What Leaders Really Do Article Analysis

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Introduction to Kotter's Argument

John P. Kotter's "What Leaders Really Do" challenges the assumption that leadership is a mysterious personal gift or a superior replacement for management. His central claim is that leadership and management are different but complementary systems of action. Management helps organizations cope with complexity through planning, budgeting, staffing, control, and problem-solving. Leadership helps organizations cope with change by setting direction, aligning people, and motivating them to overcome barriers. The article remains influential because it gives practical meaning to two terms that are often used carelessly. Its strongest contribution is the idea that organizations fail when they possess only one capability, whether charismatic change without execution or efficient administration without adaptation. (Kotter, 2001)

Management as Coping with Complexity

Kotter links modern management to the growth of large organizations whose operations require consistency, coordination, and predictability. Planning and budgeting translate goals into steps and resources. Organizing and staffing create structures, roles, and systems. Control and problem-solving compare results with plans and correct deviations. These activities are not bureaucratic obstacles by definition. Hospitals, airlines, insurers, schools, and public agencies need dependable processes because errors can be expensive or dangerous. The article usefully resists the popular tendency to celebrate leadership while treating management as routine. A vision that is not converted into staffing, budgets, controls, and operational responsibility remains an aspiration rather than an organizational capability. (Kotter, 2001)

Leadership as Coping with Change

Leadership begins with direction rather than detailed planning. Leaders interpret the environment, identify important patterns, and describe a credible future that responds to opportunities or threats. Direction is not the same as producing a long strategic document. It requires choices about where the organization should move and what it will stop doing. Kotter wrote in a period of technological and competitive change, but the distinction is even more relevant where organizations face digital transformation, climate risk, demographic shifts, political instability, and rapid changes in customer expectations. Direction becomes valuable when it is specific enough to guide trade-offs while remaining broad enough to coordinate innovation. (Kotter, 2001)

Setting Direction versus Planning

Planning asks how to deliver expected results within a given environment, while direction-setting asks whether existing assumptions and goals remain appropriate. The two activities use different evidence but should inform one another. A leadership team may identify a future market or service model, but management analysis must test cost, capacity, regulation, and timing. Conversely, a technically sound plan can optimize a strategy that no longer creates value. Kotter's distinction is therefore analytical rather than a rigid job description. Senior executives often perform both, and specialists throughout the organization may contribute leadership when they identify a necessary change. The key is recognizing which problem—complexity or change—requires attention. (Kotter, 2001)

Aligning People rather than Merely Organizing Them

Management organizes people through structures, job descriptions, staffing decisions, policies, and reporting relationships. Leadership aligns people by communicating direction and building coalitions that understand and support it. Alignment is difficult because organizations contain different incentives, professional languages, levels of authority, and fears of loss. A message sent once by senior management does not create alignment. People need opportunities to question assumptions, interpret implications for their work, and see consistency between words, resource decisions, and executive behaviour. Kotter's emphasis on communication is persuasive, although alignment should not mean manufactured consensus. Ethical leadership permits informed disagreement and protects employees who identify risks the majority prefers to ignore. (Kotter, 2001)

Motivation, Inspiration, and Human Needs

Kotter argues that leadership motivates by connecting work with achievement, belonging, recognition, self-respect, and the feeling of contributing to something meaningful. This differs from control systems that use targets and corrective action to keep performance near plan. Motivation is especially important during change because people must act beyond established routines and tolerate uncertainty. The article does not imply that inspiration eliminates compensation, workload, or fair conditions. Employees may support a purpose but still resist an initiative that is understaffed or unsafe. Effective motivation combines meaning with realistic support, decision authority, and evidence that sacrifices are distributed fairly. Otherwise, inspirational language can become a tool for extracting effort without responsibility. (Kotter, 2001)

The Complementarity Thesis

The article's most important idea is that leadership and management should balance each other. Strong leadership with weak management can produce dramatic announcements, uncontrolled costs, inconsistent quality, and exhausted teams. Strong management with weak leadership can produce efficient routines that continue long after the environment has changed. The balance required is not necessarily equal at every moment. A crisis may demand rapid direction, while stabilization requires disciplined execution. Organizations should assess capability rather than assume every executive is equally skilled at both. Leadership teams can combine people with strategic, relational, technical, and operational strengths, provided responsibilities are clear and conflict is resolved constructively. (Kotter, 2001)

