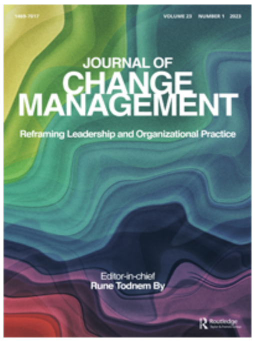

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Why Vilifying the Status Quo Can Derail a Change Effort: Kotter's Contradiction, and Theory Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

The Kotter eight-step change model has a pervasive influence in the practice of change management; founded on building urgency towards the desired change through convincing employees that the status quo is more dangerous than the future state. We critique this positioning of the current state as dangerous, the proposition of using it to drive urgency, and the resultant employee anxiety and stress that is synonymous with organizational change. We reveal that positioning the current state as dangerous is a combative (and futile) strategy given the inescapable nature of status quo bias. To address this complication, we propose a theory adaptation that appreciatively leverages status quo bias and recommends invoking approach motivation based on communicating the pressing importance of the future state.

MAD statement

Change practitioners utilize change models to support organizations to adapt, with the hope that they simultaneously support employee well-being during transition. Our theory adaption, as justified and described in this paper, provides both practical and theoretical contributions to those who want to prioritize the well-being of employees during change efforts through leveraging empirically-established status quo bias.

KEYWORDS

Change management; status quo bias; motivation; appreciative inquiry; behavioural economics; change leadership; organizational development

Introduction

Change is everywhere, organizations do not exist in static environments, and constant adaption is required for organizations to survive (Appelbaum et al., 2012; DuFrene & Lehman, 2014; Kotter et al., 2021; Thomas & Hardy, 2011). How organizations adapt, in a socially responsible manner – particularly in terms of employee well-being, is the conceptual underpinning that drives the theory adaptation proposed within this paper. Change management models, including the Kotter eight-step change model, have pervasive influence in practice (By, 2005; Cummings et al., 2016; DuFrene & Lehman, 2014; Mento et al., 2002). Yet, change initiatives are synonymous with introducing increased

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employee anxiety and stress, and employers are increasingly accountable for providing safe work environments (Battistelli et al., 2014; Cameron & Green, 2020; Dahl, 2011; Guidetti et al., 2018). Therefore, in this study we critique, and use as a leading example, the influential Kotter eight-step change model and encourage change practitioners to move towards a more appreciative (and socially responsible) approach to change management.

Our critique draws on existing change management literature along with the approach versus avoidance motivation concept and status quo bias from behavioural economics (Evans & Evans, 2019; Fonseca et al., 2014; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988; Tomaka et al., 1993). We start by highlighting the pervasiveness of change management models, with focus on the Kotter eight-step change model. We then introduce the concepts of Appreciative Inquiry (that has links to approach motivation), status quo bias, and acknowledgement that using the current state to trigger urgency is risky. From this scene-setting, a complication in the existing literature and common practice is revealed, but a pathway to resolution also becomes visible. We then justify our approach to theory adaptation by providing further explanation and articulation of the differences in perspective. This appreciative approach is an alternative to the futility of working combatively against the inevitability of employees' favouring the status quo (i.e. status quo bias). It also mitigates against the problems associated with avoidance motivation. Our theory adaptation recommends that change practitioners leverage status quo bias through identifying and discussing what elements will remain the same in the future state. Further, change practitioners can create urgency through communicating a pressing reason for the future state that ideally results in approach motivation. Before our final remarks we discuss both the theoretical and practical contributions that come from our theory adaptation.

Note: The authors of this paper are not suggesting that employees, change practitioners or organizational leaders, are the sole reason for change resistance, nor the sole source of remedy; this paper is highlighting a contradiction that exists in current practice, and argues for a profound change in approach (appreciatively leveraging status quo bias for change with less anxiety) that may assist with change effort in achieving its documented objectives.

Change Practitioners are Told: Make the Status Quo Appear Dangerous

Change Management Models as the Tools of the Change Practitioner

Organizations, given their design for stability, need a clear plan in place to help employees through the inevitability of change (DuFrene & Lehman, 2014; Malek & Yazdanifard, 2012). It is common for those charged with managing organizational change efforts (change practitioners) to utilize a change model in the delivery of an organizational change effort (By, 2005). Kurt Lewin's unfreeze-change-refreeze change model is regarded as a classic, and has informed more contemporary change models (Baughen et al., 2020) including the mid-1990s Kotter eight-step change model (Cummings et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2020; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006; Mento et al., 2002). The influence of the Kotter eight-step change model is evident in the Prosci Awareness-Desire-Knowledge-Ability-Reinforcement (ADKAR) model (Hiatt, 2006). These three change models have a pervasive influence in the management of change in organizations today (Worley & Mohrman, 2014).

