

LEADING CHANGE IN YOUR CHURCH

by Todd Adkins



LifeWay Leadership

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**“The art of progress is to preserve order
amid change and to preserve change
amid order.”
—Alfred North Whitehead¹**

Many of my childhood lessons have become quite helpful in different leadership roles I have held. Like most leadership lessons, you don't appreciate them until later, sometimes much later. In college I realized I was a “swinger of birches,” as noted by Robert Frost in his famous poem.² Let me explain.

I grew up in rural Kentucky. What Frost calls “swinger of birches” we called “skinning the cat.” This shenanigan involved finding young, tall, and thin trees that were trying to reach up through the canopy in the woods near my home. This act was best executed in spring or summer, when the tree sap was flowing and the trees were limber and growing. We would select a tree and climb almost to the top, at which point you commit and effectively jump out of the tree without letting go as it bends toward the ground. Few things in life are more satisfying than getting it just right, feeling weightless and looking almost otherworldly to those watching. Like a reverse pole vault in slow motion, I can tell you that you quickly learn to judge a tree, the time of year, the weather conditions, and how high you need to climb.

I learned this complex mixture of art and science as a 9-year-old boy, as these elements are in flux and the same tree may respond differently at different times of the year. If you climb a tree in the wrong season or when it is too dry, the tree will break in half, which



makes for a rough landing. If you don't climb high enough and lean out too soon, then you are left hanging with little choice but to let go or hold on until help arrives. If you climb too high, you come in too hard and fast, which can be even worse than when the tree breaks halfway down. I personally experienced each of these scenarios.

While we usually "skinned the cat" in the presence of a group, my worst experience happened when I was by myself and leaned out too soon. I had climbed this tree before, but it was later in the summer and I had misjudged the situation, not paying attention to the way the tree felt as I climbed. I swung out from the tree with the expectation that it would bend to my will, the way it had before. Instead, I hung about 10 feet off the ground. I bounced to get it to go down, but it didn't give much. I yelled for help, but no one heard me. Eventually I bounced until the tree broke. I landed well enough to avoid a major injury and walked off the sprain on the way back to my house.

When I think about that day now, it feels almost synonymous as decision making and leading change for leaders. There comes a time when you must fully commit to change. If you get it wrong, then you are left hanging, crash hard, or fall. But if you get it right, you feel almost weightless, like gravity doesn't matter and you are walking on the moon.

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF CHANGE

Leading change in any organization is both an art and a science. You must understand the conditions and establish a plan, but



everyone has a great plan until they are left hanging 10 feet off the ground. The failure to recognize the art of feeling usually gets leaders in the end. You must understand what is going on with the people and the environment as you process implementation.

I used to say that if you can't lead people, then you can't lead change. But I'm beginning to believe that if you can't lead change, then you can't lead people either. Being a leader in any church or organization will mean leading change. There is no other option.

In the past, a leader may have led one or two major changes throughout his or her career. Now, major changes happen every 5-10 years. In an age of ever-increasing access to information, data, and opinion, it feels like we need a degree in chaos theory to move forward. Never have we had a greater need to implement change, and never have we had so many tools at our disposal, but I am afraid this access has led to greater confusion than its intended effect.

Often, leaders recognize a change is desperately needed, so they choose the latest and greatest plan. This plan is thorough, clear to communicate, has great visuals, and can be explained on a single sheet of paper. The roll-out plan for change is both logically and theologically sound, but it goes off the rails early. Or maybe worse, you implement every step and nothing changes. You just seemed to put a new coat of paint on the status quo.

We must remember that leadership and change management remain both an art and a science.



As a leader, my bent is toward action and implementation. I love a good plan and am quick to find a whiteboard to sketch out new tactics and processes to solve whatever problem. I make sure I have clear communication and visuals of what the solution will look like and how the change will roll out. I see the change as a necessary solution and am quick to devote time, talent, and resources toward implementation. And that is where the problem lies. I have learned the hard way that I often spend much more time preparing the change for people than I do preparing people for the change.

Admit it. As a leader, you have been on one end of a conversation like this: “The bus is leaving the station and the destination is already determined. Get on board or get off at the next stop.” This line of thinking does not lead to buying or lasting change and makes for a bumpy ride, to say the least. Some people aren’t even aware of the “problem” you are trying to address with this change, and you neither appear logically nor emotionally aware of your church’s current reality.

