduring strengths of Kotter's model lies in its structured, sequential approach, which offers more than just procedural guidance. It provides a strategic lens through which change can be conceived, communicated, and executed. Each of the eight steps builds upon the previous one with intentional logic, helping organizations move from initial awareness to cultural integration. This clarity of progression makes the model especially valuable in large, hierarchical environments where ambiguity and fragmented initiatives often threaten alignment. When transformation efforts are diffused across functions or geographies, having a coherent framework can serve as an anchor point, helping leaders synchronize priorities and maintain directional focus.

Leadership as the engine of change

Kotter's insistence on leadership as a central pillar of transformation elevates the model beyond operational checklists. Change is not positioned as a project to be managed, but

as a process to be led. From forming a guiding coalition to modeling new behaviors, the framework reinforces that transformation must be championed and sustained by individuals who hold both formal authority and informal influence. This emphasis on leadership reflects an understanding of organizational dynamics where people follow signals more than slogans. When leaders visibly align their actions with the envisioned change, trust grows, resistance diminishes, and execution becomes more coherent across the enterprise.

Applicability across contexts and industries

Another important strength of Kotter's model is its broad relevance. The core principles of urgency, vision, communication, empowerment, are applicable across sectors, whether in healthcare, education, government, or corporate environments. Case examples from fields such as public health and digital innovation show how the model can be tailored to context without losing its structure. Its flexibility also extends to scale: while well-suited to enterprise-wide change, it has also been adapted for smaller departmental or initiative-based transformations. This cross-context adaptability has contributed to its continued use in academic settings and practitioner circles alike.

In sum, Kotter's framework remains influential not only because of its intuitive logic, but because it addresses key dimensions of successful change: clarity, leadership credibility, and cultural traction. These qualities make it especially valuable in complex transformations where alignment, trust, and sustained commitment are essential for achieving long-term strategic impact.

Limitations

As transformation efforts increasingly unfold in fast-moving, decentralized, and culturally diverse environments, certain aspects of Kotter's model may prove less adaptable or incomplete. The following are the key limitations that have emerged in both theory and practice, particularly concerning the model's structural rigidity, top-down orientation, and assumptions about cultural universality:

Sequential rigidity in dynamic environments

While Kotter's model offers clarity through its sequential structure, its linear progression may fall short in organizational environments that demand continuous iteration. The model assumes a step-by-step unfolding of change, from urgency to institutionalization, yet many modern organizations operate in contexts where change is neither discrete nor episodic. As noted by Mankins and Litre (2024), successful transformations increasingly depend on agility and responsiveness, requiring organizations to adapt strategies in real time rather than follow a predetermined roadmap.

In rapidly evolving sectors, such as technology, media, and digital services, transformation often unfolds nonlinearly. Feedback loops, emergent needs, and parallel initiatives are the norm, and frameworks like Agile or continuous transformation models provide greater flexibility. Within these settings, the rigidity of Kotter's sequential steps can risk delaying necessary pivots, constraining adaptive momentum, or artificially segmenting what is often a fluid and interconnected process. Although the steps remain conceptually sound, they may need to be reinterpreted as cyclical or overlapping rather than strictly linear to remain relevant in high-change environments.

Hierarchical bias and limited bottom-up engagement

Kotter's model presumes a transformation led by a guiding coalition of formal leaders. A structure that reinforces top-down authority and direction. While this leadership-centered approach can provide strong alignment and accountability, it may underutilize the potential of broader employee engagement, especially in flatter, decentralized organizations.

Modern organizational paradigms increasingly emphasize empowerment, self-organizing teams, and cross-functional collaboration. In such cultures, change often emerges from within, rather than being initiated solely by executive leadership. By focusing primarily on formal coalitions and leadership-driven visioning, Kotter's model may overlook the transformative capacity of bottom-up initiatives. This is especially pertinent in creative industries, agile organizations, and purpose-driven startups where distributed leadership and co-creation are essential. A more inclusive framework might integrate participatory structures that reflect how influence and insight flow horizontally, not just vertically, within the organization.

Cultural and contextual generalization

Although Kotter's framework has achieved global recognition, its foundational assumptions about urgency, leadership, and communication may not align with all cultural and organizational settings. The model's strong emphasis on assertive leadership and rapid mobilization is rooted in individualistic, action-oriented norms, which may clash with collectivist cultures or consensus-based decision-making environments.

