A MODEL OF MOTIVATION FOR FACILITATING SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

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When faced with organizational or personal change, there will be those who immediately see change as positive and actively embrace it in anticipation of the rewards that follow. Others, initially fearing that not changing is a greater threat, will also accept change. However, when managing change, we also deal with personality types who reject change because they perceive it as a greater threat to their status quo or because internal conflict and uncertainty inhibits them from accepting change. It is proposed that by understanding approach and avoidance personality traits, described in terms of neuroscience and Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory, we can explain why individuals accept or reject change. Based on this understanding, a new model for motivating sustainable change is presented for use by change practitioners to build into existing strategies. An example of applying this model to an existing strategy—in this case, Dr. John Kotter’s eight-step change process—is then presented as evidence of the model’s worth.
Introduction

Organizations grow, shrink, merge, and acquire. People manage, lead, learn, and are transformed. Change happens around us every day as we pursue goals or are swept up in a wave of organizational change. Change can be easy or it can be hard; some easily approach and embrace change, while others avoid or outright reject it. As leaders, we find ourselves motivating teams and facilitating change that we hope will stick. But what makes our success so uncertain? Research carried out by Dr. John Kotter (Kotter, 1996; 2002; 2006; 2008; 2013) and surveys carried out by McKinsey & Company (Aiken & Scott, 2009) indicate that 70% of all major organizational change efforts fail. The reasons why this is so may lie in reviewing familiar change processes through a neuroscience lens. We argue here that this fresh perspective will help change practitioners understand why individuals approach and embrace change, avoid and reject it, or why others freeze like a deer in the headlights, not knowing which way to turn.

The works of John Kotter have exposed people to successful change in organizations with his eight-step process for leading change, avoiding failure and “help[ing] organizations succeed in an ever-changing world” (Kotter, 2013). Initially presented in Leading Change (Kotter, 1996), as eight common errors explaining why change efforts fail, Kotter reframed his list of “mistakes” as tips for success in a change initiative and presented them in great detail through a lens of leadership and process management. A number of organizations have experienced the effects of this eight-step process with varying levels of success (Kotter & Cohen, 2012). Though success depends on many factors which vary from organization to organization, the role of the leader consistently has a significant impact on the change process, because a leader’s beliefs and mindsets drive his or her approach, implying a strong role for expectations in motivating change (Higgs, 2010). Using that notion as our starting point, we will first introduce findings from neuroscience and psychology which describe why certain behaviors derail the change process. Then, we will apply the constructs from a model grounded in approach-avoidance theory and neuroscience to Kotter’s eight steps and highlight practical guidance for change agents.
The Neuroscience of Change

How we react to change is affected by the way our brains are wired, which is in large part driven by our past experiences. Human evolution has determined the basic structure of the human brain, but there are also substantial behavioral differences that are stable over time which occur between individuals from the same environments (McNaughton & Corr, 2008). If we can understand from neuroscience how this variation gives rise to certain behaviors when individuals are faced with change, we may be able to lead change by tailoring our change messages to an individual’s traits to motivate them to affect the desired change.

In communicating change requirements, the sender encodes a message in a language and medium expected to be understood by the receiver. This message, received by our sensory inputs, passes through the central nervous system to the brain to be decoded and acted on. One of the first areas to receive sensory signals is the limbic system, where the amygdala, reacting to the emotional content of the decoded message, may prepare our body to fight or run if needed by altering our biochemistry. Signals continue to spread from neuron to neuron through the actions of hormones and neurotransmitters to other brain areas where memories are stored to communicate and combine to add physical and emotional responses, which precede any possible conscious thought (Kandel, 2006). This tidal wave of action passing through different parts of the brain eventually reaches the prefrontal cortex (PFC)—the executive controller of our working memory—where it is evaluated on the basis of our internal traits and stored memories (Knudsen, 2007), thus contributing to future thoughts and emotions as we project and transfer our past memories onto new thoughts to match our expectations, needs, and beliefs (Richo, 2008). What we perceive as real, which includes not just a representation of the stimulus world but also that which our psyche adds to or subtracts from the representation as it is translated into new actions and memories, gives rise to our own brain’s unique reconstruction of the external world (Kandel, 2006; Klein, 2007).

By the time conscious thought and decision making is possible, our brain may have already decided on an initial course of action. In the case of change, one challenge is that any emotion-triggered action may be counter to the new desired behavior and must be overcome. Research has also shown that activity in the septo-hippocampal system (S-HS), implicated in stress responses associated with punishment and non-reward (Gray & MNCaughton, 2007) and the PFC, linked to goal directed decision-making (Houser, Kurzban, & Xiao, 2011), contribute substantially to brain-based systems which control an individual’s response to change. Dominant activity in the left PFC is linked with behavior that drives individuals towards a reward. Such individuals are said to have a motivational system which reflects personality traits for activation behaviors (Amodio, et al., 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Rock, 2009a). Alternatively, right-side PFC dominance may instead result in an inhibiting avoidance response as the default personality trait (Amodio, et al., 2008; Wright, Hardie, & Wilson 2008).