Cummings et al. (2017) describe Lewin as a one of the twentieth century's most innovative society scientists, but also argue that his work has been widely misinterpreted and liberties taken when expanded and applied, particularly with respect to its embodiment within commercially persuasive and successful 'pop-management' change models. In summary, Lewin was commenting on aspects of group change, he did not present a full model that was underpinned with specific empirical research, nor did he outwardly seek to become the 'grand founder' of change management, yet the Kotter eight-step change model, and others, intentionally or not, take as truth what has been extrapolated and attributed to Lewin i.e. his purported unfreeze-change-refreeze model (Cummings et al., 2017).

Pop-Management – Kotter's Influence, and His Eight-step Change Model, in Focus

Despite the deliberate negative connotation delivered by Cummings et al. (2017) in using the label 'pop-management', the popularity of change models are far from a short lived phenomena (Collins, 1998). Since the 1980s, industry figureheads and consultancies have charged huge fees, offering quick fixes and metaphor laden toolkits that are largely undertheorized, lacking in human psychology and social science foundations (Collins, 1998). Change models should be robustly founded in theory.

The Kotter eight-step change model is particularly influential in the change practitioner community, and as such is the primary examples used in this paper; in October 2001, recognising his iconic status in the field of organizational change, BusinessWeek magazine called Kotter the number-one *Leadership Guru* in America (Aiken & Keller, 2009; Kotter, 2008; Kotter et al., 2021). Cementing his position as a leading industry figurehead, Kotter's (1996) volume *Leading Change* has been described as a landmark publication and was named by TIME Magazine in 2011 as one of the 25 most influential management books of all time (Kotter et al., 2021; Salman & Broten, 2017). Central to Kotter's (Kotter, 1995, 1996) work is his eight-step change model, which has been cited as highly influential in the academic literature and is widely used in change management education (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Nitta et al., 2009; Pollack & Pollack, 2015). Adjectives such as classic, eminent, recommendable, and popular are associated with this change management model (Appelbaum et al., 2012). Lewin's unfreeze-change-refreeze influence is visibly demonstrated by Kotter's choice of analogy in his best-selling *Our Iceberg is Melting* (2006) publication, using both penguin and iceberg metaphors to reinforce his associated unfreeze and refreeze message underpinnings (Cummings et al., 2017). The significant influence of the Kotter eight-step change model has been attributed to its ability to link theory to practice (Pollack & Pollack, 2015). Table 1 outlines Kotter's (1995) sequential steps to manage change in organizations.

Establishing a Sense of Urgency

The focus of our study is status quo bias, which is most closely linked and has consequences resulting from the interpretation and actioning of the first step ('Establishing a

Table 1. The Kotter eight-step change model.

1.	***Establishing a sense of urgency*** *Examining market and competitive realities* *Identifying and discussing crises, potential crises, or major opportunities*
2.	***Forming a powerful guiding coalition*** *Assembling a group with enough power to lead the change effort* *Encouraging the group to work together as a team*
3.	***Creating a vision*** *Creating a vision to help direct the change effort* *Developing strategies for achieving that vision*
4.	***Communicating the vision*** *Using every vehicle possible to communicate the new vision and strategies* *Teaching new behaviours by the example of the guiding coalition*
5.	***Empowering others to act on the vision*** *Getting rid of obstacles to change* *Changing systems or structures that seriously undermine the vision* *Encouraging risk taking and nontraditional ideas, activities, and actions*
6.	***Planning for creating short-term wins*** *Planning for visible performance improvements* *Creating those improvements* *Recognizing and rewarding employees involved in the improvements*
7.	***Consolidating improvements and producing still more change*** *Using increased credibility to change systems, structures, and polices that don't fit the vision* *Hiring, promoting, and developing employees who can implement the vision* *Reinvigorating the process with new projects, themes, and change agents*
8.	***Institutionalizing new approaches*** *Articulating the connections between the new behaviours and corporate success* *Developing the means to ensure leadership development success*

Adapted from: (Kotter, 1995, p. 61).

sense of urgency') in the Kotter eight-step change model, a step that then informs and influences the exact direction of steps three ('Creating a vision') and four ('Communicating the vision') (refer Table 1). Kotter (2008) professes that in a fast-moving world, contentment with the status quo can create disaster. Establishing a sense of urgency is where it all starts (Kotter, 2008), sitting at the heart of Kotter's approach, a foundation on which everything else is built. So critical is establishing a sense of urgency to Kotter, that he later dedicated a separate publication to this step alone (Brisson-Banks, 2010; Kotter, 2008). Everything else becomes much more difficult if urgency is low; the opposite of urgency is complacency (Kotter, 2008).