In multinational organizations or culturally diverse teams, applying the model without adaptation can result in misalignment with local expectations. For instance, the creation of urgency may be interpreted differently in high-context cultures, where overt expressions of crisis can be counterproductive. Likewise, the reliance on visible leadership may diminish the perceived value of shared responsibility and group cohesion. As Yi (2025) and By (2005) argue, culturally sensitive change strategies must consider how authority, time, and communication are understood and practiced within different environments.

While Kotter's eight-step model remains a cornerstone in the field of change management, its utility is not without constraints. In its original form, the framework favors structure over flexibility, central leadership over distributed agency, and generalized applicability over cultural nuance. For organizations navigating constant disruption, decentralized governance, or multicultural dynamics, the model may require thoughtful adaptation. Recognizing these limitations is not a dismissal of the framework's value, but an invitation to use it critically and modifying its application to reflect the evolving nature of transformation itself.

Current relevance of Kotter's model

Despite the evolving demands of organizational transformation, Kotter's eight-step model remains a foundational reference point. Its structured, leadership-centered approach continues to offer clarity in navigating complex change initiatives. However, contemporary environments shaped by accelerated technological change, shifting stakeholder expectations, and growing pressure for agility, require a more adaptive application of the model.

Adapting to modern challenges

Modern organizations increasingly turn to iterative methodologies inspired by Agile and Lean approaches, which emphasize responsiveness, cross-functional collaboration, and continuous feedback. These practices do not replace Kotter's model but can enrich its application. For instance, short-term wins (Step 6 in Kotter's model) align naturally with Agile's focus on incremental delivery, while empowering employees (Step 5) resonates with Lean's emphasis on removing waste and decentralizing authority. In this way, Kotter's framework serves as a strategic scaffold, adaptable to newer models that prioritize learning cycles and emergent strategy.

As Koudriachov, Tam, and Aparicio (2025) argue, Agile's success hinges on its responsiveness, team empowerment, and continuous value delivery, factors increasingly vital to modern transformation efforts.

Ultimately, the model's enduring value lies in its flexibility. When applied not as a rigid checklist but as a dynamic framework, Kotter's eight steps remain relevant for leading transformation in a world where change is no longer episodic but continuous.

An essential aspect of evaluating Kotter's continued relevance lies in understanding how the model can be adapted to meet the demands of modern transformation, where change is ongoing, fast-paced, and shaped by evolving external pressures. The following are key areas where Kotter's model can be adapted or complemented to address the demands of modern transformation challenges:

Technological advancements

The accelerated rise of artificial intelligence, automation, and digital transformation has positioned technological adaptability as a strategic imperative. In this context, the early stages of Kotter's model, establishing urgency and articulating a compelling vision, remain especially relevant, as organizations must first recognize the implications of emerging technologies and rally around a clear path forward. However, the static nature of traditional change frameworks can limit responsiveness in fast-moving digital landscapes.

To meet this challenge, many organizations are supplementing Kotter's leadership-driven approach with Agile methodologies. Agile's emphasis on iterative development, rapid prototyping, and continuous feedback allows organizations to navigate digital disruption with greater flexibility. Rather than replacing Kotter's model, Agile enables faster execution of the vision and accelerates learning, helping organizations remain responsive without losing strategic coherence. In this hybrid approach, Kotter sets the direction, while Agile delivers the adaptability required for technology-led transformation.

Market volatility

In an environment defined by supply chain instability, political uncertainty, and economic disruption, market volatility has become a constant. Kotter's framework offers valuable direction and leadership alignment during such times, but its sequential structure may not always provide the operational agility required to react in real time. To address this gap, Lean methodologies offer a complementary layer by emphasizing continuous improvement, streamlined processes, and the reduction of inefficiencies.

Lean principles reinforce key aspects of Kotter's model, particularly in empowering employees and consolidating gains. By eliminating structural bottlenecks and enabling faster decision-making, Lean practices help sustain momentum during change and allow organizations to respond quickly to external shocks. When combined,

Kotter's strategic clarity and Lean's operational discipline provide a dual advantage, ensuring purposeful change that is both efficient and resilient under pressure.

The need for agility

While Kotter's model was developed for large-scale, stepwise transformation, the current landscape often demands ongoing, adaptive change. Industries characterized by rapid innovation cycles, such as technology, media, and professional services, must operate with agility as a core capability. In these settings, the rigidity of a linear process may constrain rather than support transformation.

