

Book Report on *Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster-Moving World*

by John P. Kotter

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ENVR E-117: Sustainability Leadership for the Twenty-First Century

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16 November 2021

In *Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster-Moving World*, Dr. John P. Kotter offers insights and tools for organizations to focus on both growth and consolidation while remaining responsive to new market conditions. The situations presented in the book explain that to adapt in a fast-moving world with unpredictable threats, leaders must be conscious of the windows of opportunity that are opening and closing and must swiftly create a strategic plans to act. Kotter helps organizations to build strategic agility and provides insight into a dual system where hierarchical networks enable growth and adaptive networks help correct and orient themselves. Kotter writes, “the solution is not to trash what we know and start over but instead to reintroduce, in an organic way, a second system – one which would be familiar to most successful entrepreneurs” (Kotter, 2014). Supporting this dual system is the only approach that will allow businesses to continue operating effectively while also having the ability to respond to changing trends. This report examines how Kotter's dual operating system not only addresses organizational inertia but also provides a practical framework for sustainability leaders to navigate the tension between operational stability and adaptive innovation; a critical challenge in addressing complex environmental and social issues.

Kotter establishes his theoretical foundation by examining how organizations naturally evolve over time. He argues that our formal organizational structures have reached a point where the traditional methods that we have used no longer work. The book explains that all organizations start with a dynamic network-like structure, which can be compared to an expanding and solar system. This aligns with our course concept of adaptive networks; for clarity, ‘network’ and ‘adaptive network’ will be used interchangeably in this summary. In Kotter’s description, networks can be very fast and agile, and can navigate around existing competition. Organizations can quickly abandon existing initiatives and pursue new ones to find their market fit. When successful in this stage, companies typically begin to grow. As organizations develop and place successful products or services on the market, a more hierarchical structure begins to form with associated management processes including planning, budgets, job descriptions, and staffing. For a brief time, the company maintains both the adaptive network and the hierarchal structure linked together, facilitated by the entrepreneurs who lead in both spaces and can

translate between the two groups. Often, however, these management processes have a delaying effect and block the development of innovative ideas. This relationship shifts until the dual network is systematically eliminated, leaving only a rigid hierarchy. This progression explains the makeup of typical modern organizations that we encounter in our daily lives.

We are unfortunately familiar with the strain this type of hierarchical network faces as our world accelerates. Traditionally, leaders have attempted to enhance organizational agility by adding strategic planning committees, hiring consultants, appointing interdepartmental task forces, or implementing other mitigations that attempt to adapt to the faster pace required. When done well, these measures do aid the organization – but only up to a certain threshold. The more committees, work streams, and strategic elements that are inserted as afterthoughts, the slower the organization becomes, ultimately creating the opposite result from what was originally intended. Instead, John Kotter offers a new structure where both networks can work together to enable reliability and agility, create greater wealth, produce better products or services, offer excellent workplaces, and ultimately achieve greater profitability and growth (Kotter, 2014). The book outlines a set of processes, procedures, and methods to empower companies to transition from a traditional hierarchical network and organically grow an adaptive network component where the two systems are connected. Kotter supplements his dual system proposal with five principles and eight accelerators to make this solution practical in organizations of all sizes.

To achieve a properly functioning dual operating system, Kotter outlines five basic principles (Kotter, 2014). First, it is essential to engage individuals who are driving important change from all parts of the business, not just the typical few who tend to get appointed (Kotter, 2014). This draws on the perspective that more people need authority to initiate tasks, rather simply carry out the others' directives. Second, organizational leaders must adopt a "get-to" mindset and overcome a "have-to" mindset (Kotter, 2014). This principle suggests that finding change agents is only possible if they are given the choice to step forward to contribute to a shared sense of purpose that encourages volunteerism. Third, leaders must ensure that action is both head and heart driven, not just head driven (Kotter, 2014). It is necessary to "speak to the genuine and fundamental human desire to contribute to some bigger cause, to take a

community or an organization into a better future” (Kotter, 2014). Fourth, organizations need much more leadership, not just additional management. This principle highlights how the shift to a dual network centers on vision, opportunity, agility, inspired action, passion, innovation, and celebration (Kotter, 2014). This calls for leaders who can provide more than what project management, budget reviews, reporting relationships, compensation, and accountability can provide alone. Fifth, organizations must create an inseparable partnership between the hierarchy and the network, not just enhance the existing hierarchy (Kotter, 2014). Ultimately, the two systems must work as one with a constant flow of information and activity - they cannot be two super-silos staffed by different people and governed by different rules.