To establish a sense urgency, Kotter advises change practitioners and organizational leaders to find a crisis or to look for something dramatic and timely; '*… when the urgency rate is not pumped up enough, the transformation process cannot succeed …*' (Kotter, 1995, p. 62); change practitioners are urged to communicate broadly and dramatically (Kotter, 1995, 1996). Pertinent to our argument is the advice to *make the current situation look more dangerous* than launching into the unknown (the proposed future state) (Kotter, 1995, 1996, 2007). This recommendation has been re-phased as a prescription to challenge and break the status quo (Appelbaum et al., 2012). Kotter (1995) even supports the manufacturing of a (non-existent) crisis to create a sense of danger surrounding the status quo; he cites a case where a sense of urgency was successfully created in one organization by using a burning platform – jump now or the consequences will be catastrophic. When people have a sense of urgency, they know that action is needed now, not later, not eventually; urgency is '*… the first step in a series of actions needed to succeed in a changing world*' (Kotter, 2008, p. 13). To summarize, according to the Kotter eight-step change model, the status quo is a danger to the change effort. To mitigate against this threat change practitioners are advised to position the current state as more dangerous than the future state.

Organizational Change – Increased Uncertainty, Potential Anxiety, Stress, and Resistance

Through following such advice in the change management models, change practitioners expect to increase the likelihood of achieving documented change effort objectives, and to support employees to safely transition from a current state to a future state (By, 2005; DuFrene & Lehman, 2014). Despite these aims, organizational change continues to be associated with increases in employee's sense of uncertainty, discomfort, and ultimately negative employee stress – often with dire physical and mental health consequences (Cameron & Green, 2020; Dahl, 2011; Guidetti et al., 2018). Feelings of anxiety and stress are also linked to increased levels of resistance (Dahl, 2011; Guidetti et al., 2018; Kim & Kankanhalli, 2009). Notwithstanding the impact of heightened resistance on achievement of the desired change, workplace stress is estimated to cost the United States economy more than $500 billion dollars each year, with 555 million workdays lost due to stress on the job over the same period (Moss, 2019). Diminished employee well-being and stress often result from an anticipation of future loss or threat; including a loss or threat to the status quo (Battistelli et al., 2014). With this insight, we start to reveal that the creation of a 'crisis' (and therefore deliberate vilification of the status quo) is socially irresponsible in terms of employer's duty of care to their employees, and should be avoided (Baughen et al., 2020; Kühl, 2020). In fact, inducing a stress producing crisis frame may be enough to tip the motivational balance against success (Drach-Zahavy & Erez, 2002; Tomaka et al., 1993). This is especially the case when perceptions of the required resources of effort and support are lacking (Moore et al., 2014).

Some, not the authors of this paper, might justify the cost of such stress in an organizational change effort (through positioning the status quo as dangerous) as an appropriate course of action if it assures organizational change success, but no such assurance can be guaranteed, and even if it could, in our opinion, such an act would still be recklessness.

Towards an Appreciative Understanding of the Status Quo

The deliberate invoking of employee stress is of great concern; and we have argued that one of the sources of employee stress is through intentionally promoting the status quo as under threat or dangerous – a strategy implicit in the Kotter eight-step change model – you must defrost a hardened status quo (Kotter, 1996). In this section, we will describe how we agree that the status quo is an instrumental factor in change efforts. However, unlike the current first step in the Kotter eight-step change model that prescribes disruption of the status quo, we propose an 'appreciative' perspective, founded on 'approach' motivation toward the future state, that is sensitive to human heuristics and bias. We also find support for the need to tread cautiously with the status quo in influential change management literature.

Appreciative perspectives to change management are not new. In addition to the change management models (such as that of Lewin, Kotter eight-step and ADKAR –

introduced previously), Baughen et al. (2020) reference Cooperrider and Srivastva's (1987) *Appreciative Inquiry* approach to change diagnostics and communications as rich and developed. Appreciative Inquiry focuses attention on what is working well and looks to amplify and develop areas of strength or promise rather than spending effort on problematizing deficient areas (Grieten et al., 2018; Hung, 2017; McCarthy, 2017). Appreciative Inquiry is a positive revolution – it puts people first (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007); it treats people like people, not machines (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

Related to Appreciative Inquiry is the concept of approach versus avoidance motivation. These two types of motivation have been a mainstay within psychology research for decades, and discussed for more than 2,000 years – with approach motivation being defined as an individual's desire to achieve a positive or desirable state, and avoidance motivation being a drive to distance oneself from a state (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Elliot & Thrash, 2002). What an individual is directed to focus on influences their motivation and behaviour (Sassenberg et al., 2015). Therefore, the original stimuli (be that negative or positive) is important because it shapes an employee's attitudes and actions towards the change.