Integrating Agile principles allows organizations to apply Kotter's model with greater flexibility. The coalition-building and vision-setting stages remain vital for creating alignment and momentum, but the execution of change can benefit from Agile's iterative loops and decentralized ownership. Successful Agile organizations are those that continuously realign plans based on learning and stakeholder feedback (Koudriachov et al., 2025). This integration fosters a more responsive environment in which strategic vision and tactical adaptability coexist. Rather than viewing Kotter's model as fixed, its relevance today lies in how well it can be adapted into a more fluid, collaborative, and iterative transformation framework.

How modern methodologies complement Kotter's framework

Although primarily associated with project management and process optimization, modern methodologies such as Agile, Lean, and continuous improvement offer valuable mechanisms to reinforce and operationalize the strategic intent outlined in Kotter's model. Rather than standing in opposition, these methodologies complement Kotter's vision-driven framework by addressing its limitations in adaptability and execution. Their integration enables organizations to remain responsive in fast-changing environments while preserving the structured guidance and leadership emphasis that Kotter provides. The following are key ways in which Agile, Lean, and continuous improvement methodologies can be integrated with Kotter's model to enhance its practical effectiveness:

Agile and Kotter's model

Agile methodologies are characterized by iterative development, rapid feedback loops, and decentralized decision-making. These principles offer an important counterbalance to the linearity and top-down nature of Kotter's model. While Kotter outlines a high-level path for transformation, Agile enables teams to respond dynamically to real-time changes and customer feedback during execution.

This complementary relationship becomes particularly evident during the stages of communicating the vision and empowering employees. Agile practices, such as sprint planning and retrospectives, provide structured mechanisms to translate strategic objectives into concrete actions while maintaining alignment with the broader change vision. As Koudriachov et al. (2025) emphasize, the success of Agile lies in its ability to maintain strategic coherence while empowering autonomous teams to deliver continuous value.

For instance, in a digital transformation initiative, cross-functional Agile teams can execute change in increments, deploying new features or capabilities iteratively, while senior leaders communicate and reinforce the overarching vision. Agile's responsiveness helps generate early successes that align with Kotter's short-term wins step, sustaining momentum and enabling learning. This synergy enhances both speed and cohesion across the transformation process.

Lean and Kotter's model

Lean methodology, with its focus on value delivery and waste reduction, reinforces the sustainability of change. During Kotter's stages of consolidating improvements and producing more change, Lean tools such as value stream mapping, root cause analysis, and continuous flow principles help embed the change deeper into operational processes.

Lean's emphasis on continuous learning and optimization aligns well with Kotter's call for embedding change into systems and behaviors. By focusing on efficiency and eliminating unnecessary effort, Lean supports the institutionalization of improvements, reducing the risk of regression once early wins are achieved. This alignment is particularly relevant in resource-constrained environments where transformation efforts must demonstrate immediate and ongoing value.

Continuous improvement methodologies and Kotter's model

Approaches like Kaizen and Six Sigma introduce a culture of ongoing, data-driven improvement that strengthens Kotter's final step: institutionalizing new approaches. These methodologies offer systematic tools for reinforcing change through metrics, standardization, and problem-solving cycles.

Where Kotter emphasizes the importance of cultural anchoring, continuous improvement frameworks ensure that transformation is not a one-time event but an embedded organizational habit. Feedback mechanisms inherent in Six Sigma and Kaizen also help sustain engagement by involving employees in evaluating and refining the transformation effort, fostering a shared sense of accountability for results.

Kotter's eight-step model remains a vital strategic framework for leading transformation. However, its effectiveness is significantly enhanced when integrated with contemporary methodologies that support agility, efficiency, and continuous refinement. As organizational environments become more complex and unpredictable, the ability to combine Kotter's structured leadership focus with the adaptive capabilities of Agile, Lean, and continuous improvement provides a more resilient and responsive approach to transformation. This integrated perspective enables organizations to navigate uncertainty without losing strategic coherence, a key requirement for sustainable change in the modern era.

