

## Leading changes: Why transformation explanations fail

Leadership

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### Abstract

Professor John Kotter (1995) claimed in *Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail* to have identified eight leadership errors which resulted in transformation failures. He followed this up in 1996 with his best-selling book *Leading Change*, prescribing an eight-step model for leading transformations encouraging change leaders to create a sense of urgency, build powerful guiding coalitions and develop visions. Kotter openly acknowledged that he neither drew examples nor major ideas from any published source, except his own writing. In the 2012 edition of his book, which included a new preface, Kotter claimed that his book was now more relevant than when it was first published. As leaders knowingly or unknowingly still use Kotter's steps and academics still cite this book, this paper critically assesses Kotter's claim about the relevance of *Leading Change*. Three conclusions are drawn; *Leading Change* remains an enduring landmark leadership study, but *Leading Change* is stuck in the past and paradoxically today discourages change.

### Keywords

John Kotter, leading change, transformation, organizational change

### Introduction

*Leading Change* (Kotter, 1996) has framed (Deetz et al., 2000; Fairhurst, 2005) practitioner and academic debate about leading change ever since it was published. Glowing senior executive endorsements and its inclusion in TIME's (2014) 25 most influential business management books highlight its continuing practitioner appeal. Practitioners are Kotter's target constituency, in the preface he acknowledges that 'I have neither drawn examples or major ideas from any published source except my own writing nor tried to cite evidence from other sources to bolster my conclusions' (Kotter, 1996: X). As Kotter regards his book as

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**Table 1.** The most cited leading change/transformational leadership publications published between 1978 and 2012.<sup>a</sup>

No	Citations	Transform/Change	Output	Title	Author/Year
1.	5543	Change	Book	Leading change	(Kotter, 1996)
2.	3795	Change	Paper	Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail	(Kotter, 1995)
3.	3213	Transformation	Book	Transformational leadership	(Bass and Riggio, 2005)
4.	2654	Transformation	Book	Improving organizational effectiveness through transformational leadership	(Bass and Avolio, 1993)
5.	2592	Transformation	Paper	Transformational leader behaviors and their effects on followers' trust in leader, satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors	(Podsakoff et al., 1990)

<sup>a</sup>Analysis undertaken on 6 January 2014, using Publish or Perish software (Harzing, 2007) enabled a citation count of books and journal papers published between 1 January 1978 and 31 December 2012 which referred to: change leader/s, change leadership, leadership of change and leading change and transformational leader/s, transformational leadership, leadership of transformation and leading transformation within their titles.

practical, it is perverse that it has also framed academic debate with over 5500 academic citations (see Table 1).

In Table 1, Kotter's (1995, 1996) publications are the first and second most cited. Transformational leadership has been described as the single most studied and debated idea within the field of leadership studies over the past 30 years (Diaz-Saenz, 2011). Yet, the most cited transformational leadership publication (Bass and Riggio, 2005) by comparison received fewer citations than either of Kotter's publications.

Academic reliance upon Kotter's findings as if they were empirically or theoretically tested and supported has been described as an enigma (Appelbaum et al., 2012). Why do university libraries stock and academics cite such an unashamedly a-theoretical book? Possibly it is the halo effect of Kotter's employment at Harvard Business School or his earlier writings on leadership, or perhaps consultants more effectively convey their messages than academics (Salaman and Asch, 2003). The precursor to *Leading Change* was Kotter's (1995) article *Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail* published in *Harvard Business Review*, informed by Kotter 'watching' 100 companies. Both the article and the book would have gained legitimacy if they had been informed by research, but this was not the case. These publications were based upon knowledgeable reflections of an experienced business consultant unencumbered/untroubled by either empirical evidence or ideas from 'other sources'. As Grint (2005a: 101) more generally notes 'the claim that leadership is critical to all organizational success (and failure) is almost as commonplace as the claim to have discovered the secret of its success'. Associating leading with successful change may be another explanation for why *Leading Change* appealed to leaders/managers in 1996 and why it still appeals.

In 2012, a revised edition of *Leading Change* appeared, substantially the same book, but with refreshed penguin imagery and a new preface. Kotter (2012: ix) reflected upon the first

edition as follows 'I saw it simply as the next instalment in a series of research projects I was conducting at Harvard'. Again a Harvard research project would have considerable academic credibility, but there was no discussion about research methods, methodology or empirical findings. Kotter's anecdotes and observations could generously be described as participant observation, although he did not make this claim (see Bryman, 2011 for further discussion about what leadership studies participant observation would involve).

A repeated mantra within Kotter's writing relates to constant change, for example 'the problem for us today is that stability is no longer the norm. And most experts agree that over the next few decades the business environment will become only more volatile' (Kotter, 1996: 15) (see Eccles and Nohria, 1992; Sorge and Van Witteloostuijn, 2004 for a critique of this position). It is consequently ironic that Kotter (2012: vii) in his new preface to *Leading Change* writes 'the material in this book is not only still relevant now, sixteen years after it was published, but I believe it is more relevant, and for one reason the speed of change continues to increase'. Whilst, stability is espoused as no longer the norm, Kotter's text remains exceptionally stable and it is this assertion which this paper critically reviews. We could have remembered Kotter's contribution as a milestone on our on-going quest to better understand leadership and organizational change, but when Kotter claims that *Leading Change* is more relevant today than it was in 1996, he raises a critical academic question, is it?