Approach motivation therefore complements, and has synergies to, Appreciative Inquiry. Avoidance motivation, in contrast, is focussed on evading a state, which is problematic, because it can escalate employee stress and as a result, reduce employee enjoyment and well-being (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Elliot, 2006); threat frames of reference, which are synonymous with avoidance motivation, are anxiety producing (Feinberg & Aiello, 2010). Focusing on negative stimuli can cause also prompt an individual to take action to distance themselves from said stimuli, in an attempt to save face from being enveloped in that appraisal (Sassenberg et al., 2015).

This arguably 'negative' form of motivation is draining – constantly reviewing danger can blind the individual to opportunity and drives a want to simply survive through avoiding a particular situation, rather than to thrive and progress (Chalabaev et al., 2009; Elliot, 2006; Sassenberg et al., 2015).

The Inescapability of Our Humanness: Cognitive Biases

Moving from these insights from psychology, we turn now to behavioural economics. The theory of rational decision making was first proposed by Leonard Savage in 1954 and built on the principle that decision makers will always select the option that provides highest utility return (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). However (as Dale Carnegie first professed in 1936), '*When dealing with people, let us remember we are not dealing with creatures of logic. We are dealing with creatures of emotion, creatures bristling with prejudices and motivated by pride and vanity*' (Carnegie, 2006, p. 13). Employees are human beings, not machines – and each human being has emotions and a conscience (Stallard, 2009).

This statement underpins behavioural economics – an academic endeavour that also attempts to understand motivation and social shaping; the convergence of psychology and economics (Camerer, 1999). Further described, as a niche scientific field that investigates cognitive defaults and limitations (biases) as they apply to human rationality, judgement, and choice (Camerer, 1999). The roots of behavioural economics derive from the challenging of standard economic theory; a proposition that is built on the edict that humans are strictly, and mathematically, situational maximizers (Kahneman et al., 1991; Mullainathan & Thaler, 2000). Accordingly, utility judgements are subjective, contextual, and individual, as well as sometimes being intuitive and/or subliminal (Kahneman & Tversky, 1983); '*Making decisions is like speaking prose – people do it all the time knowingly or unknowingly*' (Kahneman & Tversky, 1983, p. 341). This 'unknowingness' is often the result of cognitive biases (Barrouillet, 2011).

Cognitive biases are an aid to human beings' limited cognitive capacity. We are continually required to pass judgement and make decisions under conditions of rapidly changing information. We rely on cognitive biases to help us make decision amongst uncertainty and conflicting objectives; they are mental shortcuts that systematically lead decision making (Maguire & Albright, 2005). A mental shortcut is a heuristic, a display of cognitive bias – an automatic and unquestioned (intuitive/subliminal) drawing of a conclusion (Barrouillet, 2011), that works by reducing decision making inputs and therefore, complexity (Martin, 2017).

In their influential paper on decision making, Samuelson and Zeckhauser (1988) found decision makers exhibit a significant bias towards the status quo; *the mighty status quo*, as referenced and coined by Martin (2017). Their results find that this preference for the status quo results from convenience, habit or inertia, out of fear of the transition costs and commitment to sunk costs, loss aversion, or though self-rationalization (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Simply stated, status quo bias explains, at least in part and at certain times, one's preference to maintain their current situation (Kim & Kankanhalli, 2009). The status quo operates as a reference point and because it is grounded in loss aversion, change is avoided, and the recipient of change has a strong preference in favour of the present (Eidelman & Crandall, 2012). The main principle is that people prefer what they have already experienced, what is known, and can be summarized as '*… all things being equal, people prefer what they perceive to be the current state of affairs …*' (Prentice & Koehler, 2003, p. 597); we are attracted to the certainty of the status quo (Kim & Kankanhalli, 2009).

We can see the effects of status quo bias across diverse settings. Classic examples of status quo bias include:

- the QWERTY keyboard – the deliberate staggering of common letters to slow typists down and therefore reduce typewriter keys/arms from jamming; a need that has been redundant for many decades (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988);
- not cancelling long term magazine subscriptions; even after the arriving magazine is no longer read (Schneider et al., 2018); and
- unwavering consumer brand loyalty, with no logical or explainable reasoning (Polites & Karahanna, 2012).

To further elaborate and link to the organizational change setting, most people are reluctant to change their habits; to move away from or give up the status quo (Garvin & Roberto, 2005). People want to maintain the status quo because they are committed to aspects of what they know, what they have, and what they do now (Evans & Evans, 2019). The status quo is a rich source of intelligence, a true (not predicted, promised, or professed) reality, a reliable present and tangible authority (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Through the lens of status quo bias, employee's resistance to change in the form of reluctance or unwillingness to embrace change can be appreciated as a predictable human response (McKay et al., 2012).