The reality is that effective change occurs less because of the logical reasons to change someone’s thinking but by compelling experiences that change their feelings. The emotional component is almost always present in the most successful stories of change. When the emotional component is missing or severely lacking, then successful navigation of change is much less likely.



Take a moment to assess an effective change and an ineffective change you or someone you know has led.

- What were the rational elements of the change?
- What were the emotional elements of the change?
- What were the key points of success or failure from your perspective?

THINKING VS. FEELING

My favorite explanation of these approaches comes from John Kotter and Dan Cohen in *The Heart Of Change*. They summarize the rational approach as analysis-think-change and the emotional approach as see-feel-change. They propose that changing the behavior of a person or group is less about giving them a rational analysis that will influence their thoughts, but helping them see a new reality that will influence their feelings.³

While both thinking and feeling are essential to the change process, the true heart of change rests in our emotions. You might expect that church leaders would be more inclined to employ the see-feel-change methodology than business leaders in a corporate setting, but I believe we all fall into that same trap.

Let's compare these two approaches side-by-side for a church context.⁴



SEE-FEEL-CHANGE

1. HELP PEOPLE SEE

Compelling, eye-catching dramatic situations are created to help others visualize problems, solutions, or progress in solving complacency, strategy, empowerment, or other key problems within the eight steps.

As a result...

2. SEEING HITS EMOTIONS

The visualizations provide useful ideas that hit people at a deeper level than surface thinking. They evoke a visceral response that reduces emotions that block change and enhances those that support it.

3. EMOTIONS CHANGE BEHAVIOR

ANALYSIS-THINK-CHANGE

1. GIVE PEOPLE INFORMATION

Information is gathered and analyzed, reports are written, and presentations are made about problems, solutions, or progress in solving urgency, teamwork, communication, momentum slippage, or other key problems within the eight steps.

As a result...

2. INFORMATION INFLUENCES THINKING

The information and analysis change people's thinking. Ideas inconsistent with the needed change are dropped or modified.

3. NEW THINKING CHANGES BEHAVIOR



EIGHT STEPS TO LEADING CHANGE

Rather than give you yet another new twist on a change framework or tool, I think it would serve us well to discuss probably the most utilized change management process ever written by John Kotter in *Leading Change*. Odds are, you have read or heard of this book. Even if you are familiar with this framework, I encourage you to continue reading as I explore ideas and exercises for you and your team to process change in your church and move forward.

My approach will be bent toward helping you process change with a group or groups of people and ultimately lead them through change. I will discuss how to create dialogue about change through questions, supplemental tools, and communication strategies. This dialogue will help you define, design, and drive change in your context and talk about how you dedicate resources and democratize the change for everyone. A big part of this approach is simply helping you and your team visualize the problems and progress you are making in leading the change, which evokes positive emotions and outlook needed along the way.

This process also scales. It will help lead an entire church through a major change and works equally for someone wanting to make a change in a ministry area. The checkpoints identify where you are in the process and clarify what might help or hinder you in that step. Approach change from the perspective of phases or stages rather than seeing it as a one-time event.



Here are the eight steps of Kotter's framework for leading change:

1. Increase urgency
2. Build guiding teams
3. Get the vision right
4. Communicate for buy-in
5. Enable action
6. Create short-term wins
7. Don't let up
8. Make it stick⁵

After releasing *The Heart of Change*, Kotter and Cohen identified three main phases of implementing these eight steps. Phase one is creating a climate for change and involves steps 1–3, which are the most crucial stages. If you get this phase wrong, it is difficult, if not impossible, to recover. You also spend most of your energy to overcome the gravity of the current reality and the status quo. Phase two is about engaging and enabling the organization in the change effort and involves steps 4–6. Phase three focuses on implementing the change and sustaining the success of steps 7–8.⁶



1. Increase Urgency

Your church will only change when your collective commitment to the Great Commission is stronger than your commitment to your own great comfort. Unless your church perceives that there is more danger in maintaining the status quo than moving into unknown territory, then they will not move forward. Two ways to increase urgency are to present it as a crisis or a great opportunity that will be missed if you don't act fast. If you do not first convince the majority of your people, including key stakeholders, *do not move forward*.

