

Leading Change: What the Experts Say

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Abstract

The competencies of adaptability and flexibility during times of organizational turbulence, often referred to collectively as “leading change” are critical to strategic leaders. While no conclusive blueprint exists for navigating leadership challenges in a rapidly changing environment, there are several standard works on the topic. John Kotter’s *Leading Change*, Peter Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline*, and Bill Joiner and Stephen Joseph’s *Leadership Agility* are among the most widely circulated on the topic and represent a basic primer for the senior public sector leader experiencing a rapidly evolving work environment.

Of the most important competencies associated with leadership at the strategic level, the most contentious is “Leading Change.” This competency isn’t contentious because anyone disagrees that it is a critical capability for strategic leaders. Rather, it is contentious because the means to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to accomplish “Leading Change” are the most elusive.

There have been a number of books and even developmental courses designed exclusively to assist senior leaders in building competencies for leading organizations through periods of change. The most notable and widely read is certainly John P. Kotter’s *Leading Change* from the Harvard Business School Press. Kotter’s message, in summary, is that change programs are far more likely to fail than succeed because organizations are **overmanaged** and **underled**. The skills we all have used to manage organizations throughout our careers—organizing, staffing, planning, budgeting, problem solving, and the like—are insufficient during times of great change.

Kotter focuses specifically on eight steps needed to lead an organization through change. These steps, coincidentally, are very much aligned with the established Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) for our public sector leaders. In fact, Kotter almost seems to have developed these steps with the ECQs and their corresponding competencies in mind. As most are comfortable with and accomplished in the other ECQs of Leading People, Results Driven, Business Acumen, and Building Coalitions and Communication, Kotter’s eight steps can serve as a familiar roadmap for navigating change for public sector leaders.

For those who may not have read Kotter’s *Leading Change*, his eight steps are:

- Establish a sense of urgency

- Create the guiding coalition
- Develop a vision and strategy
- Communicate the change vision
- Empower broad-based action
- Generate short-term wins
- Consolidate gains and produce more change
- Institutionalize new approaches in the culture

These steps are meant to be implemented sequentially and demand skills that are not easily developed. Many argue that such a prescriptive, step-by-step procedure is naïve at best and counterproductive at worst. While I do not subscribe to this view, I do feel there is a need to augment any professional plan of action with rigorous **personal development** before plans are set to motion. Such skills can and should be the focus of our formal and informal education as public sector leaders.

Since Kotter's work is filled with sound advice on innovation, strategic thinking, vision, and external awareness, I suggest that beyond embracing Kotter's blueprint for leading change, that we all carefully consider the leadership competencies of **flexibility** and **resilience**. These two characteristics, perhaps more so than any others, form the intellectual foundation for any strategic leader interested in change. Personal flexibility and resilience are functional prerequisites to any plan of action.

Within the Department of Defense we are particularly driven to develop the characteristics of flexibility and resilience. The current operating environment in which the military finds itself is in a constant state of change. Our forces are not limited to the traditional battlefield. Our roles and missions in the post-9/11 world are being redefined

for us as we prosecute the fight. Full-spectrum operations are the norm and will continue well into this century. It is rare that we ourselves are given problems that allow for clear, well-defined solutions. The problems we are presented with today require a type of adaptive, learning agility uncommon during the Cold War. In short, the Department's strategic leaders must take the competency of flexibility to a whole new level of performance.

How do we go about this personal development? Where do we begin? Well, frankly, the bad news is there are no shortcuts. The good news is that the experience of our strategic leaders has already laid the groundwork, now it's a matter of focusing their attention. Just as Kotter provides us a broad plan of action for leading change, there are some very accomplished people researching and writing about flexibility and resilience. I would like to introduce you to just a few of them.

In the study of the quality of flexibility or adaptability, the true giant is certainly Peter Senge of MIT's Sloan School of Management. Dr. Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline* introduced the world to the learning organization. It remains a standard in the field of organizational development. However, like Kotter, Senge charts a somewhat prescriptive course for organizational change. His systems thinking method is about solving problems, not personal development. Chances are you already have *The Fifth Discipline* in your professional or personal library.

With this in mind, I commend to you a book that focuses on personal development. Bill Joiner and Stephen Joseph's 2007 book *Leadership Agility: Five Levels of Mastery for Anticipating and Initiating Change* compliments nicely Kotter's *Leading Change* and Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*. Joiner and Joseph take a very

personal approach to considering the attribute of flexibility. They walk the reader through a developmental path that can be generalized to fit almost any situation. Their recommendations cover everything from interpersonal conversations to leading teams to agility in leading organizational change. Most importantly they offer specific techniques for preparing for the environment.

There are also giants in the study of resilience. Dr. Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, and former President of the American Psychological Association, is among those who have focused on practical techniques for making leaders better. His most recent book *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* isn't as touchy-feely, and thereby impractical for government leaders as its title suggests. Dr. Seligman's approach is to address qualities such as resilience holistically. We all are concerned with work-life balance and Dr. Seligman has recommendations that serve needs across every dimension of our personal and professional lives. More to the point of resilience, his Positive Psychology Network has spawned a generation of researchers dedicated to making more effective leaders and organizations.

Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatte, like Seligmann, teach psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Their recent book *The Resilience Factor* is designed to improve the capacity to handle the surprises and setbacks associated with change. Where Kotter and Senge focus on knowledge, skills, and abilities, Reivitch and Joseph offer solutions for preparing attitude. Since, apparently, personal and organizational development demands lists, *The Resilience Factor* will not disappoint. Reivitch and Joseph help the reader through a seven step program on confronting adversity, avoiding

thinking traps, examining deeply held beliefs, challenging those beliefs, ensuring perspective, eliminating emotion, and changing thought patterns. These are suggestions as much about the development of character as about managerial technique. It is this approach that makes *The Resilience Factor* a valuable addition to any senior leader's professional reading program.

Now before you simply chalk all this up as another pitch for organizational improvement and pop psychology books, it must be said that the readings suggested are really just tools that can be used to make you more effective in the core competency of leading change. They aren't a panacea or direct solution to the challenges you face in your organization. However, they are highly influential in the private sector for a reason. Each is built on extensive, credible research and has been tested in organizations not completely unlike your own. For anyone interested in reading further into these topics, a brief bibliography on leading change has been provided for your consideration.

A Brief Bibliography on Leading Change

Joiner, Bill and Josephs, Stephen, *Leadership Agility: Five Levels of Mastery for Anticipating and Initiating Change*. (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007).

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Reivich, Karen and Shatte, Martin, *The Resilience Factor: 7 Keys to Finding Your Inner Strength and Overcoming Life's Hurdles*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2002).

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Senge, Peter M., *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

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Dr. Joseph J. Thomas is the Lakefield Family Foundation Distinguished Military Professor of Leadership at the United States Naval Academy and past Director of the John A. Lejeune Leadership Institute, Marine Corps University. The author of numerous articles on the subjects of command and control, military training and education, and leadership, his published books include, *Leadership Education for Marines* (UMI Press, 2000), *Leadership Embodied* (The US Naval Institute Press, 2005, 2007), *Naval Leadership Capstone* (McGraw-Hill, 2006), and *Leadership Explored* (AcademX, 2007). Joe's education includes an M.S.Sc. from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, a M.S.S. from the US Army War College, and Ph.D. from George Mason University.