Employees have a desire to maintain the status quo (Del Val & Fuentes, 2003; Galbraith, 2018; McDonald, 2015). Feelings of loss associated with giving up of part or all of what exists is commonly enacted and treated as resistance (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Guidetti et al., 2018; Kim & Kankanhalli, 2009; Oreg, 2018). Therefore, it can be surmised that some elements of employee change resistance can potentially be correlated, at least in part, to the inescapability of status quo bias, and the way the status quo is, or isn't, communicated in change effort activity. Having conceptualized this complication with the Kotter eight-step change model, we return briefly to Kotter's reflections, over the years, on the status quo (even when he does not flag it specifically as such) in preparation to adapt the model to mitigate against invoking employee anxiety and stress.

Seeing the Danger in Vilifying the Status Quo – Kotter's Contradiction

As we have discussed, the Kotter eight-step change model recognizes the critical influence of the status quo on change efforts; seeking to problematise it. However, in stark contrast and contradiction, Kotter has also acknowledged that generally people are mostly content with the status quo (Kotter, 2008) and even where there is a dissatisfaction with the status quo, individuals are still likely to choose the status quo over an uncertain future (Kotter, 1995). This is likely driven by a fear that they will not have the new skills and behaviours required in the future state (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). Kotter (2008, p. 119) acknowledges that this tendency to prefer the status quo means fabricating a crisis can have adverse consequences: '*Crises can hurt people, disrupt plans, or even cripple an organization or community beyond repair*'. Kotter has amplified this warning in recent times stating that the burning platform analogy creates anxiety, anger and stress and that '*In an increasingly complex world, with more threats and potential problems being thrown at us every day, it is becoming harder and harder to mobilize sustained action through a 'burning platform'* (Kotter et al., 2021, p. 30).' However, despite Kotter's recognition of the risk in positioning the status quo as dangerous, his eight-step change model does not recognise and has not been modified to constructively account for the influence of status quo bias. Hughes (2016) furthers this criticism by noting that even though Kotter acknowledges and espouses increasing instability the modern working world, his model has remained largely stable/static; a contradiction that cannot be reconciled. More condemnation is launched by Hughes (2016) when he notes that Kotter promotes building trust between employee and organization as being a tenet for successful change, but at the same time, Kotter encourages the manufacturing of a crisis i.e. claim that the building is on fire. To Hughes (2016), this contradiction is not only dishonest but also ethically deplorable.

In addition to this currently unresolved matter relating to the status quo, the Kotter eight-step change model has been subject to critique (Appelbaum et al., 2012); the model is based on Kotter's personal business and research experience, produced without empirical validation, with a focus on usability for change practitioners (Appelbaum et al., 2012). To address criticism relating to lack of empirical efficacy for the Kotter eight-step change model, Appelbaum et al. (2012) published an article in the *Journal of Management Development* titled Back to the future: revisiting the Kotter change model, in which they reviewed the Kotter eight-step change model to draw comment on whether academic literature, pre and post its release, provided support for the proposal. No other such comparable study could be found during preparation of this article. In essence, Appelbaum et al. (2012) sought to interrogate research literature to see if any evidence could be identified to support the Kotter eight-step change model. Appelbaum et al. (2012, p. 764) concluded that '*No evidence was found against the Kotter* [eight-step] *change model and it remains a recommendable reference*'; it should, however, be noted that Appelbaum's appreciation of Kotter does not give validity or reliability to Kotter's consultancy-based observations.

Number-step (n-step) change management models follow rigid sequential steps, and in the process of doing so can be naïve, narrow, and lacking respect of context – ignorant of human agency (Collins, 1998). Change management should be considered an ongoing process, rather than a one-off event or linear succession of stages (Dawson, 2019). The Kotter eight-step change model is n-step in approach. Originally, Kotter (1996) stressed that each of his eight-steps should be deployed in order (one through to eight), and that skipping ahead too far or missing even one single step can leave a change practitioner/organization/effort without a solid base, resulting in almost always the creation of problems. However, after many years of external criticism with respects to this rigid approach, Kotter revised his stance in 2014 to acknowledge that the steps can now run concurrently (Hughes, 2016). Even with revisions, the Kotter eight-step change model still approaches the status quo in a manner that is problematic to employee well-being.

Given the research we have presented regarding Appreciative Inquiry, approach versus avoidance motivation and status quo bias, we propose that there is evidence to call the Kotter eight-step change model into question, and that starting on an unsound base (i.e. vilifying the status quo), whether steps are concurrent or not, will negatively impact the change effort from the outset.