In answering this question, the paper will take account of the longer chronology of Kotter's work with specific reference to publications informing the development of his eight steps. In evaluating the relevance today of *Leading Change* failings in Kotter's original explanation of transformations will be highlighted. This critique is counterbalanced with an appreciation of theoretical advances since 1996 relating to resistance, ethics, power and politics, process thinking, learning, agency and discourse, context and evaluation, inevitably underplayed in Kotter's a-theoretical book. The paper will draw conclusions that *Leading Change* remains an enduring landmark leadership study, but that *Leading Change* is stuck in the past and paradoxically today discourages change.

## Understanding Kotter's contribution chronologically

Evaluation today of *Leading Change* must acknowledge and reflect upon Kotter's work chronologically. Kotter now an emeritus Harvard Professor can reflect back upon a substantial body of influential writing, consequently the focus is upon publications particularly relevant to evaluating *Leading Change*. Kotter became a full professor at Harvard Business School in 1980 at the age of 33. *The General Managers* (1982), *Power and Influence* (1985) and *The Leadership Factor* (1988) were part of a series of books themed around leadership in business. These books were written in a very different style to *Leading Change*. They were underpinned by Kotter's empirical work and built upon his work in the 1970s including named case studies, locating companies within their own unique contexts and presenting a historical analysis of the featured companies. They remain key works within leadership studies and milestones of the development of the field. In a prescient manner, Kotter (1990: 142) worked with a quadrant of strong/weak leadership and strong/weak management warning against the consequences of strong leadership and weak management within a complex organization (see Table 2).

In Table 2, we see a leadership explanation for the collapse of Enron, Lehman Brothers and many other American corporations long before these events occurred. In these earlier

**Table 2.** Consequences of strong leadership/weak management (Kotter, 1990).

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Strong long-term vision without short-term planning and budgeting, plus  
 An almost cult-like culture without much specialization, structures and rules, plus  
 Inspired people who tend not to use control systems and problem solving discipline




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A situation that eventually gets out of control – critical deadlines, budgets, and promises are not met – threatening the very existence of the organization.

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books, Kotter was in academic mode, whilst his focus was very much upon leadership, a differentiation between management producing predictability and leadership producing change begins to surface. Kotter had signalled an interest in organizational change through a co-authored paper *Choosing strategies for change* (Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979). This paper in not citing empirical evidence anticipated the later anecdotal writing style of *Leading Change*. Managerialist strategies for overcoming resistance to change were offered ranging from educating employees through to explicit coercion of employees. Kotter and Heskett (1992) claimed to go beyond previous empirical work in establishing a link between culture and performance, although Rosenzweig (2007) was sceptical that such an association could be made.

In 1995, *Harvard Business Review* published *Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail* (Kotter, 1995). This was a time of high expectations within organizations and amongst academics that with the right recipes organizational change could be effectively managed. So against this backdrop, Kotter highlighting transformation efforts failing was a radical challenge to the orthodoxy. The paper informed by Kotter's experiences as a consultant, rather than original empirical work, allowed him to suggest eight leadership errors, although he never explained how he had evaluated particular transformation efforts as failures (see Table 3).

The subsequent book *Leading Change* (Kotter, 1996) employed a simple yet clever idea. Rather than the negative focus of errors and failure, Kotter positively and proactively focused upon eight best practice leading change steps, he believed resulted in successful transformation, each step being the reverse of an error (see Table 3). Subsequently, Kotter was invited to follow up *Leading Change* by Deloitte Consulting with a project which involved the Deloitte team headed up by Dan Cohen interviewing over 200 people in more than 90 U.S., European, Australian and South African organizations in order to collect stories which would help people to more deeply understand the eight-step formula. There is very real practical value in deeply understanding the eight-step formula, but this is different from empirically testing the effectiveness of each step, the ordering of each step, the evaluation of the outcomes or the sustainability of the perceived outcomes (see Appelbaum et al., 2012 for retrospective literature-based testing). In Kotter's preface to *The Heart of Change*, he finally clarified what he meant by transformation: 'By transform I mean the adoption of new technologies, major strategic shifts, process reengineering, mergers and acquisitions, restructuring into different sorts of business units, attempts to significantly improve innovation, and cultural change' (Kotter and Cohen, 2002: ix). In this preface,

**Table 3.** Why transformations efforts fail (Kotter, 1995) and eight steps to transform your organization (Kotter, 1996).

Eight errors which cause transformation failures (Kotter, 1995)	Eight steps to transform your organization (Kotter, 1996)
Error 1: Not establishing a great enough sense of urgency	1. Establishing a sense of urgency
Error 2: Not creating a powerful enough guiding coalition	2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition
Error 3: Lacking a vision	3. Creating a vision
Error 4: Under communicating the vision by a factor of 10	4. Communicating the vision
Error 5: Not removing obstacles to the new vision	5. Empowering others to act on the vision
Error 6: Not systematically planning for, and creating short-term wins	6. Planning for and creating short term wins
Error 7: Declaring victory too soon	7. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change
Error 8: Not anchoring changes in the corporation's culture	8. Institutionalizing new approaches

Kotter (2002: i) also suggested that he had examined ‘...close to 100 cases...’ for *Leading Change* and highlighted that *The Heart of Change* referred to real people ‘and these people are named – real names except in a few disguised cases’ (Kotter, 2002: x). In 2005, Cohen wrote *The Heart of Change Field Guide: Tools and Tactics for Leading Change in Your Organization* with a foreword by Kotter. Subsequently, *Our Iceberg is Melting* (Kotter and Rathgeber, 2006) was published based upon *Leading Change* (Kotter, 1996) explaining the eight steps now as a fable of a penguin colony in Antarctica. The intention was that this fable would be more accessible than *Leading Change*, ironic given the simplicity of the original book. *A Sense of Urgency* (Kotter, 2008) explored the first step in more detail, again written in *Leading Change*’s accessible style. Recently, Harvard Business School promoted Kotter’s accelerate dual operating system, through an article (Kotter, 2012) and a subsequent book (Kotter, 2014). The original eight steps were expanded and rebranded now as accelerators. There was an acknowledgement that the eight accelerators could operate concurrently, pull in as many people as possible and that they required flexible and agile networks.

