The Heart of Change
by John P. Kotter and Dan S. Cohen

"People change what they do less because they are given analysis that shifts their thinking than because they are shown a truth that influences their feelings." John Kotter

- Step 1: Increase Urgency
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Step 1: Increase Urgency

According to Kotter and Cohen, the first stage of large-scale transformation should be to create a sense of urgency that the change is necessary. Urgency helps motivate personnel to overcome complacency, fear, anger, or pessimism, which result in resistance. But how to increase urgency without also increasing fear and anger? The book suggests first developing a clear problem definition and then using visual presentations that communicate why the changes are needed. Some examples include videos of valued customers describing their frustrations with the company, examples of excessive spending during tight budgets, etc.

Step 2: Build the Guiding Team

Successful change needs effective leadership to provide the vision and to manage the process. The guiding team requires individuals with the right attitude, skills, and power. These skills include: relevant knowledge of the competitive environment and internal operations, credibility, connections, leadership and managerial skills. Useful teams require real teamwork. They 1) Share a similar sense of urgency, 2) Are guided by clear leadership, 3) Coordinate their efforts through well-managed meetings.

Step 3: Get the Vision Right

The guiding team is empowered to create a compelling picture of the organization's future. The successful vision will be bold, inspirational, clear, and credible. Though typical strategic planning activities such as budgeting and action planning fail to be motivators in themselves, Cohen and Kotter suggest they can provide a useful foundation for guiding the development of an effective vision. Winning visions avoid evoking resistance by focusing on
a positive portrait of the future. Merely concentrating on efficiency raises the twin spectres of right-sizing and budget-cutting, which in turn raise resistance.

**Step 4: Communicate for Buy-In**

With a vision in place, the guiding team has a powerful tool for obtaining the buy-in of management and the workforce. Persuasive communication requires leaders to deliver the message personally, clearly, and with confidence. According to The Heart of Change, this is leadership's chance to address the emotional issues raised by change - "You need to show people something that addresses their anxieties, that accepts their anger, that is credible in a very gut-level sense, and that evokes faith in the vision" (p. 84).

**Step 5: Empower Action**

The authors’ take the stand that empowerment is less about giving more power and responsibility and should, instead, be about reducing employees' impediments to doing their jobs right. The authors describe four common barriers: 1) the "boss" barrier, 2) the "system" barrier, 3) barriers in the mind, 4) information barriers.

In addressing the boss barrier, Kotter and Cohen recommend assigning resistant managers to where the problems are most acute, where they can see and feel for themselves the results of the problem. Fixing the system barrier often means realigning rewards policies so employee innovators aren't punished for trying new ways of doing things. Barriers in the mind are those self-fulfilling prophecies people tell themselves about large-scale change being impossible. Possible solutions include communicating small success stories and bringing in people from outside the organization to recount corporate victories in similar circumstances.

The final barrier listed was the personal information barrier where individuals in the organization are unaware of their impact on organizational change. Suggestions given in the book included using videotapes and other types of observation that allowed employees and teams to view themselves in a non-threatening forum. Using the concept of see-feel-change, barriers to positive change can best be removed when the persons creating them can experience the barriers from a safe perspective that does not give rise to emotions of anger or fear, and creates the opportunity for transformation to take place.

**Step 6: Create Short-Term Wins**

Kotter and Cohen’s Step 6 is about creating short-term wins. Long-term initiatives where all the successes happen at the end of the initiative leave too much room for doubts to creep in and deflate change momentum. Good leaders will create or find short-term wins and then sincerely communicate them throughout the organization. Usually the targets for these wins are low-hanging fruit – issues that are readily addressed - or important players to the organization. The objective is to have successes that show clear progress, which is
both evident and meaningful. If quick wins address employee concerns, then they: 1) Provide feedback about the validity of the change effort, 2) Give an emotional uplift, and 3) Build confidence. However, if they are blown out of proportion, over-hyped, or insincere, cynicism is deepened and the workforce's trust in management is further eroded.

**Step 7: Don't Let Up**

Kotter and Cohen assert that it is essential for change leaders to maintain the momentum created by the quick wins, otherwise urgency fades. With early successes under the belt, change participants can directly address the more difficult political and organizational issues. People need to feel motivated by the successes. They should also be empowered to take further risks without feeling that the cost of failure would be overwhelming. With momentum behind them, change leaders will have a greater ability to realign organizational process to better reflect the new strategies. The authors note that organizations can reach a point of overload, where there is not enough time to do all the old work and adopt new initiatives. His suggestion is to reduce the workload by simplifying whenever possible and cutting out anything which is not value-added. For those that are overwhelmed, yet still seeking to do more, the book offers a useful reminder - "Dying will not help." People need to take the time to take care of their physical and emotional health in order to be effective change agents.

**Step 8: Make Change Stick**

Often, after initial alterations are made in the organization, managers and employees have a tendency to slip back into old routines. Sustained changes in work processes require changes in culture and these changes take time. Continued successes help to make the changes stick, but it also requires committed management. By promoting individuals who reflect the new norms, management builds a leadership-base around the new culture and reinforces the type of traits they desire in their managers. Organizations can also use hiring and the new-employee orientation process as a method for emphasizing the new expectations into the culture. Sustaining change requires vigilance. By supporting employees that support the business transformation, companies reinforce the changes they seek.

Overall, The Heart of Change makes for a quick and interesting read. The authors use their See-Feel-Change method as their format, letting the personal stories of people they interviewed illustrate key principles. These anecdotes – which range from the work of an intern to two former South African enemy generals stranded at sea – lend credibility to the book.

The story of the intern is a quick picture into the power of visuals (the See principle) to activate motivation for change. A summer student working for a purchasing manager collected a sample of every type of glove that a company was purchasing across all divisions and factories. The resulting pile of 424 gloves was laid out in the executive meeting room.
for a corporate planning session. The massive duplication of purchasing effort and the wide
disparity in prices paid by each division for the very same glove quickly inspired the
managers involved to SEE the problem, FEEL the need for improvement, and then make the
CHANGE.

Kotter and Cohen’s approach as seekers of practical principles rather than as purveyors of
their own expert solution came across as refreshingly honest. They let the people they
interviewed tell their own stories and the lessons they learned from them. As I read the
book, I was struck by the parallels to Appreciative Inquiry and Solution Focused approaches
where the clients are considered the experts and where the consultants respect and
cooperate with the expertise of the individuals involved in a change effort.

Additionally, the authors addressed the very real – but often ignored – issues of human
emotion. The concepts of trust, integrity, honesty, and credibility form the bedrock for their
approach to organizational change. Instead of being manipulated, each participant in the
change effort is made an owner of their part of the sought after changes.

The format of the book makes it accessible for the lay change agent, whether production
supervisor or a corporate manager. Each chapter ends with suggested exercises and a brief
reminder of the chapter’s key lessons. This simple, organized layout makes for an easy
read.

For the experienced professional in organizational development and change management,
this book will be a quick reminder of what works. For those that are just entering the waters
of change management or are looking for a new way of doing things, The Heart of Change
will be an optimistic eye-opener that lends hope to the change process and provide practical
steps along the way.