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## *Interviewing for Change Leadership*

Easy-to-Follow Interview Suggestions for Hiring Leaders Who Can Make Change Happen!



# Interviewing for Change Leadership

*Easy-to-Follow Interview Suggestions for Hiring Leaders Who Can Make Change Happen!*

By Kirk A. Goeldner, CPCU, Senior Vice President and Managing Director, The Jacobson Group

**It is very rare to consult on a search and have a client say, “I need someone who will just maintain the status quo; you know, just keep doing what we’re doing and not screw it up.”**

This is not to suggest every search is a replacement for someone gone badly. Frankly, most are natural succession situations or due to a change in need. There’s that word again – change. It is unavoidable and must be embraced. We all know that, even if we don’t claim to like it. Don’t worry – this is not another white paper on the need to accept change; it is more about the “who” in the inevitable change process. Let’s face it; many, if not most, major change efforts fail to deliver on the pipe dream. It’s not the new technology, new products, nor new business models – all are forces, no question – but it comes down to the people!

In 1996, Professor Emeritus John Kotter of Harvard University, in his book “Leading Change<sup>1</sup>,” openly acknowledges what every business person knows and

experiences: macroeconomic change is here to stay and will only get more challenging over the coming decades. “As a result, more and more organizations will be pushed to reduce costs, improve the quality of products and services, locate new opportunities for growth, and increase productivity,” Kotter writes. He contends that the future of business is laden with change and requires more than managers. Success requires strong, capable leaders. In 2010, we know that to be true.

Ah, strong, capable leaders. My colleagues know I don’t care for the description “strong” when referring to skills or attributes. There are much more effective words to describe leadership. However, day-in and day-out, we are asked to source, vet and recruit “strong, capable leaders” for our clients in an environment where the difference between “yay” and “nay” is hair-thin in behavior, but financially comparable to the Grand Canyon. There are plenty of recent examples of CEOs, who though highly-credentialed and highly-reputed, couldn’t get the job done. Kotter is just one of many authors with a take on what goes wrong and what needs to happen to get it right. He contends that 70-90 percent of a successful transformation process is about leadership and a minimal amount is about management.

Most organizations reverse this importance, resigning

## **People Cited as Root Cause of Change Project Failure; Ensure You Acquire Leaders Who Won’t Fall Short**

*According to a 2008 global study conducted by IBM...*

- 60 percent of projects aimed at achieving business change do not fully meet their objectives.
- Nearly 60 percent cite changing mindsets and attitudes as the biggest obstacle for change initiatives.
- Corporate culture followed closely behind as the second biggest challenge.

<sup>1</sup>Kotter, John. *Leading Change*. Harvard School Press, 1996.

themselves to emphasize management – not leadership – regardless of what develops, which tends to produce bureaucracy and an inward focus. At the same time, unless a catastrophic event occurs, problems often go unaddressed and “an unhealthy arrogance begins to evolve.” This common process diminishes the chance for any meaningful transformation to occur. These organizations “smother those who want to respond to shifting conditions.” Without strong leadership, organizations will not be able to rise above their lethargy. If Kotter is on target and it’s up to leaders to avoid errors, it’s important to determine – with some reasonability – that the candidate being considered for a leadership position will elude these errors.

Kotter identifies the eight most common errors that companies make and outlines a process for creating major change. His intent is to provide a checklist that enables any executive to avoid errors and invoke effective change within an organization. It makes sense then, when seeking new senior leadership, that organizations are wise enough to determine whether a candidate can evidence the necessary attributes to avoid those errors.

To this purpose, I am sharing my thoughts on how you might incorporate this critical area into your interview process. My suggestions are based on this single question and the indicator signals and follow-up questions outlined herein.

**Q: *Can you tell me about a time when you had to initiate a major change?***

The witty candidate may merely answer “yes,” wishing he or she has answered the question. More seriously, hopefully the candidate is capable and willing to share his/her experiences. In which case, you can begin with this broad question and tailor a discussion to determine the following relative to Kotter’s concerns about leading change.

**1) What’s the candidate’s tolerance for complacency?**

The challenge of a new situation always includes the challenge of those who are determined to stifle effective change. An executive not able to convince others of the importance of change is destined to fall short of the goal. In any circumstance requiring change, leaders face complacency in the form of, “we’ve tried that before” and “we’ve always done it that way.” Neither statement expresses the real message: “I don’t want to change.” Assessing the



candidate’s skill in creating a sense of urgency, without alienating key stakeholders, is the first step in determining leadership.

**Q: *When did you provide direction? Why?***

**2) Can the candidate develop a sufficiently powerful guiding coalition?**

There is no such thing as the self-made man or woman. No matter how competent or charismatic, none of us “have all the assets needed to overcome tradition and inertia except in very smallest of organizations.” Kotter points out that while short-term progress can sometimes be achieved, it is often short-lived without a strong guiding coalition. He is not just referring to the head of an organization, but an additional five or more people committed to improved performance. “Even when complacency is relatively low, firms with little history of transformation or teamwork often undervalue the need for such a team or assume that it can be led by a staff

executive from human resources, quality or strategic planning.” Effective change demands the strength to overturn complacency and obtain buy-in throughout the enterprise. Determining who the candidate first engaged for the coalition and why he/she chose these individuals tells much about where the candidate’s attention will be focused in a new situation. While each circumstance is unique, an executive’s focus tends to repeat.

**Q: Which individuals did you identify as the most influential? How did you align people?**

*(Tip: Listen for inclusion of non-executives.)*

### **3) How vivid was the vision? How clear was it to others?**

Kotter advises that “vision plays a key role in producing useful change by helping to direct, align, and inspire actions on the part of large numbers of people.” A strong vision can provide the necessary focus for an organization to overcome objections and questions during the change process. Without that vision, confusion can degenerate into endless debate. Kotter sums up this third caution into a useful rule of thumb: “whenever you cannot describe the vision driving a change initiative in five minutes or less and get a reaction that signifies both understanding and interest, you are in for trouble.”

