# Can We Lead Change without Integrity?

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**Abstract.** It is time to rethink leadership. We need to step outside the box; we need to rethink how to have people work with one another as morally upright problem solvers, rebuilding organization in the third millennium. Research holds that modern organizations are led by the eight, traits one of which is honesty and integrity (Kirkpatrick & Locke, &, 2012). However, other researchers hold that the third millennium leadership seems to be plagued by much corruption (Corruption Perception Index 2015; Transparency International Corruption Index). We need to connect the dots. The objectives of this case study are twofold: first, the case study evaluates whether local leaders are perceived as change agents; second, the case study evaluates whether local change agents are perceived as leading with integrity. The results showed that participant's perceptions are that integrity was not the order of the day.

**Keywords:** Change, Leaders, Kotter, Integrity, Passive Importation, Real World Problems.

## 1. Introduction

It is time to rethink leadership. In a great time of turbulent change in technology, economy shocks and competition, social trends, global and political changes of power, we need to rethink values of humility, dignity, and courage, and trumpet integrity. "Let us never forget that authentic power is service"

proclaimed Pope Francis during his inaugural address.

Acclaimed researchers maintain that leaders need to be agents of adjustment; leaders need to engage in effective thinking, effective relationships, and effective action guided by first principles"; moreover, others hold that leaders need to face things as they are; adhere to values; prepare for things that will be; change direction; and readily implement contingency plans (Prensky, 2006a, p.1; Stephens et. al, 2008; Covey et. al, 2008; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee 2003; Bennis 1989).

In different organizations, it may be the right time to rethink leaders, structure, and change given that honesty and integrity are the foundations of leadership, and leaders are change agents. The practitioner researcher stepped outside the box to rethink change and integrity in the local context. This case study evaluates whether leaders are able to connect the dots to create balance when change and corruption seem to be the order of the day.

## 2. Literature Review

Hard data states that corrupt systems are the status quo in many organizations today. Researchers posit that an outsider/insider, a change agent, is many times the driving force to bring in a new state of equilibrium because complacency seems to have ingrained corruption, and complacency might make corruption the norm (Transparency International Corruption Perception Resource Index; Corruption Perception Index 2015; Aidia & Brion, 2007; Lewin, 1965) because corruption is difficult to remove (Danials et. al, 2016; Strachan, 2010).

Integrity is the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; Leaders who are perceived as leading with honesty, consistently over a period of time, are perceived to lead with integrity. Such leaders are seen as morally upright choosing to uphold themselves to consistent moral and ethical standards. Such leaders tell the truth even if it is ugly; they do the right thing because it is the right thing to do; such leaders do not compromise their honesty by cheating; Such leaders are humble, have dignity, and are courageous (Webster Dictionary; Pope Francis in Krames, 2015).

Research shows that leaders who consistently monitor the environment in terms of forces of change as globalization, changing technology, rapid product obsolescence, and the changing nature of the workforce keep abreast with the market and respond to trends as they emerge. Moreover, studies have shown how leaders effectively cope when they account for organizational and personal factors (Kinicke & Fugate, 2012; Hanitzsch, 2011; Birch, 2010; Whybrow,

2010; Furnham, 2009; Magee & Langer, 2008).

Organizations with centralization of decision making, organizational hierarchy, degree of formalization, degree of professionalism, complexity, organizational size, and age are factors associated with change. For example, ingrained procedures, modes of behavior, policies, habits, and rules were challenging factors that were addressed. Personal characteristics associated with change as age, training and education, rank, values and beliefs, and management courage are factors associated with change though ignorance, by default, social reasons, interpersonal reasons, through substitution, because of experience, and through incorrect logic people caused resistance to change. Nonetheless, certain aspects of change made it more amenable for leaders, as magnitude and type of change, when leaders took account of cost, riskiness, and adaptability (Furnham, 2009, pp. 1- 20; Kinicke et. al, 2008; Simerson & Venn, 2006; Boleman & Deal, 1997).

Research holds that change agents consistently push for change, despite resistance, circumventing corrupt bureaucracy, reach strategic objectives because they are aligned to community and context. Research studies have shown that change agents need to be disciplined, firm, focused, trust themselves and others; trust their assessment to and remain focused to reach effective goals. Change agents step into their new position as catalyst from outside or from inside the organization. They might be consultants, trainers or research practitioners. They articulate a clear sustainable vision which challenges the core business and its stakeholders, yet the vision ties together the internal organization to its environmental, social, and financial benefits. To generate the vision, change agents may need to redefine complex problems in simple term, and are honest about the company's current position because they walk the talk, side-by-side with their employees. As agents of change, the change agent may work in partnership with new stakeholders maximizing company objectives using a system-wide approach that might potentially block older alliances (Nochur, 2010; Lunenberg, 2010; Holland, 2000).

