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His tale of penguins on a melting iceberg carries relevance for guiding change in the public schools

The need for organizations to adapt nimbly in a fast-paced global society is a given. But ask any education leader or business person how to do that in a way that truly drives the organization forward and you may get silence--or worse, a weary look that bespeaks a grievous experience.

Leaders know all too well that the gap between a new idea and its successful adoption can be enormous.

John Kotter, the Konosuke Matsushita professor of leadership emeritus at Harvard Business School and author of some 15 books on leadership and change, is particularly familiar with the problem. Figuring out how to bridge that chasm in a way that transforms an organization's daily dealings has been his decades-long passion.

Arguably the world's foremost student of how organizations can shed old habits and create new ways of thinking, he has seen firsthand the costs of badly conceived change--from not being able to reach an important goal to alienating or burning out staff. And he is determined to share some corrective measures with every member of an organization--reaching beyond those who sit at the top to include those who don't attend business seminars or browse the business shelves in bookstores.

Points Via Penguins

Kotter's perseverance has paid off. *Our Iceberg Is Melting*, his latest book that's now a best-seller, is itself a creative twist on the business-wisdom genre that many people would not even consider opening. Most notably, its protagonists are penguins. Their adventures are related through a fable--a memorable little footnote-free saga covered in some 140 large-print, cartoon-filled pages.

This slim tome is really easy to read. Left out on a lunchroom table, it will probably soon be picked up by students and adults lured by its playful cover and propelled by its colorful (and instructive) illustrations. What will keep these readers turning the pages is the familiarity of some of the penguins' problems and personal interactions--and the wisdom of how they go about solving them.

Our Iceberg Is Melting lays out Kotter's eight principles for guiding change through the story of a penguin colony whose home--you guessed it--is melting. But they face a very common problem: Not everyone believes there is cause for worry--or feels any urgency to probe the development more deeply. As Kotter, director of the Global Leadership Initiative at Harvard, and his co-author, Holger Rathgeber, say in their introduction, "All too often people and organizations don't see the need for change. They don't correctly identify what to do, or successfully make it happen, or make it stick. Businesses don't. School systems don't. Nations don't."

The problem is not one of smarts. Smart people fail all the time, Kotter notes. What matters is responding in a way calibrated to bring colleagues on board and yield enough short-term successes to foster long-term progress. "All of us encounter the basic issues in the story," the

authors write. "Few of us encounter highly effective ways of dealing with those issues."

Teamwork is an essential part of the tale. "The authors strongly believe that the world needs much more action from a broader range of people--action that is informed, committed and inspired to help us all in an era of increasing change," Kotter and Rathgeber write.

Crisis Strategies

Since the publication of the book, numerous organizations have taken to sharing the fable and using it as a springboard for discussion and action. Indeed, the Kotter-Rathgeber collaboration began after Rathgeber, inspired by the penguin illustration on the cover of Kotter's earlier book *Leading Change*, created a training exercise based on a penguin colony. And if you don't think people loosen up when they channel their sentiments and ideas through penguins, check out uiwui.ouricebergismelting.com.

Kotter shared his views in a recent interview with *The School Administrator*.

What are the key issues facing educators today?

KOTTER: In my judgment, of the issues facing the United States, K-12 education is No. 1; health care, particularly as it relates to the explosion in Medicare and Medicaid, is No. 2; and terrorism is No. 3. Education is No. 1 because all the data suggest that if we don't have people who can handle the new economy, it's going to have awful consequences for all of us, for our standard of living, especially if you compare what's happening with other countries.

[The lack of education in some places] also is widening the distance between the affluent and the less affluent, if you compare the best schools and the worst schools, and it raises deeply moral questions because of the latter. And when you get enough distance between the rich and the poor, it affects democracy in very bad ways. So it's a big deal, and anybody who contributes to helping deal with that is among the most important people around these days.

Schools have faced considerable top-down change initiatives in recent years. Does this work?

KOTTER: The fundamental pattern we've found in the most successful cases is that real change that happens with some significance and with a minimum of anguish and costs and actually produces results that people are happy with follows a pattern. ... It has eight steps, going from creating a sense of urgency; putting together the right team to guide the change; having them work with others to get some clarity around the vision and the strategy for movement; communicating that to relevant people so they buy in; getting obstacles out of the way so they're empowered to make something happen; making sure you get short-term successes to build momentum, silence critics and give less power to skeptics; and then using that to speed things up, not slow things down. Pounding around, never letting up until you get the vision of what you wanted--and then securing it and institutionalizing it enough so it sinks into the culture so the winds of tradition will not blow it back to where it started.