My favorite musical is a story about vision and its power (and its hardships): “Joseph and the Amazing Technical Dream Coat” is a delightful musical adapted from a Bible story found in Genesis. Early on, Joseph could not articulate his vision in a way that his brothers could relate. The impact was rather injurious – they dumped him into a well to die and told his father he had been eaten by a goat!

**Q: How did you know there was clarity in your communication?**

### **4) How frequently was the vision communicated?**

Most of the time, employees are willing to be helpful, even if it means sacrifice; but they need to believe that the potential benefits are worthwhile. Frequent, credible communication is the key to getting employees behind the cause. Kotter notes three distinct patterns of ineffective communication:

- Communication is too infrequent.

- Only the head of an organization communicates effectively, not its managers.
- Key leaders’ behavior is “antithetical to the vision,” producing cynicism among the employees.

Undoubtedly, you have heard the adage “It is impossible to over communicate.” Equally important are actions, which must be consistent with words. It’s the ol’ “walk the talk” standard. Pay close attention not just to the frequency of communication, but to the so-called quality touches in reinforcing the vision.

**Q: Tell me about your communication strategy. How did you communicate throughout this period? How did your managers? What were their roles in communicating? Describe the frequency with which the vision was reinforced?**

### **5) What were the obstacles to the new vision? Were they permitted?**

Obstacles can take many shapes and sizes: organizational structure, compensation or people who refuse to conform to new standards or expectations. Whatever the source, obstacles that are allowed to persist will create another opportunity for failure. These barriers must be removed by change leaders whenever and wherever they occur. “Whenever smart and well-intentioned people avoid confronting obstacles, they disempower employees and undermine change.”

**Q: What obstacles did you face? What were the causes? How were they addressed and overcome?**

*(Tip: In assessing causes, listen for mistakes made along the way - not necessarily as a detractor to the candidate’s viability as a leader, but to uncover a candidate’s ability to self-assess, admit mistakes, adjust and overcome challenges.)*

### **6) What were the short-term wins?**

Any change of consequence takes time and “without short-term wins, too many employees give up or actively join the resistance.” Kotter is not referring to hope: he believes that identifying short-term wins and then rewarding employees accordingly provides the impetus to keep change initiatives

moving forward effectively. A savvy manager won't allow ambiguous wins to be enough, but will include recognition, promotions or monetary rewards. The candidate should clearly articulate how short-term wins were recognized and rewarded.

**Q:** *How did you motivate and inspire people throughout the change? When? Why?*

### **7) When was victory declared? Was change sustaining?**

Small wins are not enough to declare victory. "Until changes sink down deeply into the culture, which for an entire company can take three to ten years, new approaches are fragile and subject to regression." Effective change needs to be pursued until the organization's old ways are in fact the new ways of doing business. Kotter uses several examples of premature celebration and recognizes how this well-intentioned approach stops valuable and necessary momentum. "A combination of idealistic change initiators and self-serving change resisters often creates this problem." It is an unwieldy marriage of those who are pushing for change and those who are most resistant that often join forces to declare a premature victory, inadvertently allowing employees to focus on other distracting tasks.

This is very difficult to assess in an interview. When numbers are presented, be certain to understand the context. Premium growth and loss ratio achievements over a short period can nearly always be dismissed. Beyond numbers, it's the collective organizational behavior that is telling.

**Q:** *How did you invigorate the process and capitalize on momentum? What's happened since your change initiative? Why?*

### **8) Did the candidate firmly anchor the change initiative within the corporate culture?**

The analogies and illustrations are many and obvious from "The Three Little Pigs" and their respective houses built from straw, sticks and bricks to the ship without an anchor sufficient enough to reach the ocean bottom, allowing the boat to drift into peril.

Kotter highlights the consequences:

- New strategies are not implemented well.
- Acquisitions don't achieve expected synergies.

- Reengineering takes too long and costs too much.
- Downsizing doesn't get costs under control.
- Quality programs don't deliver hope (for results).

Anyone in a leadership role must recognize the power of the culture. If an important initiative is not ingrained in the culture, it will become part of the huge junk drawer labeled "We tried that in the past and it didn't work;" and cynicism will set in even further. It is essential to show people how specific behaviors and attitudes have helped improve culture and ensure that they can personify the new approach.

Kotter also chides us to better understand the change process, its inhibitors and the leadership required to be successful. Accordingly, interviewing to determine that future leaders really understand the process fundamentals is essential.

**Q:** *How did you ensure leadership development and succession? What cultural changes occurred regarding customers and productivity?*

"The twenty-first-century employee will need to know more about both leadership and management than did his or her twentieth-century counterpart," writes Kotter. People running enterprises today must focus on encouraging others to step into the future; and thus, organizations must engage leaders who help employees overcome natural fears and can grow the leadership capacity of the organization. Leaders direct, align, motivate and inspire altered behavior. It's this ability that organizations must assess during the interview process.▲

#### **About the Author:**

*Kirk A. Goeldner, CPCU, is Senior Vice President and Managing Director of The Jacobson Group. In this role, he is responsible for the leadership and management of the firm's executive search practice. Prior to joining Jacobson, Goeldner consulted organizations on growing their leadership capacities. His career also encompasses a success record in executive roles for various insurance carriers. Goeldner is based out of the firm's National Headquarters in Chicago and can be reached at (800) 466-1578 or [kgoeldner@jacobsononline.com](mailto:kgoeldner@jacobsononline.com).*



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