Reward approach and punishment avoidance are two complex processes which involve many biological systems within the brain. As such, there have been numerous behavioral studies on these approach-avoidance behaviors from which theories and scales to explain and measure individual differences of personality have emerged. Perhaps the most influential is a theory proposed by Jeffrey Gray describing behaviors which are thought to be governed by separate approach and avoidance systems within the brain (Carver & White, 1994; Ferris et al., 2011; Gray, 1982; Smillie, 2008; Smillie, Jackson, & Dalgleish, 2006). Gray’s revision of his theory in 2000 (Gray & McNaughton), now known as the revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (r-RST), suggests that individual differences in approach-avoidance traits are affected by three systems (Corr, 2008; Jackson, 2009):

1. The Behavioral Approach System (BAS), which comprises personality traits of optimism, reward-orientation, and impulsiveness, consistent with extroversion;
2. The Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS), which is responsible for the resolution of goal conflict through the assessment of uncertainty and risk using input from memory and the environment;
3. The Fight-Flight-Freeze System (FFFS), which is responsible for mediating reactions to all aversive stimuli, including fear, to reduce the difference between threat and safety.

r-RST studies show that these systems are complex and results will vary due to a combination of the level of threat and the sensitivity of the individual, both of which can be described in terms of defensive direction and distance. The direction may be positive or negative (approach or avoid) and relates to the perceived level of threat (i.e., a higher threat is perceived as being closer by a highly sensitive individual [Corr, 2008]). The resulting approach-avoidance responses due to an individual’s sensitivity and the perceived level of threat are described in Figure 1. We see that a highly sensitive individual, represented at A, experiences a more negative reaction than would an insensitive one, at B, who responds differently to the same level of threat (Corr, 2008).
Another example, which demonstrates that r-RST is not a simple dichotomy of approach-avoidance or fight-flight, is where the absence of punishment is seen as positive (Figure 1, C) or where the omission of a reward is interpreted as a negative event (Figure 1, D) (Corr, 2008).

Applying the Neuroscience

However complex our physiological process and the explanations given to them may be, researchers and practitioners working in many fields are beginning to find ways to apply results from neuroscience studies as evidence-based, “brain-friendly” strategies to manage and lead change. One such researcher is Elliot Berkman (2012) who has proposed a practical application where, by matching the context of messages with approach or avoidance motivating language, it may be possible to facilitate the desired behavior. For someone with an approach bias, a message featuring an approach-motivational element that reduces the distance to gaining a reward is expected to be more persuasive. For example, the statement, “We can be more competitive by using the latest technology systems and software, so we will be implementing a program to upgrade our technology platforms,” frames the targeted behavior (upgrading technology) in terms of its potential reward (be more competitive, and maybe get a pay rise, keep my job, etc.). Conversely, for someone with an avoidance bias, a message featuring an avoidance-motivational element (e.g., focusing on a loss or punishment) is expected to be more persuasive. For example, the statement, “We will be upgrading our technology platforms; if we don’t, we will lose our competitive advantage, because we do not have the latest systems and software,” frames the behavior in terms of a potential loss (losing competitive advantage, continuing anxiety using obsolete systems, losing my job, etc.). A high-level positive corporate message written for management and shareholders may work to motivate highly sensitive, approach-oriented individuals, but those spread across the spectrum of approach-avoidance personalities will interpret things based on their personal bias and give more weight to goals that are consistent with their preferred goal framing. The language we use needs to increase the distance from perceived negative consequences and shorten the distance to the positive reward in ways that avoid internal goal conflict. We can reduce internal conflict by creating an atmosphere of curiosity that triggers neural activity in anticipation of a reward (Kang, et al., 2009), rather than directly activating an avoidance bias by artificially creating a Machiavellian atmosphere where fear is a necessary activator of cultural change (McGuire & Hutchings, 2006). When change programs are rolled out, we could add to our messages the questions, “What will happen if we do this?” and “What would happen if we don’t do this?” to balance both sides and trigger curiosity.

Another pioneer in the practical application of neuroscience to leadership development, David Rock (2008), proposes that avoidance mechanisms may be influenced by considering differences in the way we perceive personal status, goal certainty, role autonomy, our social relationships, and our sense of fairness. Rock’s SCARF® model aims to provide us with ways to raise conscious awareness to these interactions and, to act in ways to reduce the threats that imbalances in these elements may cause (Rock, 2008). The SCARF® model is useful to consider here because it provides ways of describing both positive and negative outcomes, due to organizational change initiatives, which are likely to be detected and therefore acted on, as opposed to subconscious effects due to r-RST.
Status

When our sense of status—where we perceive ourselves to be in our work, social, or family hierarchy—is increased, the reward pathways in the brain become active and dopamine levels increase (Rock, 2008). A reduction in status can occur very easily and sometimes accidentally in the workplace. Having one’s authority or decisions challenged, providing feedback, attending performance reviews, or facing organizational change can easily trigger feelings of threat to our position of safety. At the same time, as uncertainty arises from this change in status, we are unconsciously gathering evidence from memories and scanning the environment, attempting to resolve this conflict by inhibiting moves towards change and accepting the new status as a way of gaining some level of certainty. Alternatively, those with strong approach personalities may be more optimistic and, while feeling threatened by conflicting goals, instead prepare to fight to regain their rightful position.