Methodological Interlude

Given the noted lack of empirical support for the Kotter eight-step change model, the dubious foundation it is based – through Lewin's purported research, Kotter's acknowledgement of the risks in promoting the status quo as dangerous, other noted contra dictions from Kotter himself, and the research we have presented, we see a critical need to explore a means to respond appreciatively (rather than combatively) to the unavoidable status quo bias. To achieve this aim we adopt a theory adaptation approach in the following sections: applying analytical rigour to extend understanding, application, and/or the effectiveness of a theory or concept that is already in existence (Hirschheim, 2008; Jaakkola, 2020); to develop and deliver a logical and complete argument (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). Management methods wear down over time – critical examination and blind spot identification, as we suggest we have already provided in our argument, can lead to advanced application opportunities and effectiveness, rather than the method(s) simply fading away over time (Kühl, 2020). While flawed in parts, as demonstrated in this paper, the Kotter eight-step change model, and change management models in general, provide structure and coordination to a change effort – acknowledging that they should be more considerate of social contexts, as noted by Collins (1998), and the ongoing, not fixed, nature of change in an organization (Dawson, 2019). Therefore, in following the advice of Cummings et al. (2017), we seek to question existing belief, stimulate a pause for thought, and to encourage change practitioners to think (and hopefully act) a little differently. Theory adaptation aims to change the scope or perspective of an existing theory by introducing and informing it with other theories or perspectives (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). Therefore, in the following sections we move beyond our review and critique of Kotter's influential eight-step change model and adapt the model/approach with an appreciative view of status quo bias along with insights from motivation theory (and some of Kotter's more recent commentary). It is our humble hope that this expedites the breaking of new and exciting ground, stimulating further organizational change research (see, for example, Jaakkola, 2020), while reducing employee stress during change initiatives and increasing the likelihood of achieving documented change effort objectives.

Extending Understanding – Appreciatively Leveraging Status Quo Bias for Change with Less Anxiety

Our theory adaptation is a change practitioner call to action – for a profound revision in how we communicate a change effort; creating urgency while leveraging the influence of status quo bias to minimize anxiety and leverage approach motivation. To recall, changes that appear to be positive or rational still involve stress and uncertainty, and one of the common reasons change is resisted, is through a fear of losing something of value (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; van Dam et al., 2021). Kotter (2008) defined urgency as being of pressing importance, and advised against creating panic to achieve it. This is advice that we will heed moving forward, and introduce into our proposal in an appreciative manner – looking for major opportunities where they exist. We propose that urgency can be achieved without positioning the status quo as dangerous, and therefore creating fear of losing something of value. A way to overcome resistance to change is to educate employees about it beforehand (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). However, it is what change practitioners communicate that can result in an appreciative leveraging of status quo bias. Employees' desire certainty, and research indicates that this can be found in the known and the now (their bias towards to the status quo). As such, we propose an amendment to how change is introduced; change efforts are likely to benefit from the identification and communication of elements of the current state that will be retained in the change effort, rather than proclaiming that the status quo is dangerous. Overall, employees can then have confidence about certain elements remaining the same and a reduced fear of loss. This certainty about elements that will be unchanged can then balance anxiety relating to the unknowns in the future state, this should, in turn, lessen potential employee resistance. We call for fundamentally redirecting a change practitioner's focus, from approaching the future state and avoiding the current state, to approaching the future state with elements of the existing praised and staying intact; appreciatively leveraging the status quo.

To elaborate, if a disturbance to the status quo brings uncertainty and is feared (Bryson et al., 2021; van Dam et al., 2021), then highlighting elements of the status quo that will remain undisturbed (carrying over necessary or key skills etc.) must be in the favour of change practitioners and the organization, and employees. Change increases the risk of negative employee stress (Cameron & Green, 2020; Dahl, 2011), as does encouraging avoidance motivation (Elliot, 2006) but through communicating what will remain unchanged, change practitioners can leverage the status quo as an anchor and reference point (Eidelman & Crandall, 2012; Kim & Kankanhalli, 2009; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), and likely reduce resistance throughout the entire change process.

This adaptation to identify and communicate elements of the status quo that will be retained does not exclude the need to establish a sense of urgency. Despite the prevalence of their use, panic, anxiety, or fear are not necessary pre-requisites to urgency (Kloefkorn, 2016; Salman & Broten, 2017). In fact, human nature is not dominated by high analytical thinking, and our decisions are influenced by threats that overheat our survival mechanism that can result in fighting against the change (rather than flight towards the future state) (Kotter et al., 2021). We are human, we are emotional creatures and particularly in pressurized situations our cognitive biases and survival instincts will lead our thoughts and behaviours (Kotter, 2008; Kotter et al., 2021). Change practitioners cannot afford to rely on rational decision-making driving employees' behaviour. Rather, change practitioners would be advised to create urgency through communicating why the change is of pressing importance, rather than fear of the existing. To reiterate, 'pressing importance' should not be presented in terms of dangers in the status quo that need