### Why Kotter’s transformation explanations fail

Kotter’s (2012) *Leading Change* claims that his book was more relevant today than when first written, implies that no shortcomings had been identified and no revisions were required. Critically assessing this claim necessitates highlighting the failings within Kotter’s analysis of leadership errors (Kotter, 1995) and his prescribed leadership steps for successful transformation (Kotter, 1996). Kotter (1995) believed that leadership lessons could be learnt when transformation efforts fail and now with the passage of time we can potentially learn lessons when transformation explanations fail. The seven identified

transformation explanation failures are employees depicted as resisters, ethics, power and politics underplayed, overemphasis upon a sequence of linear steps, disparaging history limits learning, and appreciation of incremental change, leader and leader communications overemphasized, under emphasis of unique cultural contexts, rhetorical treatment of organizational success/failure.

### *Employees depicted as resisters*

Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) identified four causes of resistance to change diagnosing strategies in order to respond to such resistance. In *Leading Change*, the language is different, but the message remains the same: 'the key lies in understanding why organizations resist needed change...' (16), 'Colin was typical of the foot draggers' (104), 'these blockers stop needed action' (114), 'an unwillingness to confront managers like Frank is common in change efforts' (114), '...quick performance improvements undermine the efforts of cynics and major league resisters' (123). Academics have criticized simplistic/individual-based explanations (see depiction of Colin and Frank) instead favouring greater emphasis upon the constructed reality in which individuals operate (Ford et al., 2002). Crudely categorizing people as for/against a leader's particular change neglects the multidimensional attitudes of employees towards change (Piderit, 2000). The semantics of resistance to change (Collins, 1998) suggest dysfunctional personality characteristics, again illustrated through Kotter's chosen pejorative terminology and stereotyping: 'blockers', 'cynics' and 'major league resisters'.

### *Ethics, power and politics underplayed*

Kotter (1996: 61) laments 'trust is often absent in many organizations' and that 'one of the main reasons people are not committed to overall excellence is that they don't really trust other departments, divisions or even fellow executives' (1996: 65). In this way Kotter emphasizes trust and honesty, yet elsewhere appears to prescribe dishonest actions which would potentially breach trust, for example:

Visible crises can be enormously helpful in catching people's attention and pushing up urgency levels. Conducting business as usual is very difficult if the building seems to be on fire. But in an increasingly fast-moving world, waiting for a fire to break out is a dubious strategy. And in addition to catching people's attention a sudden fire can cause a lot of damage. (Kotter, 1996: 45)

The dishonest action (claiming the building is on fire) Kotter encourages appears to contradict Kotter's espousal of trust. The idea of trusting followers to guide leaders is the antithesis of Kotter's pyrotechnic vision, but does offer an informative counterpoint.

What might be better would be an atmosphere of much greater trust (probably built around the removal of any assessment early on) when poor leadership is seen to fail and poor leaders are helped to understand why they fail and how they might succeed by those most affected by leadership failure – the followers. (Grint, 2005a: 135)

This quotation casts new light upon Kotter's 'planning and creating short-term wins', (the opposite of what Grint is encouraging), short-term wins enhance the power and authority of leaders and reaffirm their centrality/authority to lead change. If Kotter's trust in the capabilities of empowered follower's was more than warm words, he would encourage

short-term defeats in order to ensure that everyone collectively took responsibility for achieving the transformation effort. Kotter felt no compulsion to explicitly engage with ethics in his new 2012 edition of *Leading Change*. This is disappointing given the lack of ethical perspective in recent high profile leadership failures, particularly within the large American corporations which fascinated Kotter and disappointing given Harvard Business School's engagement with the MBA Oath (see [mbaoath.org](http://mbaoath.org)).

### *Overemphasis upon a sequence of linear steps*

The dustcover of *Leading Change* posed the question: 'What will it take to bring your organization successfully into the twenty-first century?' This dustcover answered its own question: 'The book identifies an eight-step process that every company must go through to achieve its goal...' Kotter (1996: 23) warned that 'although one normally operates in multiple phases at once, skipping even a single step or getting too far ahead without a solid base almost always creates problems'. Kotter (2012, 2014) tempered this sequentialism within his new accelerate dual operating system, but in terms of our focus upon *Leading Change*, was Kotter really offering a new process to bring organizations into the 21st century?

Back in the 20th century, Lewin (1947) identified three steps required for planned change (see Table 4). In his reappraisal of Lewin's contribution, Burnes (2004) acknowledged that the three-step model was not originally developed with regards to organizational issues. It was one of four concepts, part of a broader integrated approach towards understanding and bringing about change at group, organizational and societal levels. Notions of unfreezing, moving and refreezing have become recurrent themes within organizational change theories ever since (see Cummings, 2002; Hendry, 1996 for further discussion) although the academic convention is to acknowledge the original source, rather than presenting it as your own 'new process'.

