

Leading and Making a Transformational Change*

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“The only thing constant in life is change.”

- François de la Rochefoucauld

Change. What kind of thoughts and feelings does that one simple word evoke in people? Many people do not like change, many people resist change, and some people actually enjoy and embrace change. As Rochefoucauld’s quotation suggests, if everything in life changes, why is the process of change so difficult and at times painful to execute in an organization? Change affects each of us in our personal and professional lives in a very personal manner. Things change and when we fail to adapt and resist the change, it not only affects us but it also affects our organizations and our subordinates. The paradigm, “we do it this way, because that’s the way *we* do it”, may often inhibit us and our organizations from evolving to our maximum potential. To change requires courage and a willingness to accept risk, but even more so, change requires trust.

Many leaders and scholars are familiar with Harvard Business School Professor John Kotter, considered by many people as a global authority on leadership and change. Kotter’s book, *Leading Change*, provides an eight-stage change process to avoid common problems that beleaguer even simple change efforts in an organization. According to Kotter, leaders must lead their organizations through the eight-stage model to create successful and permanent change. Skipping a step, making a critical mistake within a step, or jumping ahead prematurely can have a crippling effect on the success of the change initiative. The eight stages in Kotter’s model are:

- 1) Establishing a sense of urgency
- 2) Creating the guiding coalition
- 3) Developing a vision and strategy
- 4) Communicating the change vision
- 5) Empowering broad-based action
- 6) Generating short-term wins
- 7) Consolidating gains and producing more change
- 8) Anchoring new approaches in the culture (p. 21)

Throughout the eight-stage change process, Kotter declared that quality leadership is needed to motivate and inspire people to change their old behaviors and ultimately anchor the new behaviors and thoughts into the organization’s culture. To further explain each stage of the Kotter model of change, we will use the US Army’s transformation envisioned by former Chief of Staff of the Army, General Shinseki. General Shinseki stated, “Institutions don’t transform; people do” (Jeffress, 2003). Transforming people or changing the way people think and act is complex business. The eight-stage model can assist leaders in doing this.

Establishing a Sense of Urgency

Stage 1- Tradition, standing policies, and the status quo, are familiar and comfortable ways of operating and thus are very hard to change. The vital first step in creating successful change is establishing a sense of urgency by showing the benefits and necessity of change. Understanding why the

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change is needed, how the change will benefit the organization, and what may happen if change does not take place, is how an astute leader establishes a sense of urgency.

In 1999 when General Shinseki presented *The Army Vision* at the AUSA convention, he understood the importance of changing or transforming the Army to an Objective Force and adapting the Army to the current threat before another crisis erupted. Although General Shinseki's vision met with stiff resistance for the first two years because of the magnitude of changes proposed, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 provided the sense of urgency needed to breakdown resistance to the Army transformation among many military, business, and civilian leaders.

Creating the Guiding Coalition

Stage 2- Once the urgency of change is established, a coalition of senior and respected leaders must be formed to support the change process. Building a strong coalition or like-minded team based on trust and mutual understanding is necessary to promote and propel the change process.

The Army, unlike traditional business organizations, requires senior leaders to move frequently to other assignments. The members of the initial guiding coalition may be reassigned or retire. The Army transformation required a continuity of effort and constant recruiting and creation of the guiding coalition. Members of this coalition included Major Army Command (MACOM) Commanders and their respective staff personnel, and the Commanders and senior noncommissioned officers at all levels of the hierarchical Army structure. Shinseki also spent significant time and effort to educate and build a coalition of retired senior generals (greybeards) as well as key senior civilian leaders, current, and former. These members of his coalition helped build support in Congress, the business world, and across the executive branch.

Developing a Vision and Strategy

Stage 3- Developing the vision for the change effort means envisioning a realistic and desirable future picture of the end-state and visualizing how the organization will achieve that end state. A feasible vision (and strategy to accomplish the vision) is essential for aligning the actions of the people in the organization for change to take place.

General Shinseki's vision and strategy for the Army Transformation was written in *The Army Vision*, *Objective Force White Paper*, and the *Transformation Campaign Plan*. General Shinseki's vision was; "Relevant and Ready Landpower in Service to the Nation. The Nation has entrusted the Army with preserving its peace and freedom, defending its democracy, and providing opportunities for its Soldiers to serve the country and personally develop their skills and citizenship. Consequently, we are and will continuously strive to remain among the most respected institutions in the United States. To fulfill our solemn obligation to the Nation, we must remain the preeminent land power on earth-the ultimate instrument of national resolve; strategically dominant on the ground where our Soldiers' engagements are decisive" (Army White Paper).

General Shinseki's vision and strategy for the Army Transformation was written in *The Army Vision*, *Objective Force White Paper*, and the *Transformation Campaign Plan*. General Shinseki developed his vision through many meetings with senior and junior Army leaders, academia, Congressional members and staffers, industry and business leaders, to gather their views of where the Army could best serve the nation. He scanned the current geo-political environment and then

he considered several potential future environments. He understood the Army must change, and he wanted to set it on a path towards change that he knew would take many years to accomplish.