Research shows that despite resistance to change because it represents breaking away from working patterns change agents have been effective. Change agents use positive communication on multiple communication channels to consistently reinforce that change is rewarding. They use a consistent set of key performance indicators to create association to opportunities of growth, development, and promotion inside the organization (Thoata, 2012; Scheele, 2010; Tyson, 2010; Miller, 2001).

Kotter's Eight Steps for Implementing Change might be seen from the perspective as a change agent who is a research specialist and/or a consultant (See Figure One below). The plan was developed from Kurt Lewin's Three Step Change Model of unfreezing, movement, and refreezing; however, Kotter incorporated underlying factors related to managing change effectively as a sense of urgency about the need to change, creating a coalition to manage change process, having a vision of change and effectively communicate it, removing obstacles that could impede the vision's achievement, providing short term achievable goals, and anchoring the changes into the culture because they may declare victory too soon.

Kotter further developed Lewin's process of change to provide leaders with a comprehensive guide to successfully implement change. Figure 1 below shows how leaders prepare for change from step 1--4; move towards change in step 5 while sustaining change from step 6--8.
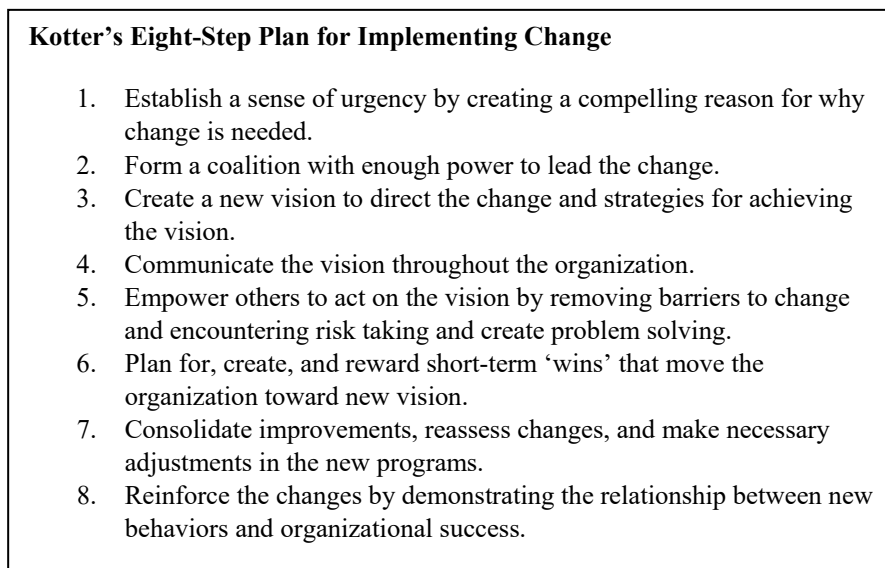
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**Kotter's Eight-Step Plan for Implementing Change**

1. Establish a sense of urgency by creating a compelling reason for why change is needed.
2. Form a coalition with enough power to lead the change.
3. Create a new vision to direct the change and strategies for achieving the vision.
4. Communicate the vision throughout the organization.
5. Empower others to act on the vision by removing barriers to change and encountering risk taking and create problem solving.
6. Plan for, create, and reward short-term 'wins' that move the organization toward new vision.
7. Consolidate improvements, reassess changes, and make necessary adjustments in the new programs.
8. Reinforce the changes by demonstrating the relationship between new behaviors and organizational success.

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Figure 1: Kotter's Eight-Step Plan for Implementation based on J. P. Kotter, Leading Change (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, (1996)

These eight steps can effectively improve the well being of organizations. Change agents need to embrace the appropriate mindset of collaborative work on real world problems, consistently reinforced.

# 3. Methodology

This section covers the purpose of the study, the research questions, the participants, the procedures used in the study, the research design, rubric, and analysis of data used.

The case study is a descriptive investigation of leadership in a local setting. The purpose of this case study is threefold: (1) to determine whether local leaders are perceived as change agents; (2) to determine whether change agents are perceived to lead without integrity; (3) to determine which leadership traits distinguish local leaders.

Research Questions:

- Research Question One: In your local work setting, do you believe that leaders are change agents?
- Research Question Two: In your local work setting, do you believe that your leaders lead without integrity?

The study included a sample size of 134 participants. 78 young men and 56 young women attending university courses participated in the study. The age range is between19-26. As employees in the business industry and as students in the School of Business, they were at a point where they had both pragmatic and theoretical knowledge of the concepts being assessed.