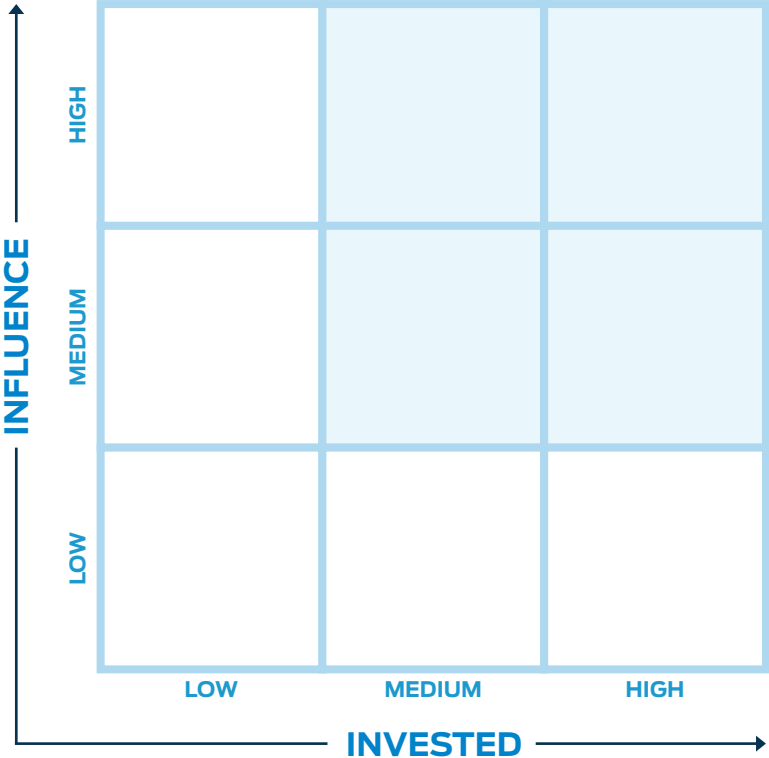
2. Build Guiding Teams

You must establish the right team to see the change process through to completion. You need people with formal authority but also people with influence in your church or organization. Their influence may or may not have anything to do with their hierarchy on the organizational chart. You also need people with the right skill sets to employ at different phases of the change implementation process. These individuals should be completely convinced that the change is necessary. After all, it is difficult to lead someone in a direction that you are not going in yourself.



I have created this 9-box to help you assess where a person is and how to bring them into your coalition for change.

BUILDING A COALITION FOR CHANGE



Think about the people in your church. For each person that comes to mind, first rate that person's influence in your church as low, medium, or high. Next, rate if that person is invested in the change as low, medium, or high. Mark where the two intersect on the 9-box grid. I suggest that you only focus on people who fall in



the upper right squares of the 9-box, as they're the most invested and influential. Here's how to build up each type in your coalition for change.

For the highly influential and highly invested people, use them as spokespersons for your church. They already have influence and are already bought into your church's mission. Put these people out front, give them a microphone, and make sure they use their influence and buy-in to move forward.

- Who are three of these people in your church?
- How can you equip them to be carriers of the vision?

For the high influence and somewhat invested people, you want to tie them strongly back into your church's mission and leverage their influence as well.

- Who are three of these people in your church?
- Examine central stories from the history of the church. What emotional wells lie in deep reservoirs below the surface that might be tapped and retold for your change initiative?

Similarly, for the medium influence and medium invested people, cast vision to earn their buy-in. It's easier to increase their investment than their influence.

- Who are these people in your church?
- Do they exist in pockets, groups, or ministries?
- How do you utilize the groups above to reach them?



- What content or tools can you give them to help them in this task?

For the highly invested but medium influence people, you want their faces and their stories up front and center. This move may seem unexpected because they're not the most influential. Bring their stories to the attention of others to build credibility and social proof. This is the everyday man getting behind the change versus the people that we all assumed would be on board anyway.

- These may be people you do not yet know. How will you identify them as you begin this process?
- What live venues do you have to bring their stories front and center?
- How do you capture and capitalize on these moments?
- What are other channels and ways you can spread their stories?

Obviously, we are leaving out a group here: the keepers of the status quo. We will address them later. Regardless of where people fall in the framework above, we also must consider their readiness for change.