Contrasting Kotter's framework with modern transformation practices

As organizations operate within increasingly complex and rapidly evolving environments, it becomes necessary to reassess how Kotter's eight-step model aligns with the demands of contemporary transformation efforts. While the model remains a foundational framework for initiating change, modern practices call for greater flexibility, iterative development, and the integration of both operational and financial dimensions to sustain long-term success (Kotter et al., 2021; Mouazen et al., 2024).

A primary point of divergence lies in the linearity of Kotter's model. Originally designed as a sequential progression from establishing urgency to institutionalizing new practices, the model assumes a relatively stable context in which one stage logically follows another. However, in fast-paced industries shaped by digital transformation and frequent market shifts, change is better understood as a continuous capability rather than a finite event (Mankins & Litre, 2024). Iterative frameworks such as Agile offer mechanisms for ongoing learning, enabling teams to respond in real time while still working within a broader strategic vision. Scholars have emphasized that integrating these adaptive methodologies can help organizations complement the structure provided

by Kotter's model with the responsiveness required in volatile environments (Koudriachov et al., 2025).

Another critical distinction concerns how organizational energy and change capacity are managed. While Kotter's model rightly emphasizes early wins and empowerment to build momentum, it does not explicitly account for the cumulative effects of change fatigue, particularly in organizations facing simultaneous transformations across multiple domains. Modern approaches emphasize the strategic sequencing of initiatives, recognizing that pacing and focus are essential to preserving employee engagement and organizational effectiveness over time (Mouazen et al., 2024).

Furthermore, contemporary transformation practices expand the leadership and vision-centric approach of Kotter by explicitly incorporating financial scaffolding. Transformations at scale often require substantial investment, and success depends not only on cultural and behavioral alignment but also on the availability and allocation of financial resources (Appelbaum, 2012; Mankins & Litre, 2024).

Finally, the growing prevalence of real-time decision-making in digitally enabled organizations underscores the limitations of prescriptive, one-directional models. While Kotter provides a valuable blueprint, its application must be adapted in contexts where responsiveness, decentralization, and continuous feedback are essential. Incorporating Agile and Lean methodologies helps organizations maintain the strategic coherence of Kotter's vision while allowing for dynamic execution and iterative refinement (Abumohor, 2025; Kotter et al., 2021; Vale et al., 2022).

Taken together, these contrasts highlight that while Kotter's model continues to offer a robust foundation for managing change, its full potential in today's environment is realized when combined with modern transformation methodologies that emphasize adaptability, resource alignment, and organizational resilience.

Theoretical implications and leadership integration: Situating Kotter's model within contemporary leadership discourse

Kotter's eight-step model is not only a practical guide for managing change but also a significant contribution to leadership theory. By positioning leadership -not management- as the central driver of transformation, Kotter reframes organizational change as a human-centered, vision-led process. This emphasis has influenced both academic discourse and leadership development practices, shaping how change is taught, studied, and executed across sectors. As leadership theory continues to evolve, Kotter's model invites renewed analysis, particularly in how it resonates with, or departs from, contemporary approaches like servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership.

Leadership as the engine of change: Kotter's theoretical contribution

One of the most significant theoretical contributions of John Kotter's model is the way it redefines leadership as the central engine of organizational change. Rather than treating leadership as a function tied to hierarchical authority, Kotter positions it as a dynamic and mobilizing force, responsible for generating urgency, crafting a shared vision, and inspiring collective action. This perspective reframes leadership as an active process of influence, grounded not only in strategic direction but also in emotional engagement and behavioral modeling.

Kotter's framework consistently places leadership at the forefront of change, beginning with the formation of a guiding coalition and extending through the sustained

communication of vision, the removal of obstacles, and the reinforcement of new behaviors. Unlike models that conflate management with leadership, Kotter clearly distinguishes between the two. Management, in his view, is largely concerned with planning, budgeting, and controlling complexity, whereas leadership is about motivating people, shaping culture, and navigating uncertainty.

This orientation represents a clear evolutive departure from classical management theories. Early theorists such as Henri Fayol and Frederick Taylor emphasized formal structures, operational control, and procedural efficiency as the foundations of effective management. Fayol's administrative framework prioritized discipline, unity of command, and hierarchical stability (Fayol, 1916/2013), while Taylor's scientific management advocated for task optimization through standardization and close managerial supervision (Taylor, 1911/2013). Even more contemporary frameworks, such as Michael Porter's focus on competitive positioning and strategic advantage (Porter, 1985), still emphasize analytical tools and structural levers rather than the human dynamics of change. Closer to Kotter's perspective, Peter Senge's concept of the learning organization emphasized the importance of shared vision, systems thinking, and continuous learning as drivers of sustainable transformation, principles that resonate with Kotter's later emphasis on leadership, engagement, and behavioral change (Senge, 1990; 2006). Kotter's model builds on this human-centric turn by positioning leadership not as directive control but as emotional engagement, belief, and collective behavioral commitment across all levels of the organization.