Certainty

The brain is a prediction machine. The sum total of our memories and what we are experiencing in our current environment is used to decide—predict—what we will do next. When an unexpected event occurs, an error response is generated in the brain, and the parts of the brain responsible for the assessment of uncertainty and threat will become more active, diverting our attention away from current tasks and using precious mental resources (Rock, 2008). Uncertainty creates goal conflict and, in turn, triggers anxiety in individuals (Corr, 2008). To dampen these effects, one needs to seek clarification, even if clarification risks an initial increase in anxiety and flight response, because it is better than doing nothing and it may provide more information which, regardless of valence, may establish some level of certainty.

Autonomy

A sense of autonomy is closely linked to the levels of certainty and status. A loss of autonomy in one’s sphere of control may result in a strong threat reaction similar to that generated from loss of status and certainty. Autonomy means allowing a level of control in decision making, which implies conscious action occurring after autonomic responses. Regardless of the cause of these reactions, taking time to label and reappraise feelings of internal conflict and any sense of loss acts to dampen the anxiety as we resolve goal conflict, control feelings of flight or flight, and activate approach-oriented traits to motivate movement in a positive, defensive direction.

Relatedness

Social intelligence is being more aware of the elements of our relationships and acting wisely in those relationships (Goleman, 2006). Inclusion is an important element of teamwork which can be affected by an overly active avoidance reaction, causing social withdrawal, or an overly active approach reaction, resulting in risky, antisocial behavior (Corr, 2008). Positive relationships increase activity in the reward-oriented circuits in the brain resulting in increased trust, better communication and sharing of ideas. This safe human contact is thought to be a primary survival need benefitting the evolution of mankind (Cacioppo in Rock, 2008). In contrast, a lack of interaction or negative relationships instead may trigger a fight-flight-freeze threat response, as well as fuelling uncertainty in deciding whether our interactions are with friend or foe.

Fairness

Those with different personality traits across the approach-avoid spectrum will experience different outcomes as they fight against perceived lack of fairness or accept the new position to avoid conflict and mitigate threats. Fairness is linked to relatedness, as we connect with others who we trust, and it creates a strong reward response (Rock, 2009b). With the approach traits providing us with a sense of optimism towards gaining a share of any reward and the avoidance traits reacting to a new level of certainty, the approach-avoid balance will swing positive as threats become negligible and retreat into the distance. In the case of an unfair situation, which may be due to external influences or as a result of internal comparisons against others, negative feelings escalate as the fight-flight-freeze system rapidly reacts. Threats appear, expectations are not met, and emotions become intense. For some individuals, when there is no obvious threat, a lack of reward is perceived as negative, while others with opposing traits may instead see a lack of punishment as rewarding. In practice, establishing fairness should appeal to approach optimists, reduce internal conflict, and help mediate subconscious fight-flight-freeze reactions.

Motivating Change

So how can we use this knowledge of r-RST and SCARF® to motivate individuals to change? Neuroscience and psychology have provided clues to what may be possible. Knowing, as described earlier, that dominant activity in the left PFC is linked with behavior that drives individuals towards a reward and away from threats, we can, by using the right language, reduce dissonance to motivate individuals to commit to a course of action (Pillay, 2011). In support of finding the right language, we can use tools from Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) proven to be effective in analysing language use, behavior and its consequences to reflect on why we react in certain ways to then learn to adapt using positive behaviors to develop new habits (Knaus, 2006; Seligman, 2011). Taking this
evidence from neuroscience and CBT into account, and if, as proposed by Berkman (2012), we communicate with employees using deliberately constructed approach-avoidance messages aimed at raising conscious awareness of change goals, we can reduce threats that imbalance an individual’s perceived status, goal certainty, role autonomy, social relationships, and fairness. If we view the relationship between innate approach-avoidance traits and an individual’s reaction to change as a two-dimensional matrix (Figure 2), it is possible to describe how an individual reacts to change and how we can categorize and then motivate individuals to accept and embrace change.