Under-socialized models of change referred to as n-step guides exhibit three features: a rational analysis of organizational change, a sequential approach to the planning and management of change and a generally up-beat and prescriptive tone (Collins, 1998). N-step approaches appeal to managers/leaders in ways that academic/empirical accounts depicting change as ambiguous, uncertain and irrational do not. Academic accounts are more likely to draw attention to improvisation and design, highlighting designs as recipes, attention and bricolage (Weick, 2000). Instead of eight 'off the shelf' steps, there would be real merit in a leader assembling their own n-step approach.

**Table 4.** Lewin's three steps and Kotter's eight steps.

Changing as three steps	Kotter explains his steps
A successful change includes three aspects: unfreezing (if necessary) the present level L <sup>1</sup> , moving to the new level L <sup>2</sup> and freezing group life on the new level (Lewin, 1947: 35)	The first four steps in the transformation process help defrost a hardened status quo. If change were easy, you wouldn't need all that effort. Phase's five to seven then introduce many new practices. The last stage grounds the changes in the corporate culture and helps them stick (Kotter, 1996: 22)

### *Disparaging history limits learning and appreciation of incremental change*

In *A Force for Change*, Kotter (1990: 40) carefully located the Travel Related Services arm of American Express within its own unique historical context, helping him to differentiate the company from National Cash Registers. However, in *Leading Change*, Kotter (1996: 142) became irritated by corporate history ‘cleaning up historical artefacts does create an even longer change agenda, which an exhausted organization will not like. But purging of unnecessary interconnections can ultimately make transformation much easier’. Kotter was writing about ‘purging’ in the context of the 1990s, a time when Hammer and Champy (1993) became infamous for their violent rhetoric – Don’t automate, obliterate! As Kotter (1996: 186) concludes on the final page of his book ‘as an observer of life, I think I can say with some authority that people who are making an effort to embrace the future are a happier lot than those who are clinging to the past’. However, the large-scale corporate transformations which interested Kotter required a far more culturally sensitive approach than Kotter prescribed (see Stadler and Hinterhuber, 2005 for culturally sensitive and historically grounded longitudinal analyses of how transformations were led within Shell, Siemens and Daimler Chrysler).

In terms of competing approaches to strategy (Whittington, 2001), Kotter favoured classical and systemic approaches, inevitably at the expense of evolutionary and processual approaches. Mintzberg et al. (2009: 318) suggested that ‘there is a time for coherence and a time for change’, in this way strategic change becomes an oxymoron as strategic change addresses both transformations and continuities. Whilst practitioner rhetoric about transforming everything is echoed within prescriptive literature, organizational change processes are far subtler. Kotter’s scepticism (see Kotter, 1996: 173) about incremental change failed to address the paradox senior managers often encounter, with regards to the interplay between evolutionary and revolutionary change (De Wit and Meyer, 2004). Despite management rhetoric and the media depicting revolutions and transformations, senior managers are largely involved in evolutionary change (Burke, 2008; Dunphy and Stace, 1988; Johnson et al., 2010).

### *Leader and leader communications overemphasized*

Critical leadership literature (Grint, 2005a; Tourish, 2013) challenges popular societal beliefs in heroic leaders. In mitigation Kotter did not explicitly focus upon an individual heroic leader, instead encouraging a notion of a ‘powerful guiding coalition’ as the optimum way to lead change. However, Kotter’s central thesis remains that companies have too much change management and not enough change leadership. Kotter (1996: 26) wrote that ‘a close look at exhibits 2 and 3 shows that successful transformation is 70 per cent to 90 per cent leadership and only 10 to 30 per cent management’. Exhibit 2 is Kotter’s eight steps (see Table 3) and Exhibit 3 comprises text-based boxes taken from *A Force for Change* (Kotter, 1990). Whilst *A Force for Change* was grounded in Kotter’s empirical work, his published research did not support his ‘transformation is 70 per cent to 90 per cent leadership’ quantification. A reader going back to *A Force for Change* at this stage would learn salutary lessons with Kotter actually warning against strong leadership and weak management (see Table 2). Even within *Leading Change*, Kotter warned against leadership alone, ‘transformation is not a process involving leadership alone; good management is also essential’ (Kotter, 1996: 129). More generally, doubts about the utility of Kotter’s (1990) differentiation between management and leadership surface (Bolden et al., 2011; Knights and Willmott, 2014; Spector, 2014).

### *Under emphasis of unique cultural contexts*

*Leading Change* is written from a contingent perspective with the rationale for leading transformations always depicted as a consequence of rapidly changing environments, rather than the whim of a powerful leader. O'Toole (1995: 7) noted an unquestioning academic commitment to contingency theory at this time, informing a popular belief '...that to implement change, effective leaders do whatever the circumstances require'. O'Toole did not favour this position, but noted its attractiveness as appearing to be non-prescriptive, non-judgemental and non-deterministic. Kotter invoking a threat of a vague and rapidly changing environment gives leaders their rationale to lead change through decisive action (in essence strong leadership). Whilst this line of reasoning may appeal to leaders, academic flaws in Kotter's reasoning are apparent. In *Leading Change*, Kotter offered no context, no company names and no named leaders, making it impossible to gauge how real this perceived environmental threat really was. The repeated rhetorical assertion that we are always living through a time of rapidly changing environments has been questioned (see Eccles and Nohria, 1992; Sorge and Van Witteloostuijn, 2004). Kotter's contingent context may even have been socially constructed to justify the actions of a change leader. Grint (2005b) warns against a belief that there is an essentialist context out there, instead drawing attention to the context or situation being actively constructed by the leader (or in this case the leadership writer). Kotter (1995/1996) constructed an oblique yet troubling environmental context requiring increased numbers of corporate transformations, yet with his own caveat that these transformations invariably failed, giving leaders a moral blank cheque to do '...whatever the circumstances require' (O'Toole, 1995: 7).