3. Get the Vision Right

Remember that people will follow you if you are uncertain, but they will not follow you if you are unclear. That may sound conflicting at first, but the point is to paint a clear picture of what the change will be like when we get there. We may know the route yet may not be able to answer detailed questions about exactly what we are going



to experience along the way. But we must have milestones in place that articulate how amazing the destination will be when we arrive. A key piece of this phase is outlining the milestones to be sure everyone is rowing in the same basic direction.

4. Communicate for Buy-In

In this stage, leaders must be sure to leave no stone unturned and speak one-on-one or in small groups with as many people as possible in the church or organization. This communication should be clear, concise, and genuinely from the heart of the leaders. People are carriers of the vision, not paper. A pamphlet can be a good tool, but vision can be multiplied in the hands of a person who is committed to it and compelled to share it. If you want this vision to go viral in your church, you need as many carriers as possible.

Napoleon said there were three distinct divisions in his army. I know what you're thinking, *Napoleon had more than three divisions ...* And he did. But Napoleon said that when it came to leading change, breaking camp, and moving on to take new ground, he had three distinct groups of people.

First were the people who are always ready for change. He was excited to have those people on board, and what he did was secure their commitment early on.

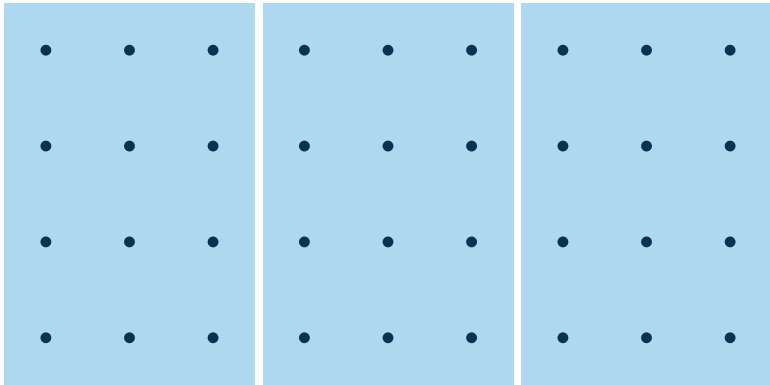
The next group is the "I'm never going to change" crowd. They're the keepers of the status quo. Anytime you try to change and go a new direction, they have pitchforks and torches ready. They do not



want to change. Unfortunately, this group is the one that we often focus on the most, spending all of our time, effort, and energy.

Napoleon instead said to spend the most time with the people ready for change and establish wins early to bring over the remaining third, who is waiting to see which group will win. This third group wants to see where the momentum is going, so as soon as you start telling stories from the group ready for change, you will begin bringing people back through from the status quo crowd. Focus on getting those early wins and gaining commitment by telling stories and casting the vision to keep everyone moving forward.

NAPOLEON'S RULE OF THIRDS



- Identify staff members who are in each group.
- Identify leaders and volunteers who are in each group.
- How will you approach each group differently?



- How is leading your staff through change different than leading your volunteers and leaders through change?

5. Enable Action

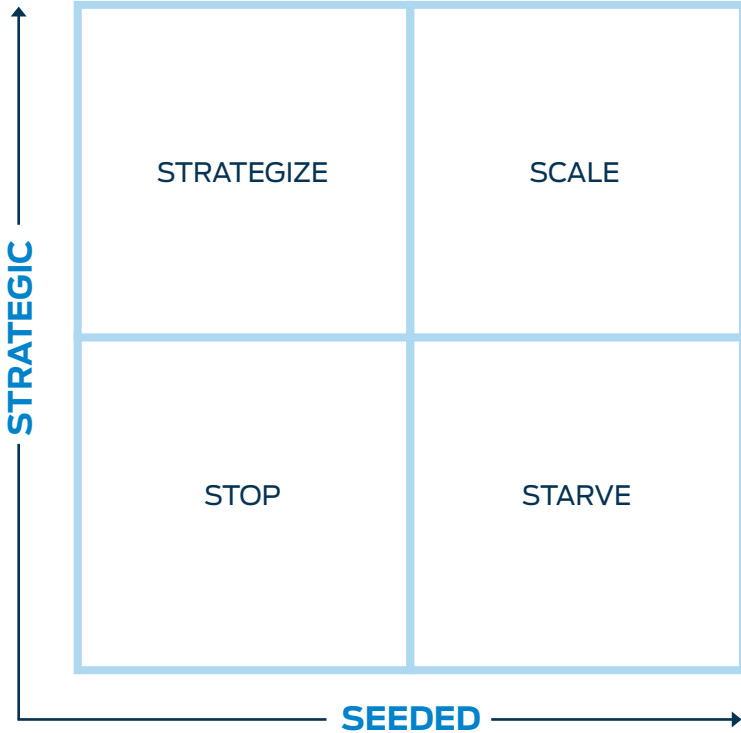
At this point, everyone must feel empowered to lead change. The problem is that the keepers of the status quo will always be with us and will start playing some strong defense. You have given your people a compelling vision, but now they have to be able to carry that ball down the field through any opposition.

