

Is Mr. Kotter Simply Re-Stating Operant Conditioning for the Benefit of the Millennial MBA Candidate?

(...excellent, thought-provoking title!)

Kotter makes a compelling case for his eight steps for a successful change process – it is difficult for anyone who has worked in an environment of deliberate change to find any fault in Mr. Kotter’s prescription. Few need to be convinced of the value of an *urgent* (#1) plan *communicated* (#4) by a *visionary team* (#2 & #3) with an intention of *empowerment* (#5) for the purpose of *short-term wins* (#6) that “*don’t let up*” (#7) until the *cultural* (#8) climate of the organization has morphed to a point of actual change (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 7). While the eight steps are necessary for effective organizational change, Kotter admits that not all of them must occur in the exact order in which he has presented them. (...though often, change gets short-circuited because it is done in the *wrong* order) Often it is appropriate for a company to operate in several phases simultaneously in order to create a synergistic change environment in which (for example) a sense of urgency can be strengthened by the building of the new vision. Kotter is quick to note, however, that regardless of any re-ordering or blending of the steps, all must occur in such a way that each can be distinguished from the other (Kotter, 1996, p. 23).

Beyond the eight steps or phases of change, Kotter acknowledges and defines three sub-categories that must be considered by those who hope to implement efficient and effective change: 1) help people see, 2) emotional impact, and 3) reinforced changed behavior (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 11). The sub-categories of the process address the *human* component of *corporate* change. Because employees are human (in most cases) ←Nice shot! and human behavior is a function of past experience, all change that occurs at the corporate level relies on – in fact, *depends* on - the ability for its human population to change its behavior both individually and collectively (Strebel, 1998). Kotter identifies the outcome of positive human change as a *cultural shift*, and declares it (the cultural shift) the significant indication that a positive corporate change has occurred. ←...positive as directional, perhaps, but not always positive in terms of its result to an organization. I have seen this “operant conditioning” you describe applied to the culture shift after the acquisition of a smaller company by a larger company. The smaller company had a “work hard-play hard” culture before the acquisition and was purchased for its great employees and loyal customer base. The larger company loved the “work hard” part of the smaller company and its resultant productivity, but loathed the “play hard” part of things. The acquirer imposed a culture shift that imposed bureaucratic rules on the smaller company, leading to the loss of many employees and customers, which led to the acquisition not achieving its goals. I refer to this all-too-common phenomenon as, “I love you, now change,” which was the name of a play, I believe.

In *Leading Change* (1996, p. 22), Kotter divides the “Eight Steps for Successful Large-Scale Change” further into three *general* categories: steps one through four help to “defrost the hardened status quo”; steps five through seven are used to introduce the corporate community to new ideas and practices; step eight is the point at which the

corporate culture has internalized, become vested in, the intended change(s). Kotter essentially applied the previously mentioned three sub-categories of changing the human component to the corporate culture as a whole. “Defrosting the status quo” is equivalent to “helping people see”; introducing new ideas and practices can (and often does) include new performance expectations and evaluation processes, both of which always evoke emotional response; the culture of vested interest et al. naturally reinforces the positive behavior change as members of the group become more homogeneous in their vision of the company (Peterson, 2004).

The premise of this paper is that while Kotter has brilliantly articulated the process of corporate change for the new millennial MBA candidate, he has simply used new words to outline the old fashioned theory of operant conditioning. **So it’s just the same old change program in a fresh, new box.** In 1943 B.F. Skinner “discovered” *shaping* in the context of changing the behavior of a pigeon. The phenomenon came to be understood as *social or mediated reinforcement* (Peterson, 2004). The process of shaping Skinner’s pigeon occurred as a result of the presentation of rewards for successive approximations of the behavior that it was expected to learn. The pigeon’s reward was contingent on its behavior; a reward was given only if the pigeon performed a behavior that seemed to be working toward the final expectation. In the corporate world, we think of this as “doing what the boss tells us to do”. Employee behavior is mediated by another (or others) just as was Skinner’s pigeon. Deliberately changing another’s behavior (pigeon or human) is done with a plan of a particular *sequence of contingencies* or “*short term wins*” (Kotter, 1996, p. 21). Kotter’s description of an effective change process is a symphony of choreographed contingency sequences that, when achieved, result in a complete, corporate-level shift. **The only point that I “jump off” from what you are saying is in the area of empowerment...the pigeon really does not have much say in the direction of the change...I don’t see a flock (covey? bevy? squadron?) of pigeons as part of the process, perhaps as the guiding coalition. This brings to mind the idea of a company being open to “leading up.” I ran into an interesting description of this in the January, 2008, issue of the Harvard Business Review arrived. In an article by Linda A. Hill entitled “Where Will We Find Tomorrow’s Leaders,” I read the following:**

“...I came across a passage in which (Nelson) Mandela recalls how a leader of his tribe talked about leadership:

‘A leader, he said, is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing all along they are being directed from behind.’