One way people try to increase urgency is to force crises. One form of forced crisis is that the [people] on top all of a sudden say, "You have to do this or that." And the distance between the current reality and "that" is so big that it doesn't look like the current system could possibly do it--and crisis!

Crisis strategies can be effective but are very tricky because crises, instead of creating urgency, can just as easily create anger and anxiety. When they produce anger and anxiety, and no one can convert that shock ... into a sense of personal urgency--I've got to get off my fanny and do something--the process does not get off to a good start. That inevitably means it's going to roll along with more frustration, and it probably will never achieve what the dreamers hoped it would achieve. And there will be great pressure to stop it along the way.

Schools often operate with a somewhat perpetual sense of crisis. Can this eight-step process work within such a setting?

KOTTER: I've had superintendents e-mail me, come up to me at Harvard, come up to me when I gave a talk at the superintendents' yearly meeting last year, and thank me--which is hilarious because they did all the work--because they used [my book] *Leading Change* as a road map. And they perceived they had made a leap, and it was paying off and they were very proud and very excited.

Once you've heard that more than one or two times, it's at least some evidence that people can use that model within a K-12 setting. I've gotten e-mails from a few principals, but the face-to-face thank yous have come from superintendents. They just do it. They figure out within their system: How can I really get urgency up? Not complacency. How can I make sure I get the right teams up and running? How do we get clarity of vision?

Creating Urgency

Do you see specific modifications needed for school systems?

KOTTER: In the details, it needs to be modified across industries, across companies, across sectors--schools, businesses--and across cultures. At the level of abstraction--no, I had a huge audience of public-sector people in Abu Dhabi in September wanting to listen to this because they were convinced it was so applicable. Different culture, different sector, different nation, same stuff. ... One of the biggest defenses you get against any new idea is "it's not applicable here--we're different!" You will hear it anywhere. It's not unique to school systems.

What if a leader believes strongly in an initiative but can't persuade those around him or her of its merits?

KOTTER: In some situations, it does require a lot of conversation to get buy-in around a direction for change. In some situations, the way you play the game is you don't try to change the whole thing at once. You find some subset where there is urgency, where it isn't impossible to get some agreement on vision, and you run it through to the point where you get some short-term wins, which is then evidence that will start to filter off to other places that maybe there's something here that we ought to think about.

Things get started in lots of ways. Everything from the top person--he gets it started, she gets it started, boom--to people buried in the hierarchy. But they're passionate and they figure out how to influence someone above them and get them whipped up. It's urgency-building, one person at a time, until there's enough of a coalition at the top that is strong enough to make things move.

How important is competition to fomenting change?

KOTTER: The data from economists are very clear. Monopolies always eventually get themselves in trouble. The poster child is IBM. It had 90 percent market share but ended up on its knees. Why? It didn't change. There was no pressure. [IBM] didn't feel it economically. On the other hand, you can have so much competition that you get people playing games that get nasty. So the two ends on the spectrum don't work. Monopolies don't work; infinite competition doesn't work. It's somewhere in the middle.

How would you characterize an organization that has truly transformed itself?

KOTTER: A good short-term win is something that is visible and unambiguous. [It's a situation where] two people are not going to look at the same information and one says, "That is a great win," and the other says, "No, it's not." That's the litmus test, and ideal [wins] are visible. That's the acid test--a reasonable number of people look at things and they'd have to say, "That's better!"

In terms of what the ideal transformed school would look like, it's got to have some of the same characteristics of hospitals, government, auto companies, and that is, that you go beyond one leap. You become skilled at continuous change. It's not just episodic. It becomes continuous, which means the sense of urgency is always kept up there--there's always this built-in capacity to throw together strong teams and focus on something.

People have learned something already--it's built into the system about how you create some clarity of vision about trying something new to deal with an issue. There are great communication channels and systems that are available to make it easier to get the word out. There aren't so many obstacles built into the system that disempower people. ... In general, people are change-skilled. That's the ultimate model. You get enough of those, and you have a great 21[st]-century organization.