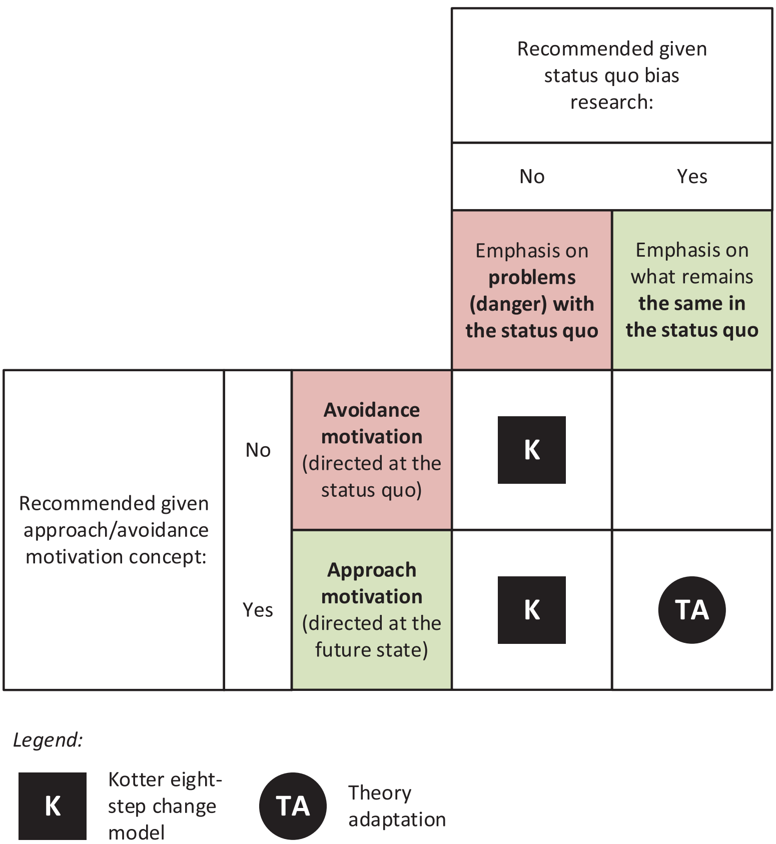

Figure 1. Integration of motivation and status quo (the Kotter eight-step change model versus our theory adaptation).

to be avoided, but rather competitive market realities and/or major opportunities that will be achieved through realizing the future state. When generating urgency, it makes both financial, and moral sense, for change practitioners to aim to reduce employee levels of anxiety and stress wherever possible (Moss, 2019). Figure 1 illustrates how the Kotter eight-step change model is different from our theory adaptation in terms of incorporation of both status quo and approach/avoidance motivation concepts.

Our theory adaptation reminds change practitioners to appreciatively leverage the power of status quo bias. Adopting this approach requires identification of elements of the current state that will remain the same and includes communication and promotion of the retainment of these elements. Urgency is important, and we propose that it can still be generated through communicating why the change effort is of pressing importance (which will include identifying and discussing major opportunities where they exist, as per wording contained within the original Kotter (1995) eight-step change model) – rather than identifying or fabricating and communicating about crises with the current state, as suggested by Kotter (Kotter, 1995, 1996).

An Unexpected Lever for Change Practitioners: Magnify the Status Quo

Our proposition has both theoretical and practical implications. We will first address the theoretical and how our model advances the change management literature through reconciling and integrating key ideas and revealing the potential of behavioural economics and motivation theory to inform research in this area; we also acknowledge the limitations of our conceptual theory adaptation. Second, we will discuss how our proposition can shape change management practice; particularly the need for an alternative approach to scoping change and the nature of engagement and communication in the early stages of change initiatives, along with the alleviation to identify or create current state crises.

Integrating the Change Literature and Stimulating New Directions

Our theory adaptation provides a reconciliation and integration of key concepts in the contemporary change management, psychology literature, and behavioural economics. The literature we have referenced acknowledges that problematization of the status quo, as suggested by Kotter, creates unnecessary angst and therefore potentially increases employee resistance. This risk is of concern given the influence of the Kotter eight-step change model in practice. Simultaneously, studies had described the benefits in taking an appreciative approach to change, leveraging approach motivation and extensive empirical research reports on the inescapability of status quo bias.

Our study has critically reflected upon this situation and then offered an integration of these concepts. We identified potentially unnecessary anxiety (created through positioning the status quo as dangerous) as to potentially contributing to increased levels of employee resistance. Given this, we then used an appreciative view of status quo bias to argue for a profound change in approach. We also use motivation theories to focus on creating urgency through communicating why the change is of pressing importance – invoking approach motivation, rather than leveraging avoidance motivation – pitched at the current state.

We acknowledge that a limit of our proposal is its conceptual nature and agree with Jaakkola (2020) that a theory adaptation paper lays the foundation for further research, including empirical validation. As such, we hope to inspire studies to test the impact of our theory adaptation in change initiatives; empirical investigation is necessary to support or dismiss the premises on which this conceptual paper is built. These studies could include but are not limited to surveys that ask respondents to select options from hypothetical scenarios that allow comparative analysis of the Kotter eight-step change model versus our proposition. Field studies including interviews and observation could also be used to explore the practice-based impact of amplifying the elements of the status quo that will remain the same in a change initiative and seeking to generate approach motivation. We also propose that our study points to the potential for better leveraging of heuristics and bias, and behavioural economics more broadly, to inform change management theory and practice.

