



Episode 18 Show Notes: A Sense of Urgency - Driving Change

In this episode, Linda Hlavac interviews Dr. John P. Kotter, an authority on leadership and change. We learn John's perspective on how change has evolved over the past 20 years; what leaders and their teams struggle most with when it comes to change or transformation initiatives; his latest book; and advice for aspiring HR leaders.

John is a New York Times best-selling author, award winning business and management thought leader, business entrepreneur, inspirational speaker and Harvard Professor. His ideas, books, speeches, and company have helped mobilize people around the world to better lead organizations and lives, in an era of increasingly rapid change. Professor Kotter's MIT and Harvard education laid the foundation for his life-long passion for educating, motivating and helping people. Today, he continues to deliver seminars in Harvard Business School's Executive Education Programs, which are sometimes regarded as life changing by his students. He has authored 18 books to date - 12 of which have become best sellers.

Key Learnings From This Episode

- **How did Dr. Kotter become interested in the subject of 'change'?** Dr. Kotter's basic interest is in performance – human and organizational performance. In studying this early in his career, he was aware that the world was rapidly changing. What increased or decreased organizational performance was how well firms were keeping up with that change - or not.
- **How has Dr. Kotter's view or perspective on 'change' evolved over the years, given how things are today compared to how they were in the mid-1990's or the early 2000's?**
 - In the 1990's, the **sense of urgency** that firms needed to deal with change could be created by either focusing on opportunities or on hazards, more often than not on hazards. Today he is finding that it works the other way around. The firms that are doing the best focus on opportunities.
 - There is always a **core group** that is strong enough to help drive major change initiatives. Today, unlike 20 years ago, the makeup of that group has to be not only from multiple silos



but also multiple levels inside the organization, from top to bottom, increasingly larger groups that organize themselves, manage and drive change.

- **Vision** - Previously, communication campaigns and role behavior from the senior leaders was enough. Now, it is more often - more people talking to more people talking to more people - not just a constant chatter, not just from a few people like the CEO, but from dozens, then hundreds, then thousands. ***The power of many people getting engaged in the process is far more important today.*** In the past, short term wins could mean something that would happen in six months. Today, it's important to get wins and successes going to give credibility to any kind of change initiative immediately – within the first week would be nice. Sustainability has always been an issue in institutionalizing change, but it is more difficult to sustain things today, and you have to focus on that from the beginning. The more people that are engaged in something, the easier it is to sustain it because they are the organization, and if they have driven it, they will make sure it sticks.
- **What do leaders struggle with most when they are charged with or are an integral part of a change or transformational effort? Is there anything over time that leaders consistently struggle with?** Creating the sense of urgency; recognizing that people will resist; and will need to actively feel some commitment, excitement and engagement to help out. Increasingly, **change is not typically 'rolling a desk chair across the room on well-oiled rollers; it's moving a Steinway grand piano across the room'**, and that cannot be done without a lot of people wanting to help and being actively involved in developing clever ways to help figure out smart ways to do it. Large numbers of employees, especially those more junior in the organization, are focused on just doing their jobs, focusing on implementing the CEO's vision. That just isn't enough to push the ship fast enough and make it agile enough to deal with the exponential changes that are happening today.



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- Dr. John Kotter



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Engagement in one's job is very important, but engagement in broader and bigger strategic initiatives that really makes a difference is also becoming critical. It's no longer good enough to have troops that really like the company and come in and do their job. You want to have people who worry about and focus on their entire division or entire organization and be engaged in helping it, supporting change, innovating, and winning.

- **What do employees struggle with the most during transformation/change?** Employees typically do not have a clue about what is going on. They see six initiatives, but they do not see how they are connected; six of the initiatives seem ridiculous, three are wasting resources, and two are making their jobs more difficult. They want to help if they aren't already worn out and cynical. What eventually reaches them simply doesn't make sense or doesn't invite them to realistically get involved in a way that is meaningful to them and would help the company.
- **Kotter's new book is a fable; it tells a story. What perspective on 'change' today might be revealed in the new book?** In "That's Not How We Do It Here!" Dr. Kotter has created a leader's discussion guide, which gives a leader ideas on how to get people thinking about the situation they are in at work and to start moving together toward some better solutions. It can be very powerful in helping move people beyond their defenses and have discussions that are difficult to have.
- **Advice for aspiring HR or organizational development professionals.** HR professionals are often in a position to support change. Because organizations are typically designed in siloes, if you are not careful, your life becomes a life within HR. If you are trying to help an organization deal with a changing world, you have to find ways to get out and get involved in things that are business or mission related that include more than just HR people. Among other things, it will expand your view, it will be a good learning experience, and you can be more impactful. All HR people want deeply to be impactful on their organizations and on people's lives. Trying to do that just within the boundaries of the HR 'tribe' is limiting.

Recommended Reading and References From this Episode

- [Kotter International](#)
- [Leading Change](#) by Dr. John Kotter



- [Our Iceberg Is Melting](#) by Dr. John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber
- [The Heart of Change](#) by Dr. John Kotter
- [That's Not How We Do It Here!: A Story about How Organizations Rise and Fall--and Can Rise Again](#) by Dr. John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber
- [Accelerate](#) by Dr. John Kotter

To Follow Dr. John Kotter

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Dr. Kotter's Question to HR Studio Podcast Group Members

If management thinks they are doing well, they are not looking for new answers, they are not reaching out to find new solutions. [As an HR professional, what are you doing to: \(1\) help your management appreciate and realistically see the situation as it exists today, the speed with which change is happening around them and how it is going to probably move even faster tomorrow; and \(2\) demonstrate that you understand the significant implications for how they and the organization operate?](#)



Aired: November 15, 2016
Industry: Human Resources
Host: Linda Hlavac
Guest: Dr. John P. Kotter
Type: HR Studio Podcast



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