By elevating leadership to a central, human-centered role, Kotter's model anticipates the shift toward more relational and adaptive approaches to organizational change, laying a foundation that continues to influence contemporary leadership theory and practice.

Institutional influence: Enduring impact on leadership education and organizational practice

Kotter's eight-step model has become deeply embedded in the institutional architecture of leadership education and organizational development. Since its introduction in the 1990s, the framework has been widely adopted in MBA programs, executive education curricula, leadership development initiatives, and change management specific training programs, often serving as a foundational reference for teaching change management and strategic leadership. Its clarity, accessibility, and practical relevance have contributed to its widespread integration into both academic instruction and applied training.

In business schools, Kotter's model is frequently taught alongside broader leadership theories and case-based instruction, offering students a structured approach to understanding the dynamics of change. Beyond academia, many executive training programs and corporate leadership workshops use Kotter's framework to guide leaders through real-time transformation initiatives. Change leadership certifications, often designed for mid-to-senior level managers, incorporate Kotter's steps as a methodological backbone for understanding and managing resistance, aligning teams, and sustaining momentum. Major consulting firms have also adapted the model within their proprietary frameworks for diagnosing organizational readiness, facilitating stakeholder engagement, and structuring enterprise-wide change programs (Basford & Schaninger, 2016; Keller & Schaninger, 2020; Accenture, 2024; Deloitte, 2021; Michels, 2022; Litre & Murphy, 2013; Litre et al., 2018; Boston Consulting Group, n.d.; Ellmer et al., 2024).

Recent scholarship has further solidified the model's value in practice. Mouazen et al. (2024) and Vale et al. (2022) provide empirical evidence of how Kotter's model interacts with transformational and transactional leadership styles, as described by Burns (1978/2010), Bass (1985) and Flynn (2024), in organizational settings. Their study found that transformational leaders, those who inspire through vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, tend to align more naturally with Kotter's emphasis on vision-building, coalition-forming, and empowering action. Conversely, transactional leaders, who focus on performance monitoring, contingent rewards, and corrective action, may be more effective during the implementation and consolidation phases, where discipline and accountability are critical to institutionalizing change. This interaction suggests that while Kotter's model is structurally consistent, its success often depends on how well leadership styles are aligned with the demands of each stage.

Together, these institutional adoptions and academic validations illustrate Kotter's lasting influence. His framework not only continues to shape how leaders are trained but also informs how organizations design and execute transformation initiatives in a wide range of industries and cultural contexts.

Convergence with modern leadership models: Servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership

Kotter's model of change leadership shares important conceptual territory with several modern leadership paradigms, including servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership. Although his eight-step framework is largely top-down in structure, its underlying assumptions about the role of leadership in driving change suggest a convergence with more participatory and relational models.

Servant leadership, as described by Greenleaf (1977/2002) and Eva et al. (2019) for instance, emphasizes empowerment, listening, empathy, and stewardship, values indirectly echoed in Kotter's calls to build guiding coalitions and empower broad-based action. These steps rely on the ability of leaders to foster trust, mobilize support, and remove obstacles that hinder engagement, aligning with the servant-leader's emphasis on enabling others to perform at their best.

Transformational leadership (Burns, 1978/2010; Bass, 1985), with its focus on inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, further resonates with Kotter's framework. Both models underscore the importance of articulating a compelling vision, aligning stakeholders through shared purpose, and sustaining momentum through meaningful recognition of early wins. Mouazen et al. (2024) show how transformational leadership behaviors are often instrumental in implementing Kotter's steps, particularly in energizing teams and embedding change into organizational culture.

Adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1998; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), by contrast, places greater emphasis on navigating complexity, encouraging distributed decision-making, and enabling organizations to evolve through experimentation and reflection. Kotter's model, while more linear and directive, does begin to touch on these dynamics, especially in its later iterations that stress agility and engagement across levels (Kotter et al., 2021). Still, Kotter's approach stops short of fully embracing the bottom-up and emergent qualities that define adaptive leadership, which are increasingly vital in fast-moving and unpredictable environments (Appelbaum, 2012; Vale et al., 2022).

