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"Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster-Moving World" - John P Kotter

Reference

[Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster-Moving World](#)

Notes

Kotter starts with the premise that organizations that have hierarchy and related approaches did so for a reasons of efficiency and these approaches have been highly effective and that if we need to do something that is more innovative we cannot just create a separate "innovation organization" but rather need to set up an side-by-side organization in the existing organization to be innovative. In other words, we need to have two "operating systems" in an organization.

The second organization is set up as a "network" where people effectively volunteer their skills to work the issues (often innovation related) the organization feels like they need to address. The network is flat and empowered to work through issues and leverages all the skills (and passions) of the people who participate. The idea is that, as the network delivers solutions, the learnings are brought back to the hierarchical organization for further optimization and execution, using the same people that did the innovative work in the first place.

The basic structure is self-explanatory: hierarchy on one side and network on the other. But to be effective this structure needs to be guided by principles:

1. Many people driving important change, and from everywhere, not just the usual few appointees. But this must be done with proven processes that do not risk chaos, create destructive conflict, duplicate efforts, or waste money. And it must be done with insiders.
2. A "get-to" mindset, not a "have-to" one. The desire to work with others for an important and exciting shared purpose, and the realistic possibility of doing so, are key.
3. Action that is head and heart driven, not just head driven. You must speak to the genuine and fundamental human desire to contribute to some bigger cause
4. Much more leadership, not just more management. The game is about vision, opportunity, agility, inspired action, passion, innovation, and celebration—not just project management, budget reviews, reporting relationships, compensation, and accountability to a plan.
5. An inseparable partnership between the hierarchy and the network, not just an enhanced hierarchy.

How do we get this done. Because specific actions within networks accelerates activity, especially strategically relevant activity, Kotter calls the basic processes the Accelerators of which there are eight:

1. Create a sense of urgency around a Big Opportunity.
2. Build and evolve a guiding coalition. These are individuals from all silos and levels who want to help you take on strategic challenges, deal with hyper-competitiveness, and win the Big Opportunity. Getting individuals from different levels and silos to work well together requires effort. Just throw them into a room and they are likely to re-create what they know: a management-centric hierarchy.
3. Form a change vision and strategic initiatives. That fits a big strategic opportunity and select strategic initiatives that can move you with speed and agility toward the vision.
4. Enlist a volunteer army. This Accelerator starts to pull, as if by gravity, the planets and moons into the new network system.
5. Enable action by removing barriers. Much of the action here has to do with identifying and removing barriers which slow or stop strategically important activity. Note: Perhaps part of decentralized thinking. Part of mechanism to detect (and deal with obstacles)
6. Generate (and celebrate) short-term wins. This action here also ensures that the wins are as visible as possible to the entire organization and that they are celebrated, even if only in small ways. Short term wins carry great psychological power and play a crucial role in building and sustaining a dual system.
7. Sustain acceleration. Larger initiatives will lose steam and support unless related sub-initiatives are also completed successfully. It is the opposite of a one-and-done approach and mindset.
8. Institute change. Hierarchy's processes, systems, procedures, and behavior—in effect, helping to infuse the changes into the culture of the organization.

Additional Ideas

- “But the truth is that the management-driven hierarchies which good enterprises use and we take for granted are one of the most amazing innovations of the twentieth century. And they are still absolutely necessary to make organizations work.” But “We have learned how to launch initiatives within a hierarchical system to take on new tasks and improve performance on old ones. We know how to identify new problems, find and analyze data in a dynamic marketplace, and build business cases for changing what we make, how we make it, how we sell it, and where we sell it. We’ve learned how to execute these changes by adding task forces, tiger teams, project management departments, and executive sponsors for new initiatives. We can do this while still taking care of the day-to-day work of the organization because this strategic change methodology is easily accommodated by a hierarchical structure and basic managerial processes.” “Part of the problem is political and social: people are often loath to take chances without permission from superiors. Part of it is simply related to human nature: people cling to their habits and fear loss of power and stature.” “It can be tempting to simply blame the problems on people: the control-obsessed middle managers or the my-career-first MBA staff. But the reality is that the problem is systemic and directly related to the limitations of hierarchy and basic managerial processes.”
- In other words, what we need “The processes that run within (a) new network structure look less like systematic management (which creates reliability and efficiency) and more like mobilizing leadership (which creates speed and agility).”
- “They create conditions under which people generate not just ideas, but ideas backed by good data from all silos and levels in a hierarchy. They create conditions under which people do not just develop initiatives, but understand that it is their job to implement them.” This is why it's not a free

for all.