To me, this take on the shepherd image embodies the kind of leader we increasingly need: someone who understands how to create a context or culture in which other people are willing and able to lead. This image of the shepherd behind the flock is an acknowledgment that leadership is a collective activity in which different people at different times – depending on their strengths, or ‘nimbleness’ – come forward to move the group in

the direction it needs to go. The metaphor also hints at the agility of a group that doesn't have to wait for and then respond to a command from the front. That kind of agility is more likely to be developed by a group when a leader conceives of her role as creating the opportunity for collective leadership, as opposed to merely setting the direction." I see this as a critical part of the 8-step process-the part where we bring people in as part of the guiding coalition-that takes us beyond operant conditioning.

Before the process of shaping a behavior can begin, a plan of action must be defined, including a deliberately designed environment in which the probability of the occurrence of the behavior is predictably high based on "specie-specific"¹ behaviors. A behavioral outcome must be operationalized to identify key behaviors that will need to be extinguished before the [new] behavior can occur. Superstitious behaviors often develop during the process that must be extinguished before becoming entwined in the new behavior. A reward schedule may need to be introduced – staying with the example of the pigeon: it must learn to not be afraid of the "magazine"² in order to "feel good" about having received the reward. Also important is the precondition of the "animal". The organism to be changed must be "primed" to be receptive to the particular reward; for example, a pigeon has to be hungry in order to perform for food. A projection of the required time for the presentation of the new behavior (and its contingency) must be defined for the purpose of recognizing failure; occasionally pieces of the "in-process" new behavior must be extinguished before a next piece can be learned. Finally, the "trainer" must be firm. S/he must stick to the schedule of the projected acquisition of behavior, careful to reward positive successive approximations consistently and with appropriate magnitude. Accidental (or unanticipated) new behaviors must be extinguished quickly and deliberately while not sacrificing progress that has already been achieved. When the "rules" of operant conditioning are applied conscientiously, the resulting new behavior(s) will become part of the organism's "regular repertoire". While I agree that many organizations treat the 8-step process cynically with the end result in mind before the first step of the program is undertaken, it leads to a better result when the organization is open to (rather than attached to) outcomes. I think (hope) that this is Kotter's intention.

According to Kotter, the "heart of change is in the emotions" (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 2). The essence of emotion is "strong feeling" or "affect" that is generally determined by the environment in and with which a person interacts. A positive emotional response can be elicited – and maintained – with a positive reinforcer or "reward". Positive reinforcement comes in many forms; to be effective it is "person-specific" such that a particular reward is meaningful to the person in which change is being evoked. Interestingly, humans respond to positive *affect* as predictably as they perform for *physical* or *material* rewards; we like it when others approve of our behavior or are interested in our thoughts. A listener who responds positively to a speaker is effectively positively reinforcing the speaker's behavior. The manager who gracefully puts forth a plan of change with the intent of increasing the level of *urgency* or *inspiration* (Mattice, 2008) ←(...make sure that you tell Stephen that you cited him in your paper. I

am sure he will be pleased) by encouraging others to contribute is effectively reinforcing participation in the process. There is a certain amount of reciprocity involved in the process in that the "graceful manager" must also be positively reinforced for his/her behavior by those listening.

Another interesting characteristic of humans is that they are able to learn things vicariously. That is to say, that sometimes it's enough for one to see another being rewarded for particular behaviors such that the one will perform the same behavior without any understanding of, or expectation for, a contingency. Most often, the "watcher" will perform only pieces of the behavior s/he is learning and will need an actual reward for each closer approximation of the total behavior. We see this in new employee training: we "forgive" little mistakes, and indeed we often reward, despite those little variations of the total behavior that we hope will eventually occur. We are effectively *shaping* a new employee into the position for which s/he has been hired. **Eek...you are making me feel pigeon-like!**

As the good manager leads the process of change, s/he positively rewards those "successive approximations" with contingencies that are meaningful to each member of his audience. For example, if a conversation between a staff member and the manager goes well, it may result in an appointment to the committee designated for change. It must be said that an appointment to a committee may not always be a good thing! The astute manager is aware that it may be that a particular staff member would rather not actually sit on the committee, but would feel "rewarded" by being asked to contribute in other ways. The manager who is "in the game" can read the face of that staff member instantly: a frowning staff member will negatively reinforce the manager's suggestion of committee membership, and the alternate offer will be made; a smile on the staff member's face positively reinforces the manager's suggestion. This reciprocal reinforcement process occurs continuously in all human interaction; an awareness of the process is critical to positive large scale change.