Our aim is to motivate those who fight to reject change (Category A) and those who are too inhibited to accept change (Category B) by modifying their perceived defensive distance towards the reward or away from threats they see at the heart of change. Critically, not everyone will necessarily be rejecting or avoiding change. Individuals high in approach orientation, who anticipate greater rewards and actively embrace change (Category C), and those high in avoidance orientation, who recognize greater threats in not changing (Category D), are each expected to embrace change, albeit for different reasons. Therefore, both an individual’s trait level of approach-avoidance orientation and their expectations about the effect of the change are relevant. This observation leads us to define four categories of employee reactions, characterized by the axes of personality traits and the individual’s initial reaction to a change event:

A. Those with approach traits who initially reject change based on their internal reaction to aversive stimuli, fear, and a perceived lack of reward. People in this group, who Kotter referred to as the “No No’s” (2008), fight back by vocalizing their dissent and openly criticize and undermine the change strategy;

B. Those with avoidance traits who initially fear the change. People in this group are likely experiencing anxiety related to internal conflict and uncertainty brought about by change, thus inhibiting movement towards change;

C. Those with approach traits who initially embrace the change. People in this group actively seek and facilitate the change in anticipation of the rewards it will bring;

D. Those with avoidance traits who initially embrace the change. People in this group tend to react to aversive stimuli, and recognize that stagnation is a greater threat than change.

By understanding the differences that give rise to innate approach-avoidance behaviors, it may be possible to motivate the required behaviors using a process that incorporates the work of Gray (in Corr, 2008), Berkman (2012), and Rock (2008). To aid in understanding how this may work, a Motivation-Trait Model has been developed. In Figure 3, as in Figure 2, the axis of this model indicates how individuals react to change in a trait-like way, either by approaching or avoiding and their initial reaction as either rejecting or accepting change.

In this model, the upper-left quadrant represents those who are approach-oriented but reject change because they see it as unrewarding, and thus “fight” to preserve the status quo. To motivate this group of people, who are highly reward-sensitive, we could use positive activation-framed strategies which appeal to their approach orientation to modify their perception of the change towards one of reward. This strategy, indicated by the top arrow labelled “Activation Framed Motivator,” shifts them into the top-right quadrant as they actively seek and embrace change.
Your skills make you a valuable employee and a key player in the rollout of the new computer system. Your support will be essential in helping others to adapt and together we can be competitive and deliver better outcomes for our customers.

- Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, if we were to use an avoidance-framed strategy with this same group, it may be possible they recognize that not changing is a far greater and more urgent threat to them, thus triggering a flight response.

You will be a key player in the introduction of the new technology. There will be additional work required in the short term however if we don’t do this we will lose our competitive advantage and may have to lay off staff.

The lower-left quadrant describes individuals who are avoidance-oriented and initially assess the change as being more threatening than the status quo, thus rejecting it because they are more likely to be anxious and reluctant to move when faced with conflict and uncertainty (indicated by the Inhibit arrow). Their behavior may be modified by creating what Kotter (2013) refers to as a “sense of urgency,” which triggers a flight reaction away from aversive stimuli. This strategy, indicated by the arrow labelled “Avoidance Framed Motivator,” is based on helping people in this group who are threat-sensitive to recognize that the new goals and behaviors are less threatening and represent fewer potential losses than any alternative (Berkman & Lieberman, 2010).

I know you are concerned about the forthcoming introduction of the new computer system and the extra work that will be initially required. However, we need you to start developing a personal change plan as soon as possible to ensure that the rollout in your area goes smoothly. Failure to do this will mean we risk losing our competitive edge and let down our customers, which will certainly lead us to downsize.

In support of the approach-avoidance framed strategies suggested above, practitioners should identify elements within the existing environment and in the post-change environment which affect SCARF® elements to maximize perceived rewards and minimize threats brought about by change relative to the status quo. By providing clear goals that differentiate between threat and safety, and between stagnation and change, we can avoid pushing employees into the center of our model where, like the deer frozen in the headlights, they know not which way to turn.

Application of the Model

Applying the Motivation-Trait Model requires a host framework where the strategies described above can be incorporated. Out of the many theories, models, and processes existing in change and project management disciplines, John Kotter’s eight-step change process (1996; 2013) has been chosen as a test case for applying the Motivation-Trait Model because the author:

- Has witnessed its use as a mandated corporate change process—with varying degrees of success and failure,
- Has successfully led change initiatives in the workplace, and
- Believes it easily lends itself to reinterpretation using the Motivation-Trait Model to thread the needle of change.

Experience has shown that planning and then implementing a change process in a lock-step fashion dooms it to failure. Instead the author suggests that although the planning phase may proceed in a linear, sequential manner, the implementation must be flexible enough to allow steps to overlap, merge, switch order, or be revised as required. The following discussion will however follow the original eight steps in order:

Step 1: Establishing a Sense of Urgency
Step 2: Creating the Guiding Coalition
Step 3: Developing a Change Vision
Step 4: Communicating the Vision for Buy-in
Step 5: Empowering Broad-based Action
Step 6: Generating Short-term Wins
Step 7: Never Letting Up
Step 8: Incorporating Changes into the Culture

Change Case Study:

The case study described herein describes the roll out of a corporate-wide Learning Management System (LMS). The LMS is used to track completion of Learning and Development (L&D) within a subsidiary of a large multinational company. L&D tracking includes items which are prerequisites for being certified to carry out specific work. Many of these certifications expire after a set period unless the employee re-certifies by completing the original module, a shorter re-certification module or being assessed as competent in the workplace.