- Management and leadership:
 - “Leadership is about setting a direction. It’s about creating a vision, empowering and inspiring people to want to achieve the vision, and enabling them to do so with energy and speed through an effective strategy. In its most basic sense, leadership is about mobilizing a group of people to jump into a better future.”
 - “Management versus leadership Management Leadership Planning Budgeting Organizing Staffing Measuring Problem solving Doing what we know how to do exceptionally well Constantly producing reliable, dependable results Establishing direction Aligning people Motivating people Inspiring Mobilizing people to achieve astonishing results Propelling us into the future”.
- “The best communication here will not look routine. It will capture people’s attention in a way that almost compels them to be open minded.” Communication is not routine and connects with people's feelings.
- “Wins give credibility to the whole idea of pursuing a new strategic advantage. Celebrations give a needed pat on the back to people who are trying to help. The emotional reward of these pats is positive energy, which not only makes an individual feel good but also has a cumulative effect within the organization.” Reason for short term wins.
- “As I use the term here, a “Big Opportunity” is usually the product of changes in an organization’s environment (such as new markets, new advances in technology, or new demands being placed on an enterprise by competition or turmoil), changes inside the organization (such as new products or new people), or both.” In other words it is not about the new thing, but a change in direction as a result of some factor. “People who create successful dual systems center the creation of great urgency around opportunity, not vision, for two basic reasons. Focus on opportunities outside the org and so has less negative reaction (my part of the pie is not getting bigger or smaller). Plus opportunity is not about saying “here is the vision, now you go do it” but rather a discussion about common outward direction.
- Characteristics of a Big Opportunity - “The most fundamental are: To create a statement which is memorable, smart, and emotionally compelling. To have a product so good that, when top management is asked if they believe in it, and if they want deeply to take advantage of it, everyone in the room will raise their hands, most of them quickly and with total sincerity. To have a statement so good that a few on the executive committee want to help take it to the rest of their organization in order to create a great sense of urgency around that opportunity. When at least two people on the executive committee truly volunteer to help lead the effort—not even knowing exactly what they are volunteering for, how much time it might take, or the difficulty of the task—then you have a good indicator that you have achieved the task of creating a great TBO.”
- Functions of the Guiding Coalition include “(1) making sure the network has a change vision that is totally aligned with the Big Opportunity; (2) agreeing on what the primary strategic initiatives are at any one point in time and making sure they are aligned with the change vision as well as any left-side strategic plans and strategic initiatives; (3) keeping in tight communication with the executive committee, but not as in a left-side reporting relationship; (4) monitoring, but not controlling, what is happening in the strategy-accelerator network, looking out for unnoticed overlap between initiatives on the right and left, and facilitating communication and problem solving among initiatives; (5) looking for and celebrating wins; and (6) in general keeping the accelerator processes working well.”
- On why we can ask people to participate in both the hierarchical work as well as network work “The key issue here is that people’s energy levels are not a zero-sum number. It’s not the case that, if 20% of your capacity goes into network activities, there is only 80% left over for your regular job.

People can expand their energy and expertise to 120% or 150% of current levels, and in a well-functioning dual system they do. If you have never seen this, it can, quite logically, be hard to believe. But most of us have seen this, at least within the context of a whole life. Think of the parent who has no spare time but somehow makes time, without shirking other commitments, when his or her child needs tutoring to do well in school. Or the man who is “exhausted” at the end of the workday yet is building a twenty-five-foot boat in his backyard with energy that comes from ... where?” In other words, it's not a zero sum “resource” game.

How Does Is This Book Different To Previous Books

The book I've used in the past to guide with work associated with transformations to an agile approach was ["Leading Change" - John Kotter](#) where Kotter talked about an eight-step process for managing change with positive results. By outlining the process every organization must go through to achieve its goals, and by identifying where and how even top performers derail during the change process, Kotter provides a practical resource for leaders and managers charged with making change initiatives work. Leading Change is widely recognized as his seminal work and is an important precursor to his newer ideas on acceleration published in Harvard Business Review.

The eight step process talked about was very similar to the steps above:

1. Create a sense of urgency
2. Pull together a guiding coalition
3. Develop a change vision and strategy
4. Communicate for understanding and buy-in
5. Empower all others to act
6. Produce short term wins
7. Don't let up
8. Make sure the change sticks

As you can see, the steps line up pretty well. To my way of thinking there is value both books although you would not have to read both to get the value. The main differences are:

- The idea of the “dual operating system” with a hierarchical and network component in “Accelerate” book. The driver is that idea that change is constant for organizations and so a single “transformation” is not what organizations need.
- There is a discussion of budgeting a transformation in the “Leading Change” book. My experience is that some money needs to be available to allow the transformation to take whole without the need to go through the hierarchical organization.
- The “Leading Change” book has explicit emphasis on communication. My view is that you cannot over-communicate this type of change. The “Accelerate” book has a lot of discussion on communication, but seems to emphasize it less.
- “Leading Change” talks about creating a “vision” and “strategy”; “Accelerate” talks about defining a “Big Opportunity”. The opportunity is more than a typical dry vision / strategy piece, developed

as a collaboration and incorporating the human (feeling) aspect so that it improves engagement (thus allowing organizations to overcome inertia).

My experience is that you need elements of "Leading Change" when we are doing an agile transformation initially - "Leading Change" to get you to "Accelerate" network model. This is partially because there are a lot of changes to existing thinking that needs to be worked into an agile transformation in many instances.

Want to Know More

- ["Accelerate" - John Kotter](#). The original HBR article.

[Book](#), [Organization](#), [Executive](#), [Transformation](#), [Scaling](#)

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