Communicating the Change Vision

Stage 4- Clearly communicating the vision throughout the organization is one of the most important steps in the change process. Clearly explaining why the reason change is needed, how the change will benefit the organization and the employees, what is planned for the organization, and what may happen if change does not take place, are necessary for communicating the change vision to all employees. The leader must walk the talk and lead by example or the change effort is doomed for failure. Additionally, the change vision must be communicated often and in many repetitive forums.

General Shinseki continually discussed his vision of the Army Transformation wherever he went. For example, he spoke with all of the Army's key leader development institutions (War College, Sergeants Major Academy, CGSC, etc.) about his vision for Transformation, stressing the need for a lighter and more agile and lethal force. He was also candid and admitted he did not know what the Objective Force (the new structure of the Army) would look like in 2020, but he knew it needed to look different than it did in 1999. He also formulated key messages and used his guiding coalition to further communicate the key points of his vision.

Empowering Broad-based Action

Stage 5- Empowering others includes decentralized control, training, listening, resourcing, aligning organizational systems to support the change, implementing solutions to problems, and trusting others to accomplish their tasks and objectives. Empowering subordinates at all levels to take action will engender commitment, buy-in, and trust in the change process. Removing obstacles to change is another leader action that must take place. Removing obstacles may include removing key leaders who are complacent or adamantly opposed to progress or implementing the change effort. Removing change-resistant leaders should be done to prevent those leaders from sabotaging the change process.

General Shinseki empowered subordinate units and agencies to develop and change. Some of these empowerment measures included: establishing better ways of developing, testing, and procuring new equipment; providing Soldiers with new and improved organizational and institutional education and training; and publishing new doctrine manuals that reflected the new way of operating in the Contemporary Operational Environment (COE). Additionally, senior officers that did not support the Transformation effort were moved out of critical assignments or asked to retire.

Generating Short-term Wins

Stage 6- To keep the vision from stagnating and to prevent procrastination by cynics and resisters, short-term successes that are visible and related to the change must be planned, identified, rewarded, and celebrated. People need to see proof that the change effort is succeeding and the difficult work is indeed worthwhile and on track. This is especially true in lieu of the fact that many changes take years to enact because they are anchored in the organization's traditions and culture.

General Shinseki and his guiding coalition generated short-term wins in many ways. Two examples were the implementation of Intermediate Level Education (ILE) where all Army majors attend the ten month CGSC course rather than only the top half of each year group, and the

development and fielding of interim brigade combat teams. The change of official headgear to the black beret can also be seen as a short-term win that provided a very visible, and emotional, indicator that the Army was changing.

Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change

Stage 7- Since major change or transformation takes a long time (many years in large organizations), consolidation of the short-term wins should be used to increase credibility and reinvigorate the process for more change by other members in the organization. The effects of change on interdependent systems in large organizations create more change. People are promoted, trained, and recruited to assist with all the changes. Senior leaders must continue to communicate the importance of the change and motivate employees to keep the urgency levels high, during this turbulent period of additional change.

General Shinseki fully understood the importance of this stage and he, along with his guiding coalition, continually communicated the importance of Army transformation and embraced the many additional changes that were realized after the change process began. General Shinseki saw the need to integrate his vision using all of the systems and processes of DoD, e.g. personnel, budget, acquisition, etc. He put in place the objective force acquisition program that received Congressional approval and funding for the long-term. This program required a high degree of human, machine, and network interdependence, thus ensuring that all aspects of change moved forward together as one. It would then be very difficult to cut just one piece of the program without causing the entire objective force to be altered. By interweaving many aspects of change into one path for change, many senior officer and civilian careers became tied to transformation. This further embedded the force for change. General Shinseki's vision included communicating that he wanted to put in place a path of change with "irreversible momentum." He had served in the Pentagon and he knew how to expertly use and exploit DoD systems (PPBES, acquisition, etc). He knew that he could put in place the foundations for change, that the following CSA's and SECARMY's could easily leverage, but find difficult to kill. He also went before Congress many times to garner their long-term commitment to supporting transforming the Army.

Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture

Stage 8- The importance of organizational culture cannot be understated. Kotter stated, "Culture refers to norms of behavior and shared values among a group of people" (p. 148). Anchoring the change in the culture must happen for long-lasting and permanent change. A change is considered rooted in the organizational culture when people believe, "this is the way we do things here."

It is still premature to understand the full effects of the Army's Transformation and determine if these changes were anchored in the Army culture. As time passes, today's Soldiers are developed with greater focus on their self-awareness, training, agility, and increased ability to adapt to the diverse situations throughout the full spectrum of conflict.

Change will continue to be difficult and replete with setbacks. The Kotter model is one model or tool that can be successfully employed by senior level leaders to make lasting change without reverting back to the old way of being when the leader leaves or when the organization abandons the process of creating change.

References:

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