Previous attempts to use the LMS component of an existing Human Resources Information System (HRIS) and later an LMS, introduced as one component of a new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system, met with change failure.

Step 1: Establishing a Sense of Urgency.

A sense of urgency is necessary to help others see the need for change and the importance of gaining cooperation to act and drive the change effort (Kotter, 1996). There are a number of ways to raise the level of
urgency. One recommended way of grabbing attention is by making a crisis visible—and if you don’t have one, create one (Kotter, 1995; 1996). The role of the crisis is to gain attention, stimulate action, and remove complacency within the target population (Kotter, 2008). Describing our crisis using approach-motivational framed elements activates approach-oriented behavior in individuals by taking advantage of their innate optimism and perception that change will be rewarding. To counter rejection due to a fight response, we can tip the balance from change-as-threat to one of crisis where change is perceived as more urgent and far less threatening. Alternatively, messages using avoidance-motivational framed elements, with cues of non-reward or potential punishment, provide avoidance-oriented individuals with the opportunity to recognize the risk of ignoring change which, in a carefully engineered crisis, alters the defensive distance balance in favor of change-as-reward. Incorporating such approach-avoidance motivating strategies, with the appropriate level of urgency, has the potential to maximize cooperation in our change effort.

The Urgency:
The LMS rollout within the subsidiary is a relatively small part of a company-wide project. If this project task slips by more than two weeks, it will be rescheduled to the back of the queue, resulting in an implementation delay of at least two years.

A second reason for urgency is the need to maintain an accurate record of employee certifications to meet legislative or regulatory requirements. The LMS assists in reducing human error by automating the certification validation and reminder process, reducing the administration workload by many hundreds of hours per year.

Approach-Motivation:
The new LMS will be operational in six months, giving us the ability to forecast L&D requirements, manage records, view accurate certification records, and have automatic email notifications as their re-certification becomes due or lapses.

Avoidance-Motivation:
We are currently experiencing issues, because employees and their team leads have difficulty finding out when recertification action is required. If certification is allowed to lapse, all work must cease. This will have a negative impact on our customer, resulting in contractual penalties being enforced and placing the renewal of the current contract at risk.

Observations:
The approach-motivation message worked best with leadership teams because they could visualise the advantages of having online access to manage and report on their team’s L&D and certification requirements and records.

The avoidance-motivation message worked better with frontline managers and their teams where current certifications are required. Many had previous experience of the crisis that occurs when work ceases as certifications lapse.

Step 2: Creating the Guiding Coalition.
Putting together the right team to lead change is critical for success (Kotter International, 2013). Personality types with approach traits are seen as essential for successful leadership, whereas anxious or avoidance types may be viewed as less effective leaders or may not take the risks necessary to rise to a leadership level (Pillay, 2011). If this is the case, it is likely that there will be more approach-oriented people who rise through the leadership ranks and therefore be appointed to our guiding coalition. This potential over-representation of activators populates the group with enough key players to block resistance, which is desirable (Kotter, 1996). As long as we have a group that has the required range of expertise to make informed decisions, has credibility within the organization and can lead change, we have an effective team (Kotter International, 2013). These may be the right characteristics of successful guiding teams (Kotter & Cohen, 2012), but having too many like-minded personalities is cause for concern, because a group with similar perspectives may be less creative in their decision making as the status quo is unlikely to be challenged (Richardson & West, 2010). Putting together a balanced team will avoid groupthink-driven situations where either too many approach-oriented members fuel a collective and damaging overoptimism or a majority of avoidance-oriented members triggers a collective reaction in defence of potential failure (Esser, 1998). Selection of team members may be aided by use of psychometric testing or other measurement scales. One such scale is the Jackson-5 scales of r-RST which measure BAS, BIS, Fight, Flight, and Freezing in order to predict behaviors (Jackson, 2009).

If we can identify avoidance-oriented individuals who join the guiding coalition, they will need encouragement to take active roles as equal and valued members of the team so they do not feel threatened or anxious. This means assigning roles and building a team where the leader ensures:

• Status is equal, or clearly defined and respected, so that all contributions and decisions are seen as credible and representation of expert points of view are encouraged for all personality types;

• Roles, responsibilities, and goals are clearly defined to provide certainty to individuals,
• Opportunities for task autonomy is respected within the boundaries of the team,
• Relationships within the team are respected, within the bounds of the organization’s hierarchy, and
• Allocation of tasks and decision making are seen by all as fair.

The Guiding Coalition:
A team was assembled from existing employees who could:
- manage project tasks with authority at the appropriate level of the business,
- communicate the project vision and issues to relevant stakeholders,
- identify existing and future data requirements,
- create and communicate new policies and procedures,
- provide leadership to drive the change process.

The team was a mix of personality types established by reviewing Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) results. Extroversion, one of the MBTI dichotomies, was used to identify possible approach-biased candidates based on consistency between these two traits (Jackson, 2009).

