

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our Iceberg is Melting, John Kotter & Holger Rathgeber

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A key question that we in the Development Impact Group are grappling with is: As change agents, what are some effective approaches we can use to facilitate change? We discovered one answer in *Our Iceberg is Melting*, a simple and unique book about managing change. Delivered in the refreshingly readable format of a children's fable (complete with illustrations), the book tells the story of a colony of penguins who discover that their iceberg home is melting, and how they set out to change their fate by finding a new home.

The book was co-written by John Kotter, a leading change management practitioner from Harvard's Business School. The story is structured around 8 steps to change, which Kotter's research showed were critical factors in the success of change efforts in the public and private sectors. One of the central messages of the book (and his research) is that people are more likely to change their behavior when they *feel* differently, rather than when they *think* differently. So, while logical and well-presented evidence is important for change, Kotter also advocates creating surprising, compelling or visual experiences that lead people to feel a strong need or urgency for change.

The context of Kotter's story – melting icebergs – is an apt one, given that the most powerful recent example of his message has been the issue of climate change. For over 20 years, scientists under the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have been gathering scientific evidence to help the world understand how human activity was causing climate change, and advocating the need for change. But it wasn't until Al Gore stood on a scissor lift and showed us the CO₂ levels going literally *off the chart* that a tipping point occurred in global sentiment towards the issue. Appropriately, the importance of both contributions were recognised with a joint Nobel Prize to the IPCC and Gore in 2007.

How well do Kotter's lessons, extracted from research in business and governments in a western context, translate to the international development profession? Very well I would argue. Beneath the jargon and constructs, development is also fundamentally about change. Our job as development practitioners is to build the capacity of others to achieve the positive changes they aspire to. Because change only occurs when people take action, a big part of our work is to understand what approaches will most effectively and ethically lead people to change their behaviour. Kotter's book offers us one useful approach to doing this.

To finish with just one example of this approach in practice, I was recently reading the blog of a friend working as a volunteer in rural Cambodia. His work involves helping farmers to increase the productivity of their rice plots through different planting and management techniques. To manage this change process, he and his colleagues planted two demonstration rice plots - one using traditional management techniques, and the other using the 'new' techniques they were trying to encourage farmers to adopt. When the plots were ready, the crops were harvested, thrashed and weighed before 95 witnessing farmers. The new technique yielded twice as much rice as the traditional technique. Observing the excitement this experience sparked amongst the farmers, he wrote in his blog, "this really got the crowd talking". It goes without saying that this approach is much more likely to lead to change than if the results had been shown to farmers in a report or training room.

How could you apply Kotter's approach to enhance your change efforts?

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