### *Rhetorical treatment of organizational success/failure*

Quantifying results/outcomes of leadership are extraordinarily difficult (Grint, 2005a). In Kotter's (1995: 59) paper, *Leading Change: Why transformation efforts fail*, he wrote 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'. It was the title of his paper that framed (Deetz et al., 2000; Fairhurst, 2005) a notion that transformation efforts fail. Kotter never claimed all transformation efforts fail; a few were very successful and most were somewhere in between success and failure. Kotter's eight leadership errors explained transformation failure (see Table 3) exclusively through internal factors, rather than external environments, perverse given that Kotter was preoccupied with a rapidly changing external environment. Plausible explanations of failure such as technological or legislative change, local/global competition or products being at the maturity stage of the product life cycle were absent. As it was transformation efforts in the corporations that Kotter was 'watching' which kept failing, as a consultant did he ever feel complicit?

In *Leading Change*, the narrative becomes much more appealing switching from errors and failure to successful transformation. If you follow Kotter's eight steps in the order that he prescribes your transformation will be successful, again he neither explains how to evaluate success, nor more troublingly even encourages such an evaluation, instead choosing to emphasize 'consolidating gains and producing more change' (Kotter, 1996: 131). The goal of pausing and reflecting would lead to incremental change which Kotter was sceptical about. As Kotter (1996: 126) concedes 'without competent management, inadequate thought is usually given to the whole question of measurement' and certainly inadequate thought was given to the question of measurement within *Leading Change*.

## Rethinking leadership and organizational change

Failings within Kotter's explanation of transformation typify an academically problematic intersection between leadership and organizational change. Parry (2011: 57) took critical stock of such interrelationships in his contribution to *The SAGE Handbook of Leadership*.

Leadership and organizational change are inextricably intertwined. However, 'organizational change' has become an interest for organizational consultants more so than for empirical researchers. There are many more books and articles on practitioner or conceptual scholarship than on theoretical or empirical scholarship. Much of the practitioner work is case study-based, and anecdotal and not rigorous in its conduct.

This sad indictment of the state of theorizing interrelationships between leadership and organizational change highlights an urgent need to academically rethink leadership and organizational change. At the very least we need to debate the current pitiful state of understanding leadership and organizational change, as identified by Parry (2011), rather than continuing to cite Kotter's flawed analysis (see Table 1). This rethinking must be informed by theoretical and empirical work, which may subsequently inform practice, rather than the reverse, this is essential if the sub-field of leadership and organizational change is going to gain academic credibility. In this spirit, this section offers a positive counterbalance to the critique of the previous section acknowledging and celebrating research, theory and research-informed practice advances (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Leading changes: Why transformation explanations fail.

Why transformation efforts fail (Kotter, 1995)	Leading change (Kotter, 1996)	Why transformation explanations fail	Rethinking leadership and organizational change
1: Not establishing a great enough sense of urgency	1. Establishing a sense of urgency	Employees depicted as change resisters	<b>Resistance</b>
2: Not creating a powerful enough guiding coalition	2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition	Ethics, power and politics underplayed	<b>Ethics, power and politics</b>
3: Lacking a vision	3. Creating a vision	Overemphasis upon a sequence of linear steps	<b>Process thinking</b>
4: Under communicating the vision by a factor of 10	4. Communicating the vision	Disparaging history limits learning and an appreciation of incremental change	<b>Learning</b>
5: Not removing obstacles to the new vision	5. Empowering others to act on the vision	Leader and leader communications overemphasized	<b>Agency and discourse</b>
6: Not systematically planning for, and creating short-term wins	6. Planning for and creating short-term wins	Under emphasis of unique cultural contexts	<b>Context</b>
7: Declaring victory too soon	7. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change	Rhetorical treatment of organizational success/failure	<b>Evaluation</b>
8: Not anchoring changes in the corporation's culture	8. Institutionalizing new approaches		

The first column of Table 5 summarizes the leadership errors which Kotter identified resulting in transformation failures. The second column features his subsequent eight steps prescribed for leading change. The third column summarizes Kotter's transformation explanation failures (see previous section). The fourth column directly responds to each of these failures (column 3) and more proactively highlights advances since 1996. The seven empirical/theoretical advances (fourth column) relate to Resistance, Ethics, Power and politics, process thinking, Learning, Agency and discourse, Context and Evaluation are gathered together using a mnemonic REPLACE. This mnemonic is shorthand for both a need to replace deficiencies within *Leading Change* and anecdotal/practitioner orientated work as highlighted by Parry (2011) and more proactively the REPLACE mnemonic privileges theoretical/empirical accounts of leadership and organizational change over practitioner accounts. As a single explanation is unlikely to suffice given the complexities and ambiguities of both leadership and organizational change, REPLACE encourages thinking in terms of seven interconnected advances. This discussion is inevitably selective in number given word count constraints of a journal paper, deliberately concentrates upon publications since 2000 and privileges references within respected refereed journals and critical monographs.

### *Resistance to change*

*Leading Change* worked with an assumption that resistance to change was the problem and strong leadership was the solution. Critical scholars have increasingly questioned the utility of overcoming resistance to change and crudely categorizing people as either for or against a leader's particular change (Piderit, 2000). Oreg's (2003) empirically grounded paper asked questions about individuals who resist even changes consonant with their interests, generating a four-facet structure for measuring individual differences in resistance to change dispositions: routine seeking, emotional reaction to imposed change, short-term focus and cognitive rigidity. In their polemical, *Academy of Management Review* paper, Ford et al. (2008) took critical stock of what was now known about resistance to change, updating developments since Ford et al. (2002) they warned that the presence and activities of change agents may even be part of the problem, rather than the solution. Engaging with resistance in a more sophisticated manner as subtle and diverse responses to ongoing organizational change processes involves employees within change processes, rather than marginalizing them as resistant bystanders.