You get as many people as possible who understand they have a role to play. It's not just the superintendent's job or the principal's job; it is our job, too. We'll do different things, depending upon who we are, what we're good at and what our job is. In our little penguin story, we went out of our way to make sure that one of the chicks comes in and plays a critical leadership role. Well, that mirrors the reality. The more people you can get who get it, feel responsible for it, know something about it, the better.

Scanning for Ideas

So does a good school leader need to get out of the way at times?

KOTTER: It depends. More often than not, change brought about among a few people [who are] weak within the system can be stopped. Ultimately, you have to have a group behind it that's powerful enough that they can't be steamrolled.

That doesn't mean a principal shouldn't be constantly scanning for interesting ideas from anywhere. But just saying to that first-year teacher, "Go for it," well, that won't get you anywhere. But maybe you say to that first-year teacher, "Amy and Fred have been thinking similarly, so go talk to them." Amy and Fred are the department heads and someone else, and because they all click, they reinforce each other, urgency goes up, and the principal gets on board and becomes part of team that starts driving that.

And in a funny way, the story started at the bottom of the chain, but it doesn't stay there. It generates urgency upward, and the team that's put together has enough strength to make something happen.

Can change hurt people?

KOTTER: Remember, with a bad change vision, you can take people off cliffs.

We get this great idea of teaching English by the "Blop" method. And everyone gets whipped up on that, and we have it institutionalized. Unfortunately, the Blop method is terrible, so they've succeeded in bringing about a change that produces bad results. That happens at companies, and I can't believe it doesn't happen at schools.

In some schools, leaders feel buffeted by the change du jour. Change becomes negative. How do you get past that?

KOTTER: One way is honesty. Stand up and say, "If we look at the past 10 years, we've been through this flavor of the month a hundred times. It's produced more chaos and pain than it's produced results. It's insane to go through this anymore. Let's try a different way."

Some people might be grumpy about that, as they were one of the failures and they don't want to admit they were one of the failures. But clever people who feel a sense of urgency to deal with a situation, it's amazing what they can come up with.

In our town, there was one elementary school that was different if you looked at the outcomes.

... Are they being allowed to opt out of centralized mandates? No. That's interesting. Did someone give them a lot of money? No. That's interesting. Oh, they must have all the kids from rich, well-educated families. "No. Better building. No. What's the difference? [My wife said], the principal. This guy was just determined that he was going to make this a good school.

Some people can make things happen under the most ridiculous circumstances. That isn't to say that if you're trying to run one of these schools, with mandates coming from everywhere, the job isn't hell, but to say it's impossible? If you look around, you find these stories. It's not impossible.

You talk about the role of feeling differently, not just thinking differently. Why is feeling so important?

KOTTER: One of the great expressions that has stuck in the culture is "winning the hearts and minds of people." That tends to be associated with making big things happen. And two things are interesting in that phrase. One is, it's not winning the minds of people. And second, isn't it interesting what order the two words are in?

The problem is, professional education ... focuses, at least explicitly, 90 percent on the mind piece and 10 percent or less on the heart piece. All great teachers aren't like that; they're usually so passionate about things that part of the reason the kids learn so much is that it's an emotional thing. Ultimately, you get people moving, at whatever stage you are at, as much if not more through creating experiences, creating compelling visuals that impact emotions, which in turn impact behavior.

Thinking is anything that goes through our conscious heads. It's any kind of logic--it's me simply saying here is the evidence. Anything that is conscious mind to conscious mind, information flow to information flow. ... But a lot of what seems like data presentation--the impact isn't the data, it's the presentation. A guy makes a speech, and ostensibly the speech is to give information about what some other school did, or the statistics in the rise in grade reading levels.

But that isn't what has an impact--it's how he or she does it. It's the details of when it's done, how it's done, who does it, whether there are visuals or just a person standing behind a podium, little jokes. All that creates an experience that isn't just the data. And even data can be used in a way that catches attention. For example: [The data are] so surprising that maybe there is a part of the mind that says, goodness gracious, this is not what I expected. But there is part of the emotional system that is more powerful that is going "What?" And it's the "what" that starts to mobilize behavior.

Here's the problem. All too often, when people design things--here is how I'm going to talk to this person, set up this meeting, send out this information--the way they're consciously thinking about it, it's too much one-sided on the information. ... If the paradigm is beaten into you and it's 80-20 or 90-10 on the think dimension, we know that's not where the great successes come from.

Energizing Employees

Can you give some examples of how this relates to a school leader?

