CASE STUDY

**Using Kotter’s model to implement change**

The company which I was working with as an external consultant wanted to develop the ability of leaders within the business to understand the impact of people and to improve employee engagement across its manufacturing sites. The company had been receiving continuously low employee opinion scores and had tried many interventions without success. They had big issues with quality, cost and service KPIs and were clear that a disengaged workforce was the root cause. The change was sponsored by the Vice President for the European business but was also championed by site leaders across the business. The business also had a strong internal Organizational Capability Manager who had partly initiated the change. The organization had a fairly patchy track record of change. There had been many well-thought-out and well-resourced interventions. The organization was poor at institutionalizing change and often relied on crude measurement systems to try to do this.

The change involved the introduction of a new framework for assessing the performance of 32 operational sites against 50 standards. These standards were defined as the factors that had the biggest impact on employee engagement from the standard of the canteen facilities all the way through to clarity of the site vision and values. The format we ended up with was that all site leaders would be trained as assessors and would assess each other’s sites. Results would be for developmental purpose and we would not compare sites against each other in order not to create a culture of hiding bad news. The change was to be implemented over a six-month period but it was realized that it would take many years to fully embed.

Working with us, the Organizational Capability Manager set up a Guiding Team (GT) to lead the change effort. We pulled in the managers who had originally advocated the change and also senior users with credibility and power. There were 10 people in this team and the senior operations leaders from the business sponsored the team. The team had strong characters who had different styles and approaches. Meetings had to be well facilitated and also trust and candour had to be high. Our role was in the facilitation of GT meetings and in helping to come to consensus. The sponsors had faith in the team and supported it.

The change was implemented and the assessments succeeded in a number of levels. They drove the right actions to improve engagement. Those who took part in the assessment process understood it better and were therefore able to use it at their own sites more effectively. Sponsorship remained high throughout the project. As a result, the changes are still in place, several years later. The success was dependent on the following: the set-up of the GT was crucial. Had we used HR professionals or consultants to lead the change it would have been seen as another ‘fad’ and would have lacked credibility. The people in the GT were strong, well respected and great advocates of the process.

While the change was a success, complacency is easy to generate and difficult to destroy. The organization made a conscious effort to ensure that the change was part of a journey and not a final destination to reach. The programme has been through many iterations and it is a constant challenge to keep it relevant and fully supported. The most difficult parts were around resources and, in particular, time dedicated to the process and to follow up on improvement opportunities at the sites. The benefits achieved from the change were greater employee engagement, better retention and improved business performance.

Kotter’s change model was used to lead the change effort. The GT was a great success. The way the organization institutionalized the change was strong. Assessing became a critical experience required for promotion and the senior team did a great job in role modelling many of the leadership aspects we were trying to reinforce.

If there was one area we really struggled with, it was the vision. It was hard to articulate an end state when there were so many standards and when we knew there would not be a point at which we would be done. We did create a vision but, in my opinion, it was a weak one.

**Questions:**

1. Try to trace Kotter’s eight steps to implement change in the case reported;
2. In which areas did the organization experience difficulty in applying the model? Why?
3. What are, according to you, the strengths and limitations of this approach in the case examined?