Observations:
The team shared an attitude of determination, which led to a high level of trust and a culture intent on success. Use of existing MBTI data proved useful to identify probable approach-biased personalities, based on extroversion being consistent with BAS. Those labelled extroverts reacted more favorably to positive-motivation messages.

Step 3: Developing a Change Vision.
Kotter defines six key characteristics of a vision for it to be effective. A vision that is imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible, and communicable are all elements that make the vision real which can further raise levels of certainty (Kotter International, 2013). These characteristics support both approach and avoidance personalities in that they:
- Convey a clear picture of what the future will look like with clear, realistic, and attainable goals, thus reducing internal goal conflict and mediating negative fight-flight-freeze reactions;
- Appeal to the interests of optimistic approach-trait stakeholders who see a future reward;
- Are flexible enough not to overly restrict impulsive behaviors which may find opportunities to use their initiative under changing conditions.

Change Vision Statement:
To provide easy online access for learner management and record keeping for the regulatory requirements of the business and allow supervisors and employees access to accurate and relevant L&D and certification records.

Change Vision Characteristics:
Imaginable: The LMS will have a web-based interface where employees can easily enroll in programs and access L&D and certification data.
Desirable: The long-term interests of employees, customers, and shareholders will be served by the reduction in overhead costs to the business. These savings will result in a lower cost to customers, make the business more competitive, and generate more business, for a greater shareholder return and long-term job security for employees.
Feasible: The project team (guiding coalition) have determined that they are able to use existing resources to validate and migrate historical data from legacy systems, create new catalogue items to manage classroom and online courses, and develop a framework to manage regulatory certifications.
Focused: Accurate learning and development information allows employees to consult with supervisors to better plan and view their L&D and certification records.
Flexible: Rapid access to records allows management the flexibility to arrange just-in-time training and certifications to suit changing work requirements.
Communicable: The system allows communication of L&D and certification needs through online individual learning plans (ILPs) visible to employees and managers, with email support to notify users of L&D and certification requirements.

Observations:
The above items were developed by the guiding coalition as their vision based on an earlier analysis of business requirements and system specifications. It was noted that all items were initially framed using positive wording which may only be effective on approach personalities. Additional change vision characteristics, using avoidance-motivation language, were then developed.
Imaginable: Continuing with current systems leaves employees unable to enroll in programs other than by completing paper forms and having to request L&D and certification data, leading to unacceptable delays and risking certification errors.
Desirable: Increasing overhead costs to the business in managing L&D and certifications is
increasing costs for customers, making us less competitive and unable to win new business.

**Feasible:** The project team (guiding coalition) have determined that much of the existing historical data from legacy systems is inaccurate and cannot be relied on to manage regulatory certifications.

**Focused:** Employees must consult with supervisors and L&D staff manually in order to plan L&D and view their L&D and certification records.

**Flexible:** Lag times from determining what training is available and when it can be scheduled are unacceptable, because they are too slow to react to changing work requirements.

**Communicable:** L&D and certification records must be checked manually by personnel visiting L&D staff who in turn must perform manual searches and respond in writing by email or via internal mail for those shop-floor employees without email access.

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### Step 4: Communicating the Vision for Buy-in.

There are many ways of communicating. Kotter (1996) suggests use of metaphor, analogy, and examples. Neuroscience supports this strategy with the concept of storytelling. Rephrasing abstract concepts to link with existing memories engages the cortex by triggering sensory responses—whether the sensory input is real or imagined—and the limbic system which, with its emotional reactions, creates new meanings and memories (Faherty in Washburn, 2010). Because stories are more engaging and easily related to personal experience than directives are, they are more likely to guide behavior (Swap et al., 2001). If we create stories to appeal to both approach and avoidance types, we may reduce anxiety and fear by using unambiguous narratives tailored to the change vision. Kotter also recommends that the idea of the message be repeatable. This is an important concept: Repeating the idea, but not the message. If the same message is repeated we do not necessarily commit it to memory—unless we are into old-fashioned rote learning. Our brains need repetition to build memories, but it is the novelty of new experiences that triggers the necessary biological changes for long-term memory (Kandel, 2006). Knowing that repetition, novelty, and emotion are key elements of laying down new memories, we can incorporate these elements into our communications to:

- Help rejecters see change as a reward, not a threat, by repeating positive, activation-framed messages that appeal to their optimistic reward orientation;
- Support those who actively embrace change by regularly updating change vision messages;
- Help those who are too inhibited to initially accept change to recognize risks and threats;

- Reinforce messages to those who recognize that change is a less threatening option than the status quo.

### Communicating the Vision:

The media available for communicating the vision, plans, and changes include direct emailing to affected stakeholders, a weekly news email from the corporate communications team, a monthly newsletter distributed to all corporate leaders as well as weekly face-to-face leadership team meetings, and daily “toolbox talks.”