Given the nature of the study, a survey was personally constructed. Two questions were posed which were open- ended question. Each question required discussion and reflection. The survey was handed out in eight different classrooms. The participants were assured of the confidentiality related to professional surveys. They were given 20 minutes to respond. The participants were asked to be open, honest, and explicit in their discussion given their understanding of the external context.

The case study dealt with a localized context. The survey was designed by the researcher to include three parts related to the research questions. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected and to evaluate the participants' knowledge and awareness of local leadership.

# 4. Results and Discussion

The survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics to evaluate local leadership with respect to three research questions. With respect to the first research question, "In your local work setting, do you believe that leaders are change agents?", the results showed that 69 participants held that local leaders

were change agents whereas 65 of the participants held that local leaders were not change agents. The results of the open-ended question showed high levels of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2010). The participants were uncertain about the exact nature of their immediate context. Had they been part of the decision-making process, the participants would readily have said yes. However, leadership reflected power distance (Hofstede, 2010); their chief executive officer was positioned at the top of a very tall rigid hierarchy: most of the participants were not involved in participative structures nor active members in change management.

The reflections below serve to clarify the results drawn from research question one: small family business, don't change; local business leaders are people who cope with solutions but they make them in Japan; local leaders who change are rare; local leaders do not change companies, they think about themselves, but not about company; they are change agents; because leaders are, AC Holding is the Number One on market share; local leaders, creative ones are not here: they want to make profit, they want to make money; local leaders who are change agents go overseas and they earn a good salary; local leaders do not change here, they go outside; yes in my opinion local leaders are change agents like Ghandour (a local and leading food manufacturing company).

The reflections show that change was understood by the participants to include both initiating and sustain change. For the participants, change was perceived of as fundamental and systematic. They believed that leaders are important to organizations when they help their staff develop. "Local leaders are not change agents. They are stuck in the era of slavery and they think that employees are slaves that should not be promoted." The quality of collaboration between leader and follower seems to have had a profound effect on individuals because corrosive connections diminished participants' capacity to get their work done. The impact of corrosive communication seems to have severely affected the organizational effectiveness since its corrosiveness seems to have spread all across the local organization as was found by other researchers (Dutton, 2007, p.2).

Moreover, the reflections show that change agents have to produce results that satisfy not only top management but also improve efficiency and tighten control by transforming systems that have been in place for years as other researchers have shown (Tyson, 2010; Whybrow; 2010; Ford et. al, 2008). However, as one participant noted, "A lot of leaders are not change agents. They want to stay on the safe side and keep up their profits without engaging in

any kind of change and without understanding that change will help growth…. While a lot of leaders do engage in change and innovation…because they know its importance in the environment…. But few are these leaders."

Moreover, the reflections show that some of the local modern organizations that are an interacting network rather than the tall centralized bureaucracy have change agents who work on developing staff; furthermore, research shows that they work together, collaborating; everyone is on board (Covey et. al, 2008; Loehr & Schwartz, 003). However, other participants disagreed. As a participant aptly remarked, "In my opinion, local leaders are not working on the ability of employees to changing or improve the company to reach better objectives." Another put it, "No, they are not change agents. All they care about is themselves, their own benefit, careless about leadership."

The participant's reflections on local leaders perceived as change agents also clarifies how the uncertainty which surrounds them is part of the leaders' thinking process (Harrison, 2010). A student noted, "In my opinion, local leaders in small family businesses prefer to maintain and preserve old ways of doing things." The participants also seem to understand change not only on what it means inside the work context but also about its impact on the external forces of change and vice-versa as was noted by other researchers (Lazarus, 2010; Kinicke et. al, 2008; Karaevli, 2007). For example, with respect to the list of reflections shared, the participant said, "Yes, in my opinion, local leaders are change agents like in Ghandour (This is a local leading food manufacturing company that has become regional). This company is known for its cheap low-quality chocolate bars which we all eat; however, the company recently, headed by a new leader, started to produce high-quality dark-chocolate cookies for a new sector of the market, the customers who diet. Although this change is small, but it is still considered change."

Then, based on the results drawn from research question one, a good number of the participants were aware that many local leaders whether it was their friend, uncle or mother were importing a solution through a foreign conduit: somebody else's product or somebody else's service. It was "passive importation" (Mintzberg, 2010, p. 3) which may be the root of the localized situation. Leaders were adopting techniques, controls, and beliefs that came from a foreign change agent who was dealing with his/her localized problem. A participant put it nicely, "In my opinion, local leaders are always seeking change, but they bring it in from somewhere." Another said, "My friend is a change agent, and he has a very popular restaurant. We go there all the time:

great food, great multimedia system setup, and great design but all of is from America." Passive importation is not "indigenous" but a "marginal fix" (Prensky, 2016a; Mintzberg, 2010).