KOTTER: It could be figuring out ways they have interactions with schools doing innovative things. In industry, there are thousands of ways they show this. Someone just wrote me an e-mail of how he finally convinced some of his managers to go visit a factory in a noncompeting industry, which is why it was possible. He told them about it back at work, but it was their actual seeing it and the experience of listening and seeing the people and seeing the facility that left them coming back for the first time saying, "Gee, you know, maybe there's something here."

How do you energize not only particular workers but a whole community?

KOTTER: Don't get people defensive. Convince people that you want to make things better and show them some data. We want it better and as fast as possible. I'm going to do this, and this is why I need support. If it were done right, I bet you'd get part of the audience up there afterward volunteering. ... It's creating experience, but injecting reality into it as well. Sometimes parents think their school is fine because they have nothing to measure it against.

What if you promote your vision for change, but at the two-year point, things aren't working. How do you tell if it's the vision that needs changing or the methodology of getting there?

KOTTER: If you've done it right, and you've got the right group of people that are in front or behind the scenes pushing it, they'll figure it out. This isn't "Star Wars." The reasons people can't figure it out is that they have different agendas. Most of the time, reasonable people can look at something and if they're at all bought in to trying to make something better, even if they're not quite sure the vision is right, they can look at something and say, "you know, I think that suggests we have to modify our thinking." Or, "boy, this is exactly what you'd predict."

Things falter almost always because of Step 1 (creating a sense of urgency). People don't get that right, and that makes Step 2 more difficult, which makes Step 3 more difficult, and by the time you get to Step 6, it can be just this horrendous thing. And trying to cope with this kind of morass, mess, at Step 6 is really, really tough, unless you can say, "let's rethink; maybe we need to go back beyond the vision. Maybe we didn't have enough people who were committed and excited enough to even want to take the time ... to work together as a team, not just as a committee."

So Step 1, at its core, is getting people to say, "Boy, there's an issue here." It could be as big as the school is failing, or it could be more narrow. [For example], if you compare us to other people there's something wrong in the way we teach math and the sciences. ... People say, this is an issue, No. 1, and No. 2, I have to do something to help. I feel this personal urge to say, I want to help. If you don't have enough of that going, it's more difficult the further you go down the process.

People fool themselves [on whether urgency is established] all the time. They overestimate urgency, they underestimate complacency, they underestimate anger and anxiety--it happens constantly. That's the subject of my next book (due in September). The title is *Urgency: How to Overcome Complacency and Make Things Happen*.

You spoke to the annual conference of the American Association of School Administrators last March, and at the end, you got choked up in recalling educators who influenced you.

KOTTER: I'm getting choked up right now. Education was my ticket out.

I lived in Jackson, Mich., best known for its federal prison. And [there was a] combination [of people who influenced me]. Two teachers in high school, both oddballs--they didn't toe the line but were just inspiring and helpful. And a school superintendent.

Somehow, I'm trying to remember, I fell into him; something led me to him. He just helped provide a worldview that went well past Jackson and Michigan. Those one-on-one couple of interactions, in retrospect, were very important.

[The superintendent] would not have shared this view unless he had a sense of urgency. And my teachers had a sense "that if education was at level X, they wanted to teach at level 3X. They wanted to send people out empowered to take the next step. Who cared if the school norm was here [at a certain level]--that was irrelevant.

ADDED MATERIAL

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AASA Training on Kotter's Change Process

Based on John Kotter's best-selling works on organizational change, AASA will offer a certification workshop at association headquarters in Arlington, Va., on June 4-5.

The workshop certifies participants to facilitate other leaders in Kotter's eight-step approach to leading organizational change.

The two-day certification workshop, titled "Leading Bold Change," will equip participants to create a sense of urgency around needed changes; identify team-member traits to assemble leadership teams capable of guiding change; create a vision of the future that is compelling and helps people focus on the benefits of change; develop communications plans and key messages that generate buy-in; identify and remove obstacles that prevent people from taking action; create consistent small wins to sustain momentum; know when it's time to push harder; and develop strategies for instilling a new culture based upon new ways of acting.

The workshop has been organized by the AASA Institute for Leadership Development and Systems Thinking. More information and registration forms can be accessed at www.aasa.org/leadership/LBC.

Kotter is a professor of leadership emeritus at Harvard Business School and author of *Leading Change* and *Our Iceberg Is Melting*.

Harvard University Professor John Kotter is an expert on managing change in an organization.