Your job is not over. You now have to block and tackle. There will be barriers to implementing this change, and it will require adjustments to ministry. You will be shocked to see how many people suddenly realize that to lead change means that they will have to change things in their ministry. That's why gaining clarity and commitment in the previous steps is so important.

Here is a quadrant to assess and re-allocate resources during change. Determine whether or not the change is strategic and whether or not the change is a felt need for your people. Mark the box where the two overlap.



RE-ALLOCATING RESOURCES DURING CHANGE



- If the change is not strategic and is not a felt need for your people, you stop doing it. No further questions asked.
- If the change is not strategic but is a felt need for your church, you starve it. You stop allocating time and resources to it.



- If the change is strategic but is not yet a felt need, strategize it. What could you do differently to make it a felt need for your people?
- If the change is both a felt need and strategic, you scale it. Dedicate time and resources to elevate it and continue its momentum.

This assessment isn't a one-time thing. You must continually assess your change to best meet the needs of your church or ministry.

6. Create Short-Term Wins

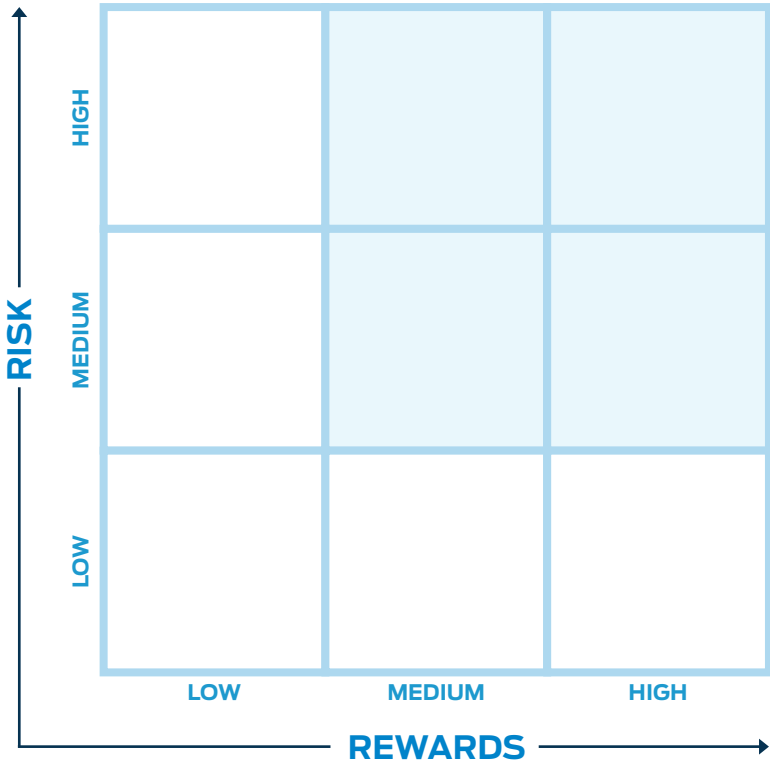
This step is all about creating and capitalizing on visible wins, the flywheel concept. A flywheel is difficult to start turning, but, once moving, its momentum keeps it going forward. It gets easier to move the faster it goes.

Keep in mind Napoleon's three groups from step 5. If some of your troops don't see these early wins, then they are likely to leave the battle up to you. Your leaders must be re-energized along the way by achieving meaningful goals that are visible and celebrated to demonstrate that progress is occurring. Celebrate change leaders publicly at every opportunity to shift the behaviors in your culture and continue to win over others.