With respect to the second research question, "In your local work setting, do you believe that change agents lead without integrity" The participant's answer was a resounding "Yes." 82 % held that their local leader led without integrity. The participant learnt that leaders keep promises. Leaders give promises carefully and always follow through because they lead with "candor" (Welsh, 1990). However, the participants' context was quite different. They learnt that effective leadership/people management during change builds and sustains high quality connectivity that has a strong impact on them as employees and organizations where they work. They learnt that regular communication, consistent communication, and positive communication (1) enhances psychological and physical health, enables learning, and task engagement and (2) facilitates cooperation, coordination, attachment, organizational culture, learning, and adaptation. Change becomes easy and nonthreatening (Lazarus, 2010; Strachan, 2010; Dutton, 2003, p. 20). What participants perceived inside the organization were leaders who made promises they did not fulfill; leaders stealing competitors' ideas. Some other reflections elaborated on the corrosive communication inside many organizations are noted below:

- No, local leaders are not honest. They steal their competitor's ideas. Yes our leader takes credit for others ideas.
- No, they are not honest because look at the debt and the loans and the financial situation
- No, they are not because look at how many companies going bankrupt.
- No integrity …where is the government…where is the infrastructure?
- No integrity here because there is no change…no improvement over a long time
- Only theft…

As can be seen, little integrity is witnessed in many of the local organizations. A concluding reflection drawn from the participants' survey relates integrity to change agent's personality in the work settings. "It all depends on the leaders' characteristics, attitudes, values, integrity, and culture which they live in and whether the change motivates him/her. They need to cope with the change. Because society is changing its technology, leaders are afraid to make mistakes. Afraid they will lose their jobs, positions, and so in fact afraid of future in company and whether change is positive for the whole organization." The

participants' analysis is so accurate.  Most local leaders do not seem to serve with humility

Pope Francis endorsed leaders to serve with humility, but most local change agents are not humble nor dignified nor courageous.  Nonetheless, a few participants witnessed change that reflected integrity. One participant remarked, "My mother is a leader in a small shop.  Every day, she does thing differently!" Another said, "My uncle brings change into his company.  He goes to Europe to international exhibitions and learns.  He brings ideas home."

"Real world accomplishments" are led by "good capable people" (Prensky, 2016a), and our students are those people.

## 5.  **Conclusions**

To conclude, let me return to the introduction and ask did rethinking leadership in the local context gain meaningful knowledge? The results reflected that the participants showed a heightened level of responsiveness in their local context.
It showed that for the new generation of work cohorts, change meant initiating and sustaining change collaboratively across Kotter's eight steps.  Furthermore, it showed that millennials realized that local business leaders who are agents of change were not going through the steps of decision making or real-world problem solving to uncover the root of their problem and design a solution for it. Most local leaders were using marginal fixes, worked on their own rather than collaboratively. They were passive importers.

Moreover, leaders who were change agents were being innovative globally. Most participants held that leaders who are creative or innovative were engaging in change regionally or internationally in Saudi Arabia, in the Gulf nations, in Europe, Asia, Australia or the United States; however, the local leaders who were change agents built personal wealth or were passive.
Furthermore, the participants seemed to be upset about the shortcomings of their leaders, especially because they consistently practiced dishonesty. "My boss keeps on promising to do things to improve our work.  Then nothing gets done! I am sick of it. Leaders will never change!  Look at the country."
Despite the leadership problems perceived, the millennials seemed to have taken it into their stride. "We are different from our leaders." Young millennials, high-tech, connected, multi-tasking, and upbeat about life, have stepped outside the problem and see the world based on principles. The conclusions drawn from the

study are that the millennials promise to be leaders who lead change with integrity.

The descriptive case has a number of limitations starting with the oversimplification of the research design to evaluate the complex issue of leading change with integrity in developing countries. The study undertook to take only initial steps to better understand perceptions of the change process from the individual perspective rather than organizational. The survey implemented had a simple structure given the nature of the case study. Furthermore, the sample was a convenience one. It was small and not sufficiently representative of the local population in terms of organizational demographics.

As a practitioner-researcher, much work lies ahead in terms of understanding change and change agents in the local work context. Additional research needs to be undertaken to broaden understanding of how leadership in the local context uses Kotter's Eight-Step Plan to lead with integrity as it implements effective change.

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