Our course content integrates seamlessly with John Kotter’s five basic principles. For example, the third principle, “to lead with action inspired by the head and heart,” connects back to our discussions around psychological safety and emotional labor, and how understanding how the status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, empathy, fairness, and creativity of individuals are influenced will better position the change agent to use less capital to lead more change (Kotter, 2014). Similarly, the fifth principle, to create an “inseparable partnership between the hierarchy and the network,” relates directly back to our core class concept of how change agents often must translate between the two networks to achieve success (Kotter, 2014).

The synergy between Kotter's principles and course concepts runs deeper than surface connections. The third principle's emphasis on 'head and heart' leadership directly parallels our exploration of psychological safety as a foundation for inclusive change processes. When change agents understand how organizational shifts impact individual needs for status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, empathy, fairness, and creativity, they can design interventions that honor both emotional and rational responses to change. This becomes particularly crucial in sustainability leadership, where the stakes are simultaneously personal (affecting individual livelihoods) and planetary (addressing existential environmental threats). The fifth principle's call for 'inseparable partnership' between hierarchies and networks mirrors the systems thinking approach fundamental to sustainability challenges, where solutions require both top-

down policy changes and grassroots innovation networks.

While hierarchies provide efficiency, control, scale, accountability, and structural cohesion, networks provide responsiveness to context, sensing, connecting, ideas, learning, and adapting (Kotter, 2014). Therefore, to identify opportunities, permission, invitation, strategy, and structure must act in synergy with an adaptive state through the generation of good ideas, engagement, and sensing. Kotter notes that the principles “resemble activity that you usually find in successful, entrepreneurial contexts” much like his eight steps for leading change (Kotter, 2014). These action steps, called accelerators, “accelerate activity, especially strategically relevant activity” and include creating urgency around a big opportunity, building a guided coalition of volunteers, developing a change vision and strategic initiatives, engaging more and more volunteers, removing barriers, celebrating wins, maintaining relentless action, and institutionalizing changes (Kotter, 2014). To illustrate these concepts, Kotter provides case studies of organizations that instituted this system and successfully accelerated the creation of new partnerships, sales growth, and revenue increases (Kotter, 2014).

In sustainability contexts, Kotter's dual system proves particularly relevant. Consider how environmental initiatives often begin as passionate networks of advocates (the adaptive system) but require institutional support and resources (the hierarchical system) to achieve scale. For instance, corporate sustainability programs frequently fail when treated purely as compliance exercises within existing hierarchies, lacking the innovative energy of network-driven initiatives. Conversely, grassroots environmental movements may struggle to achieve systemic impact without engaging established organizational structures. Kotter's framework suggests that successful sustainability leadership requires fluency in both modes—nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit of environmental innovation while building bridges to institutional power and resources.

The remaining chapters of the book continue to strengthen the hierarchical network by priming it for change and demonstrating how to realistically orient it to accept support from an adaptive network. Beyond embodying the five principles and applying the eight accelerators, Kotter emphasizes concepts such as celebrating victories and successes to create positive energy while tapping into the minds and

hearts of employees (Kotter, 2014). This relates directly to the core class concept of tapping into collective sentience to locate the field of shared possibilities guided by shared purpose and psychological safety. By creating what Kotter calls a “big opportunity,” or a realistic and compelling window to a successful future, leaders help to create a vision and enable information to flow between adaptive and hierarchal network nodes. This “big opportunity” is translated into a change vision that outlines how the organization should take advantage of the situation identifies the underlying change initiatives the collective needs to achieve the vision.

Kotter's 'Accelerate' offers sustainability leaders a valuable framework for navigating the inherent tension between the urgency of environmental challenges and the deliberate pace of institutional change. By fostering dual operating systems that honor both innovation and stability, organizations can develop the strategic agility necessary to address complex sustainability challenges that require both rapid response capabilities and sustained commitment. The true test of Kotter's approach lies not just in implementation but in fostering lasting organizational cultures that adapt to an unpredictable environmental future while maintaining a commitment to sustainable practices.

References

Kotter, John P. *Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster-moving World*. Harvard Business Press Books, 2014.