### Observations:

The guiding coalition took advantage of communication opportunities where and when they arose to “talk up” the vision by explaining the advantages of the change, using approach-motivation language, and the disadvantages of not changing, using avoidance-motivation language.

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### Step 5: Empowering Broad-based Action.

Kotter defines empowerment as the removal of barriers that block action (Kotter, 2012). At a personal level, the behavioral inhibition system will assess risks based on a combination of our past experiences and what is happening in our current environment to influence our decision to approach or avoid change goals. To tip the balance in favor of an approach behavior, we can provide employees with recognition and reward systems that “inspire, promote optimism, and build self-confidence” (Kotter, 2012). Those who continue to reject change, which may include supervisors as well as employees, are another barrier to be dealt with. One strategy is to use those who have experienced past positive change or accept the current change to establish relationships and gain their trust whilst avoiding devaluing their status.

Extending trust empowers people to act by inspiring and motivating (Covey, 2006); however, unsolicited advice to superiors could be seen as threatening their status (Rock, 2008). Rather than physically removing such obstacles, our senior leadership and guiding coalition needs to clearly articulate threats, raise the level of urgency, and stimulate approach behaviors which override pessimism and fear without devaluing status.

### Empowerment:

There are four major obstacles to empowerment: Structures, skills, systems, and supervisors (Kotter International, 2010). Removing barriers associated with these obstacles will allow employees to do their best work.

**Structures:** The structure of the company has created a number of obstacles which have to be overcome. Subsidiaries have difficulty obtaining...
support from the parent company for business systems and processes because there may be no work or funding agreements in place. U.S.-based employees are not allowed to discuss business with foreign nationals, so local employees often receive no response at all to issues raised. This was overcome by escalating issues to senior vice-president level.

**Skills:** The project used reports from previous rollouts of an LMS and results of a gap analysis to identify candidates requiring formal training and to determine when it should be scheduled.

**Systems:** During a previous LMS rollout (as part of a subsidiary-wide ERP System), there was inadequate stakeholder analysis, no data analysis was carried out, changes were not communicated, support and user training was superficial, and the system failed to meet the technical requirements of certification management. These shortfalls were corrected with the new LMS project, and, as the LMS was already in operation across the U.S.A. with over a quarter of a million users, it easily met all local requirements. This inspired confidence in both the new LMS and the project.

**Supervisors:** Many supervisors were skeptical and exhibited some resistance to yet another system change. By empowering leaders at all levels to provide feedback and attend information and training sessions (using a training instance of the LMS) delivered by experienced LMS managers, these obstacles were removed as attitudes changed, the new system became operational, and employees could see the advantages for themselves.

**Observations:**
Throughout the LMS rollout, leaders and the guiding coalition clearly and publicly acknowledged risks and issues that arose to threaten the project. By returning to Step 1 and revising the “sense of urgency,” issues were analyzed and communicated in terms of advantages and disadvantages so that both approach and avoidance would be considered as these revisions flowed on to each step of the change process.

**Step 6: Generating Short-term Wins**
Managers who do not understand the biological processes required for personal and organizational change expect to see immediate shifts in their employees’ behaviors as evidence that change is occurring. Cognitive change requires us to learn the new ways and commit them to memory. Neuroscience has shown that repetition over time must occur for all forms of learning, because enduring change is not just “changing our mind” to do things differently, but a complex biological transformation where new connections for memories are created, and, if we allow it, old memories fade as connections dissolve through lack of repetitive use (Kandel, 2006). Some individuals are likely to find this more difficult because, with higher levels of goal conflict-induced anxiety, they subconsciously act to reinforce old connections as they stick to what they know, stay where they are, and ignore motivation to change. The time needed to create long-term memories for short-term wins needs to be viewed realistically. Kotter writes in terms of months, or even years, which is the time it normally takes for change to stick in a critical mass of the population for cultural change. Short-term wins need to be planned for because they rarely happen on their own (Kotter International, 2013). Plans should include strategies where approach-oriented individuals are motivated with an offer of tangible rewards, and avoidance individuals motivated by non-punishment for accepting change and engaging in new behaviors. These small wins reduce the apparent size and scope of the change process, because the benefits of reaching a goal are perceived as being closer (Klein, 2007). Communicating successful small wins helps to motivate those who reject change by transforming them into active supporters who, recognized now as successful change agents, inadvertently motivate those who were previously neutral or avoiding change.

**Short-term Wins:**
Research has shown that companies experiencing significant short-term wins after a change initiative commences are more likely to complete the transformation (Kotter International, 2013). Although the parent LMS project was implemented worldwide over a period of years, the local implementation occurred over a period of less than one year. For the parent project, their short-term wins were the successful implementation of each subsidiary, whereas the local rollout earmarked these key milestones in the rollout for subsidiary-wide communication and celebration:

- **Data cleansing and transfer:** This required the identification, correction validation, and transfer of L&D and certification data stored in various legacy systems to a single trusted database.
- **Data migration test completion:** The completion of script writing and testing with a successful transfer of legacy data to the test LMS.
- **“Go Live”:** The date on which the system became operational for subsidiary users.
- **Legacy system archiving:** Legacy LMS L&D and certification training data was be archived within HRIS and ERP databases. These systems were not being retired.