### *Ethics, power, politics and organizational change*

*Leading Change* at best minimizes ethical concerns, whereas by contrast critical scholars foreground ethical approaches towards leading change (see for example Wall, 2007). Narratives and ethics as related to downsizing within a multinational information technology company were explored by Rhodes et al. (2010). Their research highlighted that '...the presence of strong collective narratives in organizations can limit the scope of ethical deliberation and action, organizations seeking to engage in organizational change ethically should encourage debate, critique and contestation over the meaning of those events' (Rhodes et al., 2010: 547). By and Burnes (2011: 296) reminded us that those promoting particular approaches to leadership and change must explicitly acknowledge the ethics of the approaches they champion, yet simultaneously criteria for judging leaders are far less clear than for managers (see also By and Burnes, 2013).

*Leading Change* socially constructing leaders as the powerful ones in times of change may explain its enduring popularity. There is a logic and inevitability in using management power in the context of organizational change, recognized by academics as far back as the early 1970s (see Bradshaw and Boonstra, 2004; Hardy and Clegg, 2004 for discussion). However, Hardy and Clegg (2004) warned that much of the organizational change literature assists change management failure due to a lack of pragmatism with regards to power. Buchanan and Badham (2008) encouraged greater engagement with power and politics, although they conceded that academics tend to neglect political behaviour with regards to organizational change. Thomas and Hardy (2011) went further arguing that power and resistance constitute organizational change. Engaging with ethics, power and politics introduces important dynamics and choices often absent within typical explanations of leading change.

### ***Process thinking and organizational change***

Similarity between Kotter's eight steps and Lewin's (1947) unfreeze, change and refreeze (see Table 4) is indicative of sequential temporality common within organizational change explanations (Burnes, 2004; Cummings, 2002; Hendry, 1996). More recently, Dawson (2014) acknowledged the prevalence of such temporality, but equally the need to engage with alternative explanations of organizational change. In a far-reaching reflection upon temporality and organizational change, Dawson (2014) revisited Tsoukas and Chia's (2002) notion that organizations consist of processes of becoming with verbs such as organizing and strategizing capturing fluid processes of changing organizations. He highlighted the considerable traction that now exists between theories explaining change either as a series of marked episodes (steps) or as an ongoing ceaseless process. Engaging with process thinking explanations of leading change disrupts the sequentialism and linearity which Kotter's eight steps encourage.

### ***Learning and organizational change***

The danger within leadership preoccupations with looking forwards is the neglect of looking backwards and recognizing the temporal dimensions of organizational change (Ybema, 2010). Forward looking leadership potentially underplays the contribution learning theory can make with regards to organizational change processes (Starkey et al., 2004). Easterby Smith et al.'s (2000) overview of organizational learning debates, past, present and future identified interest in organizational learning as growing up almost 'underground', until an explosion of interest in the late 1980s. Lakomski (2001: 68) highlighted the centrality of learning 'the prime mover of change is the leader, who transforms the current stagnating culture into a productive one. . . Ongoing learning is believed to be the best preparation for the future, and it is the leader's responsibility to see that happens'. Lakomski's (2001) paper a provocative think piece shared similar beliefs to Sugarman (2001) who focused upon five businesses which successfully changed through becoming more like learning organizations. The publication of a revised and updated edition of *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 2006) featuring Senge's (1990) conceptualization of the learning organization highlighted its enduring popularity. Mintzberg et al. (2009) have acknowledged that Senge (1990) gave impetus to burgeoning interest in the 'learning organization'. However, learning discourse with its underlying ideology of depicting learning as always a good thing has

been critiqued (Contu et al., 2003) with Clegg et al. (2005) favouring rethinking and reframing organizational learning as organizational becoming, in order to make connections between organization, learning and becoming (see also Friedman et al., 2005; Jackson, 2001; Ortenblad, 2007 for critiques of learning organization). Engaging with organizational learning acknowledges the past, as well as, the future and the often evolutionary/incremental nature of strategic change and potentially involves employees within organizational change processes.

### *Agency, discourse and organizational change*

*Leading Change* depicts leaders/powerful guiding coalitions as agents of change and Caldwell (2003) acknowledged the 1980s as the era change leaders gained prominence. However, Caldwell was sceptical about claims being made for change leaders including an over-emphasis upon leaders transforming organizations, failure to clarify differences between leaders and managers within change processes, underestimation of leadership at all levels in changing organizations and a conflation between leadership and change. Informed by literature reviewing, Caldwell (2003) developed a fourfold classification of change agency covering leadership, management, consultancy and team models. In synthesizing and reconceptualizing the nature of change agency, he emphasized that there was neither a universal model of change agency, nor a single type of change agent with a fixed set of competencies (see also Caldwell, 2005, 2007). Ongoing debates with regards to change agency have highlighted both problems of dispersed change agency (Doyle, 2001), as well as, how distributed change agency was used successfully (with caveats) to implement a complex organizational change (Buchanan et al., 2007) (see also Battilana and Casciaro, 2012).