Overall, Kotter's model implicitly supports many of the aims of these modern leadership frameworks but does not fully incorporate their relational, distributed, and systems-oriented dimensions. As leadership theory continues to evolve, integrating these

paradigms with Kotter's foundational principles offers a more holistic view of what effective leadership looks like in today's complex transformation landscapes.

Conclusion

Achieving sustainable organizational change requires more than short-term effort or isolated initiatives. It depends on strong leadership and a coherent, structured approach. Kotter's eight-step model remains a cornerstone in this regard, offering a systematic process to address common leadership and planning failures. The framework continues to hold relevance, yet it must be understood within the broader context of accelerating technological disruption, economic uncertainty, and the growing imperative for agility and innovation. Organizations that combine Kotter's disciplined methodology with adaptive, iterative practices are better positioned to navigate ongoing transformation and secure long-term success.

Key takeaways

Kotter's model provides a foundational roadmap for leading change, particularly in large and complex organizations. Its enduring value lies in several core strengths:

Leadership as the engine of change

The model positions leadership not merely as directive authority but as a dynamic force for mobilization. Visionary leadership, broad-based coalition-building, and consistent behavioral reinforcement are central to sustaining change efforts. Without this strategic leadership presence, transformation is unlikely to take root.

Process structure amid complexity

The eight-step sequence offers clarity in environments where change efforts can otherwise become fragmented. By delineating discrete, sequential stages, it enables leaders to anticipate challenges, maintain focus, and sustain alignment throughout the transformation journey.

Early wins to sustain momentum

One of the model's most actionable features is its emphasis on early, visible successes. These short-term wins play a critical role in reinforcing belief in the change, strengthening stakeholder commitment, and countering resistance, especially in lengthy or high-stakes initiatives.

Nonetheless, critical limitations also emerge when applying the model in contemporary settings:

Lack of iterative flexibility

Designed as a linear progression, the model may fall short in contexts requiring agile, real-time responses. Continuous transformation, common in digital and innovation-driven environments, demands a more cyclical and adaptive approach.

Inadequacy in highly dynamic sectors

In industries characterized by rapid disruption, such as technology, finance, and healthcare, the model's structured pace can hinder responsiveness. Flexibility in timing, decision-making, and experimentation is often needed to remain competitive.

Top-down bias

While effective in traditional hierarchies, Kotter's top-down orientation may conflict with leadership philosophies that prioritize inclusion, collaboration, and shared accountability. Servant, adaptive, and transformational leadership models suggest that enduring change also emerges from trust-building, distributed authority, and grassroots engagement.

Final thoughts

Kotter's eight-step model continues to serve as a foundational roadmap for orchestrating successful organizational change. Its clarity, structure, and emphasis on leadership make it a valuable tool for navigating complex transformations. However, the pace and volatility of contemporary business environment, shaped by fast technological disruption, evolving stakeholder expectations, and the imperative for continuous innovation, require a more fluid and adaptive approach to change.

Sustainable transformation now requires organizations not only to follow a structured plan but also to cultivate a mindset of continuous learning and responsiveness. Blending Kotter's framework with agile methodologies and adaptive leadership practices allows organizations to move beyond episodic change and embrace transformation as an ongoing capability. This evolution calls for feedback-driven iteration, distributed leadership, and cross-functional collaboration, elements that enhance organizational resilience while preserving strategic direction.

The trajectory of leadership theory will continue to influence how Kotter's framework is interpreted and applied. As leadership paradigms shift toward decentralization, shared accountability, and empowerment at all levels, the framework must adapt to remain effective. Integrating servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership perspectives into Kotter's model enriches its applicability, fostering inclusivity, psychological safety, and innovation across diverse organizational cultures.

In conclusion, the enduring value of Kotter's framework lies not in its rigidity, but in its ability to be thoughtfully adapted. By aligning its structured guidance with the demands of modern leadership and the reality of continuous transformation, organizations can remain strategically focused while flexibly navigating change. This balance is critical to achieving not only successful transitions, but also long-term, sustainable outcomes in an increasingly dynamic world.

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