**Observations:**
At each milestone, there were visible, unambiguous changes completed and
performance improvements demonstrated. The project teams were publicly recognized and rewarded for maintaining project schedule and budget. Steps 1 to 5 were revisited with changes made to reflect the current state of the rollout. These changes included creating a new sense of urgency, changing roles and responsibilities for some coalition members, updating the vision, communicating successes and status, and encouraging further empowerment of employees and their managers as LMS elements became available for testing and user feedback.

**Step 7: Never Letting Up.**

‘Never letting up’ is about maintaining the momentum of change regardless of stimuli that threaten safety, such as internal conflict and anxiety, impulsive approach reactions, or stimuli that trigger a fight reaction. Being aware of the impact of these traits, we can align what we say and do with brain-friendly strategies to celebrate short-term wins, empower employees to recognize and react to barriers, reinforce communication using a variety of media, and not stop until the vision is a reality. These methods help to maintain the sense of urgency required keep the flywheel of motivation spinning.

**Never Letting Up:**

The relatively short timeframe scheduled for LMS implementation did not allow for complacency. There were few gaps between project tasks and no allowance for slippage by more than a week on the critical path. After each project task, the team was reminded to focus on accelerating and sustaining their continued success to make their vision of change reality.

**Observations:**

Some managers and employees were skeptical about the rollout of the new LMS maintaining schedule and its functioning as promised. This was understandable, considering previous attempts had met with both planning and implementation failures. To counter these attitudes, the team regularly reviewed the change process steps and developed both approach- and avoidance-framed messages to communicate that the new LMS rollout had been better planned, was on schedule for “Go Live,” and that some employees, who already had access to U.S.-based online courses, were observed “singing its praises.”

**Step 8: Incorporating Changes into the Culture.**

For an organization to change, the cognitive shift must take place in a sufficient number of heads so that change is more difficult to reverse once our rejecters and inhibitors join the wave of change. If change for an individual, even with short-term wins, takes many months, change for a large organization can take years. It takes a guiding coalition time to influence others, but when they are successful in convincing others to accept change, even if it is only one person at a time, we will eventually reach the point where a critical number of the target population accepts and embraces the desired change and we achieve what Malcolm Gladwell calls the Tipping Point (Gladwell, 2000). This is when a small group with the right connections and drive, such as our guiding coalition, manage to sell an idea which is memorable enough to stick and spread until a critical viral point is reached and the idea takes hold within a culture. When such an idea goes viral, and both rejecters and inhibitors see their world changing around them, they will be more likely to join the majority on the right-hand side of the Motivation-Trait Model as culture tips towards change.

**Culture Change:**

A concerted effort was made to give presentations to leadership teams at all sites immediately prior to “Go Live.” Follow-up visits to deliver face-to-face training for middle and frontline managers were scheduled for just after “Go Live.” This also demonstrated that the LMS was being supported by employees, for employees. These sessions also included information about the corporate online performance management system which, in the months following the LMS cutover, would be made available to subsidiary managers allowing them to assign L&D and certification courses as part of their employee’s annual performance review.

**Observations:**

Over a period of two years, commencing with the introduction of the new LMS, the business moved sequentially to a new suite of tools which enforced responsibility and accountability for all managers to analyze employee survey results, record performance management data, and then be able to check and schedule L&D and certifications. This rolling introduction had the effect of continuing the momentum created by the LMS rollout and reinforcing cultural change. Two interesting observation were made shortly after “Go Live”:

1. All who were asked if they would be willing to revert to any of the previous LMS implementations replied with an emphatic “No!”
2. When follow up LMS training was scheduled, there were no nominations. On investigating why this was so, the LMS project manager was told, “It is so easy use with its intuitive interface and online ‘Help’ that we don’t need any more formal training.”
Conclusion

Observation:

The implementation of the new LMS was successful as a project because it met scope, schedule, and budget considerations. As a change management process, all stakeholders have accepted the LMS and are using it to manage their L&D and certification requirements. A telephone survey to key L&D and certification stakeholders to obtain their views on the new LMS provided evidence that earlier skepticism was unwarranted and that behaviors and attitudes had changed with the new LMS.

Regardless of which change process is used, or the size, duration, or the difficulties encountered during its implementation, the single biggest challenge will be changing people’s behavior (Kotter, 2002). By applying the Motivation-Trait Model to Kotter’s eight step process, we emphasise a personal approach to ensure that change will be less about organizational thinking and more about personal feelings, which, according to Kotter, leads to long-term cultural change and organizations that succeed. The Motivation-Trait Model uses our current understanding of r-RST approach-avoidance traits to encourage behaviors which recognize and react to threats in appropriate ways, rather than rejecting change, being too frightened to act, or not knowing what to do.
References