Depictions of the leader/powerful guiding coalition as change agent privilege one way communication at the expense of listening to or engaging with followers, the quantity and volume of the change communications takes precedence over message construction and message reception. The danger is that '...communication is frequently treated as either a tool for promoting change or an unproblematic component of organizing' (McCellan, 2011: 467). A sensible precaution of not speaking up against an organizational change has been labelled 'organizational silence' (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). However, the leader/powerful guiding coalition may assume that the absence of negative feedback conveys acceptance of their change. Dutton et al. (2001) analysed 82 accounts of 'issue selling' and identified how managers were successfully shaping change through issue selling moves including packaging, involvement and timing. Heracleous and Barrett (2001) explored the role of discourse in shaping organizational change processes informed by their longitudinal field study of electronic trading in the London Insurance Market. They developed a typology of four approaches to discourse: functional, interpretive, critical and structural approaches based upon Van de Ven and Poole (1995). Similarly, Tsoukas (2005) encouraged more sophisticated engagement with discourse in the context of organizational change differentiating between behaviourist, cognitivist and discourse analytical approaches (see Phillips and Oswick, 2011 for a comprehensive overview of organizational discourse developments). Academic accounts of agency challenge belief in the exclusive agency of a change leader or leaders, highlighting choices with regards to where change agency is located, dispersal of power and construction of change discourses.

### *Contextualizing organizational change*

The academic norm is to locate strategic change case studies within their own unique context. In this sense, Hope Hailey and Balogun's (2002) context-sensitive account of change within Glaxo Wellcome is an exemplar, as well as, offering a critical counterpoint to *Leading Change's* a-contextual transformation cases. Hope Hailey and Balogun warn against descriptive contingency models which offer 'recipes' for making complex business simpler and more manageable, they cite Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) as illustrative of such a formulaic recipe. Instead they favour their own diagnostic tool referred to as the change kaleidoscope which encourages: '(1) A rigorous analysis of context; (2) consideration of a range of implementation options; (3) an awareness of one's own preferences about change and how this limits the options considered; and (4) development of change judgement' (Hope Hailey and Balogun, 2002: 154). This position is compatible with notions of leaders socially constructing the context for a change (discussed earlier). As Pettigrew (2012: 1308) acknowledges 'strategic change is ultimately a product of a legitimization process shaped by gross changes in the outer context of the firm and by political and cultural considerations inside the firm, though often expressed in rational/analytical terms'. Engaging with unique contexts and cultures encourages movement away from formulaic recipes, refocusing upon diverse choices made by reflexive leaders.

### *Evaluating organizational change*

Leading change is caricatured as either failing with improved leadership the solution (Kotter, 1995) or leading change will be successful if leaders follow eight successful transformation steps (Kotter, 1996). Pettigrew et al. (2001: 701) in their frequently cited overview of the study of organizational change acknowledged that '... in very few empirical studies do researchers seek to link change capacity and action to organizational performance'. They (2001: 701) suggest that whilst this is a difficult area, this should not deter scholars from the challenge, although with the caveats '...evaluating the success of change initiatives is replete with practical difficulties. What is success in the management of change? Definitions of success can include notions of the quantity, quality, and pace of change'. Vaara (2002) focussed upon discursive constructions of post-merger integration, drawing upon extensive interview data with reference to eight Finnish-Swedish mergers and acquisitions. Four types of discourse were identified: rationalistic, cultural, role-bound and individualistic. This narrative perspective revealed multiple interpretations for evaluating organizational change '...success stories are likely to lead to overly optimistic, and failure narratives to overly pessimistic views on the management's ability to control these change processes' (Vaara, 2002: 237). In their empirically informed study of organizational change, Amis et al. (2004) questioned common assumptions, evident within the literature, around the pace, sequence and linearity of organizational change. Their research focussed upon 36 Canadian national sports organizations (NSOs) challenged the belief that rapid change throughout organizations was sufficient to bring about radical change even suggesting that rapid change may be detrimental.

'Why do some changes to organization structures, working practices and culture appear to be irreversible, while others decay more or less rapidly?' (Buchanan et al., 2005: 189). Buchanan et al. (2005) illustrate an emerging academic interest in the sustainability of organizational change initiatives. They subsequently identified 11 factors affecting sustainability: substantial, individual, managerial, financial, leadership, organizational, cultural,

political, processual, contextual and temporal. Sustainability is likely to be influenced by interplay between these factors (see Hughes, 2011, for further discussion about evaluating organizational change). Academic engagement with organizational change evaluation offers an antidote to simplistic generalizations that transformations fail or succeed exclusively as a consequence of leadership.

The REPLACE mnemonic has been introduced here as a framework for encouraging debate around seven related advances grounded in empirical and theoretical work believed to be particularly pertinent to informing understanding about leadership and organizational change interrelationships. Whilst academic advances have been discussed separately in order to aid exposition, inevitably they overlap and they are interconnected. They are likely to be closer to Chia's (1999) rhizome analogy of organizational change than traditional conceptualizations of a tree of knowledge.

## Conclusions

Kotter's belief that unprecedented change was occurring, yet that *Leading Change* was now more relevant than when first published in 1996, fuelled the writing of this paper. It was as if the 2008 global financial recession never really happened. As if a leadership thought leader was announcing in 2012 – It's business as usual! Taking critical stock of Kotter's claims necessitated engagement with his larger body of influential work, as well as, Kotter's leadership explanations of why transformations failed and how successful transformation would occur through appropriate leadership. This review enables three conclusions to now be drawn, addressing Kotter's considerable contribution to the sub-field of leadership and organizational change, development of this sub-field since 1996 and movement towards more moral and ethical leadership.