Becoming Appreciative in Communication

For the change practitioner using our theory adaptation, the key implication is an amendment to their change scoping process and subsequent engagement and communication strategies. Previously, change management methods, except for Appreciative Inquiry, have brought a focus to what is going to change. This is understandable given the need, for example, to address skill or behavioural gaps between the current state and future state, which require planning, resourcing and so forth. However, our theory adaptation requires change practitioners to also consider what will remain unchanged as this becomes an input to engagement and communication activities and enables the status quo to be an anchor, reducing anxiety relating to the change.

In terms of engagement and communication, the elements of the status quo that are remaining the same should be featured, and future state opportunities amplified in an attempt to generate approach motivation. Acknowledging that choice should always be afforded, semantics matter and should be used in communications as a point of focus, to nudge message recipients towards a preferred organizational outcome (Ehrlinger et al., 2016; Kahneman et al., 1991). If the organization and change practitioners do not deliberately apply meaning to messages, employees will (Barr et al., 1992). Communications that focus on the opportunities afforded by the change effort and what is staying the same can lead sensemaking and should be prioritised.

In doing so, the communications work with employees' inherent cognitive bias towards the status quo, with an anticipated reduction in resistance. Specific examples of communications that align with our theory adaptation, with annotations to highlight the stability and consistency of the status quo and urgency through communicating a pressing reason for change towards which approach motivation can be directed are provided in Figure 2. Example one focuses on implementation timelines, and future state opportunities/benefits, and example two focuses only on implementation timelines. We emphasise that factual information on the change should still be shared, but importantly, the change narrative should also include leveraging status quo bias and generate urgency that invokes an approach (rather than avoidance) motivation response.

Importantly, within our theory adaptation change practitioners are alleviated of the need to focus on identifying or fabricating crises with the current state. Whilst some

Example	Communication artefact
1	The on-screen interface that we use for invoicing will be upgraded to a new platform *in 8 weeks' time. The new platform removes the need for you to manually record receipt numbers and paper postage, which we know has been a time-consuming inconvenience for some time*. *While* the new on-screen interface differs in appearance*, the skills you currently hold and processes you follow with respect to creating, sending, and acquitting an invoice, will fundamentally stay the same, as will the number and name of services that we provide*.
2	Today we announce a restructure that impacts our Team Leader level; *a restructure that will be fully implemented by the end of this Financial Year. While* the Team Leader that you report to may change*, the functioning of your job, the tasks that sit within and hours expected etc., will all remain the same. Performance reviews will stay as is, as will our bonus structure.*

Legend:

Black	The change
Green	*A compelling reason for change that is of pressing importance – creating urgency*
Blue	*Promoting consistent elements – utilizing status quo bias*

Figure 2. Communication excerpts, using our theory adaptation approach.

may disagree, we argue that the opportunities afforded by the future state should, on balance, provide appropriate approach motivation to the employees being asked to change, without vilifying the current state. We propose that this 'balance' should be central to a business case that is created by the assigned change practitioner. In situations where employees will ultimately be disadvantaged by the future state or where no current state elements will be carried over, we propose that a socially responsible organization should be fully transparent with respects to explaining that outcome, and seek to find ways to authentically protect and support employees.

Conclusion

Change management models, particularly the Kotter eight-step change model are pervasive in the practice community. This paper has identified a contradiction through critiquing the Kotter eight-step change model using existing literature, particularly status quo bias from behavioural economics and the concept of approach versus avoidance motivation. Specifically, when change practitioners position the status quo as dangerous and create urgency to shift from this current state through avoidance motivation, they are pushing against the powerful and unavoidable tendency of employees to favour the status quo. This leads to potential employee anxiety, and we have posited amplifies resistance and therefore negatively impacting the chances of achieving the document change effort objectives.

We found contradiction between the Kotter eight-step change model and his supporting commentary, and recommend that change practitioners appreciatively work *with* the status quo to prioritize the identification and communication of elements of the status quo that will remain the same. In addition, change practitioners create urgency through communicating why the change is of pressing importance with the aim of generating approach motivation. We feel our proposal is well justified given the empirical evidence for status quo bias, the positive impacts of approach motivation, and contemporary reflections on the risks of disrupting the status quo as part of a change management strategy. However, this does not negate the merit in empirical study of our conceptual proposal.

Change is unavoidable and organizations are increasingly accountable for protecting the well-being of their employees. Within this context, our theory adaption is a step towards a more socially responsible approach to change management.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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