Leadership Is Not Charisma

Kotter rejects the belief that leadership depends on a rare personality. This is valuable because charisma can attract attention without producing ethical or effective change. Quiet leaders may align people through credibility, expertise, listening, and persistent coalition-building. Charismatic individuals may also create dependency, discourage criticism, or direct organizations toward harmful goals. The article broadens leadership from personal magnetism to observable work: setting direction, communicating, building alignment, and enabling action. Nevertheless, personality and communication style still influence how that work is received. The best interpretation is that charisma is neither necessary nor sufficient. Leadership should be evaluated through judgment, relationships, outcomes, and the treatment of people affected by decisions. (Kotter, 2001; Yukl & Gardner, 2020)

Developing Leaders through Experience

Kotter argues that successful organizations do not wait for leaders to appear; they identify potential and provide challenging experiences. Leadership development therefore requires more than classroom instruction. People learn by leading projects, working across functions, handling failure, entering unfamiliar markets, and receiving feedback from credible mentors. Rotations can broaden perspective, but poorly designed assignments may become tests without support. Organizations should give emerging leaders real responsibility, psychological safety to report problems, and accountability for results and conduct. Development opportunities must also be distributed fairly. Informal sponsorship can reproduce existing demographic and social patterns if senior leaders choose only people who resemble themselves. (Edmondson, 2018; Kotter, 2001)

Strengths of the Article

The article is clear, memorable, and useful for diagnosis. Its paired processes help readers identify why a technically competent organization may be unable to change or why a visionary initiative may collapse in execution. Kotter also corrects the false hierarchy that places leadership above management. His framework links each function to a real organizational problem rather than a title. The article's continued use in education reflects this practical value. It encourages managers to see change as a human coordination challenge and leaders to respect the systems required for reliability. Few short articles provide a vocabulary that remains usable across private, public, and nonprofit organizations for several decades. (Kotter, 2001)

Limitations: A Binary That Can Be Overstated

The distinction can become too neat if readers treat leadership and management as separate occupations or personality types. Planning can involve leadership when it questions assumptions, while control systems can support change by providing feedback. Frontline employees may lead without formal authority, and senior leaders often perform detailed management. Contemporary work also depends on distributed expertise, agile teams, networks, and professional communities that do not align through one leader's vision. The framework is most accurate when used as two clusters of activities rather than two kinds of people. Organizations should avoid labelling some employees "leaders" and others "mere managers," because that can devalue essential work and confuse accountability. (Mintzberg, 2009; Yukl & Gardner, 2020)

Limitations: Ethics and Direction

Kotter explains how leaders mobilize change but gives less attention to whether the chosen direction is morally defensible. A harmful strategy can be communicated clearly, aligned effectively, and implemented with high motivation. Leadership analysis must therefore include purpose, stakeholder impact, truthfulness, power, and accountability. Employees should not be aligned through deception or pressure to ignore affected communities. Ethical direction requires credible evidence and willingness to revise when consequences differ from promises. Management controls also have ethical importance because audits, safety systems, and compliance can restrain powerful leaders. The combination of leadership and management should support not only organizational success but lawful and responsible conduct. This expanded ethical test is necessary whenever organizational change affects safety, rights, employment, communities, or the distribution of environmental and financial risk.

Application to Digital Transformation

A digital-transformation program illustrates Kotter’s framework. Leadership identifies why customer behaviour, technology, or competition requires a different operating model and communicates the benefits and risks. It aligns departments that may fear loss of budget or status. Management then defines architecture, cybersecurity, procurement, staffing, milestones, testing, training, and service continuity. If the organization buys software without changing roles and incentives, management activity occurs without adequate leadership. If executives announce an ambitious digital future without data governance or implementation capacity, leadership language occurs without management. Successful transformation requires direction and disciplined delivery to operate as one system. (Kotter, 2001)

Application to Crisis and Recovery

During a crisis, leaders interpret uncertain information, set priorities, communicate honestly, and maintain confidence without pretending to know everything. Managers establish incident structures, allocate resources, document decisions, track supplies, and restore operations. The balance changes over time. Early response may emphasize rapid direction and coordination, while recovery requires reliable processes and learning. A common failure is allowing emergency leadership to become permanent centralized control after the immediate threat has passed. Another is returning to routine without addressing weaknesses exposed by the crisis. Kotter’s distinction helps organizations ask whether they are currently solving a complexity problem, a change problem, or both. (Kotter, 2001)

Conclusion

“What Leaders Really Do” remains valuable because it converts leadership and management from vague labels into complementary forms of work. Management creates order and reliability through planning, organizing, staffing, control, and problem-solving. Leadership creates movement through direction, alignment, motivation, and coalition-building. Neither is inherently superior, and organizations need different balances as conditions change. The article should not be treated as a rigid separation between leaders and managers, nor as a complete theory of ethics or distributed work. Used critically, it offers a powerful diagnostic question: does the organization possess both the capacity to choose and mobilize necessary change and the capacity to deliver that change responsibly? (Kotter, 2001)

References

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