### *Leading Change an enduring leadership studies landmark*

Kotter's (1996) account of leading change is remembered and still utilized as a respected practice orientated model. In an academic sense, the first four of the eight steps (see Table 2) offer an alternative explanation for Kotter's significant influence upon the field of leadership studies and sub-field of leadership and organizational change. Kotter was deeply concerned with American corporate transformation failures at a time when managing, rather than leading change was the norm. Despite its deficiencies, Kotter's (1995) paper created the sense of urgency both within the practitioner and academic communities of that time with regards achieving and explaining transformations. The crisis was the failure of transformations and although with hindsight he may have caricatured this crisis, it needed to be of this magnitude to disrupt change management thinking at that time. In terms of step two, creating the guiding coalition, Kotter (1996: 57) suggested four essential ingredients: position power, expertise, credibility and leadership. Kotter as a professor at Harvard Business School possessed such position power. He had the expertise both in terms of his influential and respected earlier contributions to leadership studies, but also his willingness to engage with practitioners at a senior level in American corporations through his consultancy work. His credibility was underpinned by his position power and his expertise and he undoubtedly showed leadership in his influence of an academic field, as well as, practice. In terms of step three, Kotter (1996: 72) suggests that effective visions are imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible and communicable. In this paper, *Leading Change* has

been critiqued however as a vision of how change is to be lead, it meets these criteria. In terms of the fourth step, communicating the change vision Kotter (1996: 90) emphasizes 'simplicity: all jargon and technobabble must be eliminated'. And once again he practices what he preaches. This modelling of the first four steps in Kotter's leadership of the theory and practice of leading change may explain its enduring success (one of TIMEs most influential management books of all time and by far the most cited book about leadership and organizational change).

### *Leading Change is stuck in the past*

Kotter's steps as well as offering an explanation for the enduring success of *Leading Change* also explain the major limitation of this book today. Kotter and Cohen (2002: 177) refer to the eighth step, anchoring new approaches in the culture slightly differently, as 'make change stick', writing in the final chapter of their book 'be sure the changes are embedded in the very culture of the enterprise so that the new way of operating will stick'. Whilst Kotter was a tireless advocate for creating more change, the eight steps became the new way of operating, the new way of thinking and in this sense they did stick, for practitioners and academics. This potentially explains why the eight steps in 2012 remained completely unchanged. As Kotter (1996: 157) himself warned 'sometimes the only way to change a culture is to change key people', it was always going to be difficult for Kotter to create the sense of urgency to change his own vision of leading change.

Kotter's contribution will be remembered long after this paper has been forgotten. However, the play on words within the title of this paper acknowledges that accounts of leading inevitably change, informed by the people writing about change changing, informed by thinking changing and informed by contexts in which leadership takes place changing. This paper has showcased the latest thinking believed to be pertinent to advancing theories and practices of leadership and organizational change with seven empirical/theoretical advances relating to resistance, ethics, power and politics, process thinking, learning, agency and discourse, context and evaluation gathered together using the mnemonic REPLACE (see Table 5). Development of the REPLACE mnemonic has been driven by three forces: perceived shortcomings now within Kotter's 1996 vision of leading change, the lived experience of the 2008 global financial recession and its aftermath and Parry's (2011) critical verdict of the current state of what we know about leadership and organizational change.

### *Leading Change today paradoxically discourages change*

At the same time as Kotter's (1996) *Leading Change*, O'Toole's (1995) *Leading Change: Overcoming the ideology of comfort and the tyranny of custom* was also being published. In the latter book, O'Toole (1995) made the case for values-based leadership. O'Toole (1995: 7) was annoyed with unquestioning academic contingency theory at this time '... the belief that to implement change effective leaders do whatever the circumstances require'. He (O'Toole, 1995: 10/11) subsequently challenged this belief 'clearly, the leadership of change, does not depend on circumstances it depends on the attitudes, values and actions of leaders'.

O'Toole's (1995) concerns have been magnified with the passage of time and the recent experience of failed leadership with regards to the global financial recession. Kotter (1990) himself originally warned against the consequences of companies with too strong leadership

and too weak management developing ‘cult like cultures’ and not using control systems which would threaten the very existence of these organizations and Kotter’s prophecy came true. The 2008 global financial crisis encouraged critical reappraisal of the leadership of our largest companies and the academic responsibility to collectively challenge the darker side of transformational leadership (Tourish, 2013). Kotter writing about his sixth step about generating short term wins wrote ‘to some degree, all management is manipulation – and that includes the production of short-term performance improvements’ (1996: 128), tempered with some caveats. However, set against the context of recent corporate history, for example, Enron’s accounting practices, Arthur Anderson’s auditing or the manipulation of the LIBOR rate by UK bankers; Kotter’s 2012 prescriptions now paradoxically discourage change. In his thought leadership of the field of leading change, it is disappointing that with the benefit of 16 years hindsight he chose to maintain that such views were still relevant today, ignoring local developments at Harvard Business School, such as the public commitment to the MBA Oath (mbaoath.org). We have a limited window of opportunity to learn from the leadership errors of the past decade, if we are to avoid repeating these leadership errors and the considerable damage they do to societies and economies. As Kotter (1996: 186) himself concluded ‘...people who are making an effort to embrace the future are a happier lot than those who are clinging to the past’. The enduring status quo of leadership studies and leadership practice requires challenging, which *Leading Change* now impedes. *Leading Change* remains an enduring landmark of leadership studies, but today it is stuck in the past and paradoxically discourages changes which leadership studies and leadership practices urgently require.

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