

This Change Wasn't My Idea!

Leading change — whether you initiated it or not

When Harvard Business School professor John Kotter published his landmark “Eight-Stage Process of Creating Major Change” in the *Harvard Business Review* (1995), he had a specific leader in mind: the one at the top. The visionary. The initiator. The person who saw the burning platform and decided to act.

But here's what Kotter didn't fully address - and what most leaders are living right now:

What do you do when the change wasn't your idea?

A mandate comes down from above. A policy is reversed overnight. A new “top priority” is announced. A reorganization lands in your inbox. You didn't design it, you may not even agree with it, and yet, your team is looking at you for answers.

This is the reality of leading from the middle. And it's more common than any leadership textbook acknowledges.

Here's the uncomfortable truth: **Kotter's model still applies. You just have to use it differently.**

Stage 1 — Establish a Sense of Urgency

For many leaders right now, this stage has already been handled – maybe loudly and abruptly. You didn't need to manufacture urgency. It *arrived*.

But here's the nuance: Your job isn't to amplify the alarm. It's to *translate* it. Urgency without direction creates panic. Your role is to take the heat of the moment and channel it into focused energy: “*Yes, this is real – whether we like it or not. Now, here's what we're doing about it.*”

Stage 2 — Build Your Guiding Coalition

Even when you didn't initiate the change, you still need people around you to help you move it forward. Who are the two or three colleagues you trust - peers, direct reports, a mentor - who will help you navigate this and map out the path forward?

Now is not the time to go it alone. Leaders who try to absorb all the uncertainty themselves burn out and lose credibility. The coalition doesn't have to be formal. It just has to be *credible*.

Stage 3 — Develop a Vision and Strategy

This is the stage most middle leaders skip — and it's the most costly mistake.

When change arrives from above, it often comes without a clear picture of what “success” looks like at your level. Senior leadership has the macro vision. Your team needs a *local* vision: *What does this actually mean for us, in our work, day to day?*

If you can't articulate where you're going - even imperfectly - your team will fill the silence with fear, speculation, and disengagement.

A partial, honest vision is infinitely better than no vision at all.

Stage 4 — Communicate the Change Vision

This stage doesn't require you to have all the answers. It requires you to show up — consistently and honestly.

There's a framework I use with leaders navigating uncertainty: separate what you **do know**, what you **don't know**, and what you **can't know**. These are three different categories, and conflating them destroys trust.

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- **What you do know:** Say it clearly.
 - **What you don't know:** Own it - “I don't have that answer yet, but I'm working on it.”
 - **What you can't know yet:** Name it - “That decision hasn't been made yet at the level where it will be made. When it is, I'll tell you.”
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Your people might want a path forward without uncertainty – but you can't give them that - it doesn't exist. What you can do for them is to show them that you're paying attention and that you'll be straight. That's communicating a change vision - even when the vision is still forming.

Leading Change You Didn't Design

Kotter's Eight Stages were written as a forward-facing model, for leaders who light the fire.

But some of the most important leadership happens *inside* a fire that someone else started.

Whether you're navigating a federal policy shift, a corporate reorganization, or a mandate that came down last Tuesday — the framework still holds. You just enter it mid-stream, and you lead from wherever you are. **That's the job. Welcome to leadership.**

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