Implicit to general behavior change is that old behaviors must be extinguished; often new behaviors and practices surreptitiously appear in the process and can quickly become "solid" if not "dealt with" immediately. Humans are adept at "bad science" and will latch on to behaviors that *seem* to be working toward an end result. The classic example of the little league baseball player who taps his bat three times and kicks the plate with his toe before taking the batter's box is usually "accidentally reinforced" by his having hit the ball after performing his "tricks" in the past. It is the responsibility of the change agent ("coach") to quickly stop any negative superstitious behaviors from appearing to be positive. **In this area, I think Kotter takes it beyond Skinner (...with my limited knowledge of Skinner returning vaguely from the days of an early 1980's undergraduate haze) in how to overcome the "boss barrier" when middle managers act as a speed bump in the change process.**

There are several serendipitous behaviors that occur as a result of positively reinforced positive interaction. The first is that as the interactions become more productive (e.g., team building), the level of trust across different levels

of management and staff goes up dramatically. Another is that everyone's behavior will become more homogeneous – humans tend to assume others' demeanors (positive and negative) as they spend more time together. With enough trust et al., the negative demeanors will often extinguish themselves – almost magically. The combination of increased trust and similar behaviors creates an environment in which modeling those “change behaviors” will thrive. The inherent synergy of modeling behavior (every one modeling each other) is the perfect atmosphere for Kotter's “defrosting”, or changing the status quo, phenomenon (Kotter, 1996, p. 22).

A less understood human trait is that of self-reinforcement, where the person is responsible for maintaining his or her own contingency schedule. We often recognize this behavior as “self-discipline” or “will power”. Self reinforcement or mediation occurs when a person is given a set of behaviors that must occur before an identified “prize” is granted; small rewards are provided for the person to “give to himself” as he moves through the shaping process of change. While there may be “externally imposed contingencies” in place (e.g., a promised raise), the person is in control of what group of behaviors will actually merit the contingency. It has been hypothesized that people will perform – change – at the same rate when allowed to do so on their own, as those whose behavior is adjudicated by others (Felixbrod & O'Leary, 1973). This phenomenon can only occur in an environment rich in trust; it is the “step” that Kotter identifies as “empowering broad-based action” (Kotter, 1996, p. 21). This environment does not naturally occur; it must be nurtured by those responsible for a corporate change toward creating a *collective of individual* change.

A collective of individual change is defined by Kotter as the indicator of change when he talks about “anchoring new approaches in the culture” (Kotter, 1996, p. 21), and “mak[ing] change stick” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 7). The product of a successful large scale change is equivalent to the planned outcome in Skinner's shaping discovery, after a carefully mediated set of contingencies have been successfully implemented: the new behavior(s) becomes a solid and functional part of the organization's behavior repertoire or culture. Change has occurred

Grade: A

Though I don't agree that Kotter merely restates the Skinner approach to making change stick, I always enjoy the opportunity to test thought. You make a compelling case, and though I see Kotter's approach as being more open to the “human” side of change, I will also grant you that there are those who will cynically apply it in a corrupt way that *is* merely Skinner's operant conditioning. Good analysis, thorough research, and so on.

References

- Felixbrod, J., & O'Leary, K. (1973). Effects of reinforcement on children's academic behavior as a function of self-determined and externally imposed contingencies. *The Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 6 (2), 241-250.
- Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading Change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Kotter, J. P., & Cohen, D. S. (2002). *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People change their Organizations*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Mattice, S. (2008, January 22). Kotter's Step One. *Change Management*.
- Peterson, G. (2004). A day of great illumination: B.F. Skinner's discovery of shaping. *The Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 82 (3), 317-328.
- Strebel, P. (1998). Why do employees resist change? In H. B. Publishing, *Harvard Business Review on Change* (pp. 139-157). Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.
- Wadsworth.com. (n.d.). *Sniffy, The Virtual Rat*. Retrieved January 21, 2008, from Project 5: Chapter 14: Exercise 43:
http://www.wadsworth.com/psychology_d/templates/student_resources/0534633609_sniffy2/sniffy/exercises/exer5.htm

¹ *Specie-specific behaviors* are those behaviors that one can predict will occur in the repertoire of the particular organism. Colloquial examples include: pigeons always head-bob; monkeys love to push buttons; rats cannot vomit.

² *Magazine Training*: A common procedure used with dogs and many other kinds of animals is called "clicker training." You get a little noisemaker and teach the animal that whenever it hears the clicker sound, you will give it a small treat. (Wadsworth.com). Herzberg speaks of this as "positive KITA (Kick In The...)" in his discussion of motivation, pointing out that it is I who is (am?) motivated for the dog to move and not the dog her/him/itself.