This framework will help you identify short-term wins in your first 90 days of implementing change.



CREATING SHORT-TERM WINS



First, determine the risk of the objective. Is it a high-risk, low-risk, or somewhere in-between? Next, assess the rewards of that decision. Are they high, medium, or low? Mark the box where the two intersect.

Now it's important to understand that if things are too high of a risk, too low of a reward, or the matrix isn't just quite right, you don't do those things. If you fail early in the change management process, it



will be difficult to recover. You really want to focus on those things that fall in the upper right boxes of the 9-box. Another element you must consider is visibility. Is it seen or unseen? As a change leader, you want visible early wins that hit clearly defined goals that align with your milestones.

7. Don't Let Up

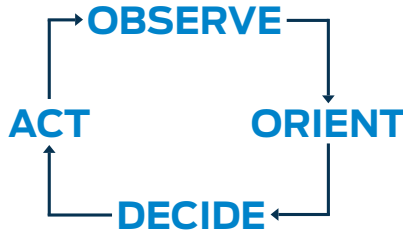
You will be tired of talking about change. You will grow tired of celebrating change. Your staff and leaders will approach you and say, "This is too much! People are tired of hearing us talk about this." But, don't let up!

You know the storyline of every monster movie for the last three decades, right? You think the creature is dead. There's no way he could have survived, and he is quiet, not moving, and seemingly gone from the scene. But then he comes back to life when you least expect it. Change is transformation, not transaction. Change is a process, not an event. Continue to focus on the change, and keep turning over every rock until there is no longer any trace of the status quo.

This graphic illustrates how to keep a constant eye out for things that may seem to come out of the sky and challenge your change process.



AGILE DECISION MAKING



John Boyd was a World War II military strategist who said that during dogfights between fighter pilots, each pilot went through these four decision phases. Whoever did them most quickly was the one that won out. Most of us aren't locked in a life or death struggle while leading change, but these four phases are helpful in agile decision making.⁷

- Observe: What is going on around us? What is the situation?
- Orient: What do we need to orient to or adapt to what is going on? How do you need to change in light of your current reality?
- Decide: What have identified as an opportunity for change? What can you decide on that will actually help you move forward?
- Act: How can you see it through to completion? What will you do to observe the results?

Again, this assessment is one that is never truly done because one decision leads to another. This is a decision loop. It's not a linear



diagram, because even after you've made that action step, you are going to continually evaluate the decision and improve your system, which ultimately improves your leadership. The quicker you are at making solid decisions, the better leader you will become.

8. Make it Stick

This may sound counterintuitive, but the ultimate success of change is if it has actually resulted in a new status quo in your church. If the change has now become part of your church's social norms, then you may declare you accomplished your mission.

If you fail to get to this stage, then it will be harder to lead any change initiative in the future. But if you get here, everyone in the church will approach the next change initiative in a much more positive light. Continue to come back and connect the dots for people. Don't leave it up to people to create their own narrative. Show exactly how these dots connect and how they have made significant improvements in your church.

LEADING CHANGE IN YOUR CHURCH

Whether it is your first time leading major change in your church or you have "skinned the cat" before, I encourage you to take a balanced look at both the art and science of leading change. The simple reality is that no matter how many times you lead change, it will be different each and every time, even when it is in the same church or ministry. Yes, information, analysis, and logical planning are vital to success, but never forget that if you want to shift from transactional change to transformational change, you must lean into the see-feel-change approach.



Just as my friends and I learned from experience how to assess the season, temperature, and limberness of trees as we climbed, you too will learn from experience how to best lead change in your church.



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Choose from three cities and dates in 2019! For information and to register, visit leadership.lifeway.com/events.

ENDNOTES

1. David Hurst, *The New Ecology of Leadership: Business Mastery in a Chaotic World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 15.
2. Edward Connery Lathem, ed., *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Henry Holt and Company), 122.
3. Adapted from John Kotter and Dan Cohen, *The Heart of Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 2.
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5. Adapted from John Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 23.
6. Dan Cohen, *The Heart of Change Field Guide* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005), 11-12.
7. Chet Richards, *Certain to Win: The Strategy of John Boyd, Applied to Business* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2004).

