

# “For my middle management penguins” America’s leadership guru tells fables

## Interview with John P. Kotter

John P. Kotter is known for his successful books on frame breaking change. Now the American Leadership and Change guru sets out to teach the masses about the dynamics of change in an unorthodox manner. By telling a story about ‘Fred’. Fred, the penguin.



John P. Kotter

By Job ten Bosch

“You might think that Fred was an odd bird, perhaps the kind of bird that other penguins did not want to spend time with. But that wasn’t really true. Fred was just doing what seemed right to him. As result, he became increasingly alarmed at what he saw.” This is part of the first chapter already published on [www.ouricebergismelting.com](http://www.ouricebergismelting.com).

a German chap, Holger Rathgeber, created a two hour training based on my books. In these trainings he let the participants play a role in a ‘penguin colony’. This triggered the imagination of the participants and created a playful environment. One day he send me an email about this and it all came together. I said to him “we should be writing a book together” so we did.

*“This book is the most powerful vehicle that I have ever written.”*

### CHANGE MANAGEMENT FOR THE MASSES?

Fables have culturally been a very powerful tool for getting a message across great distances. Furthermore, it also has roots in neurology since stories trigger more senses and therefore engages the brain more. This helps people to learn.

More important, it reaches also people without a business administration background. The use of micro-stories has proven to be a very effective tool within change processes itself. This book is the most powerful vehicle that I have ever written.

### SO IT ALSO ‘PRACTISING WHAT YOU PREACH’?

In a way it is. This book is in fact step 4 and 5 of my 8-step model. It is about communicating change and empowering others to act. Be aware, that my work is about non-incremental change. It is about those moments that you have to take giant leaps. (See also the separate BOX on Kotter’s 8-step model on transforming organisations)

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The title would make you believe Kotter’s new book is about global heating, but it is not. Instead it tells the story of a penguin colony faced with a challenge. Fred the penguin, our leading character, discovers that their iceberg is melting and that destruction of their penguin world is imminent. What now? Change!

### MR. KOTTER. A BOOK ABOUT PENGUINS IS NOT SOMETHING ONE WOULD USUALLY EXPECT.

In a way it’s even a logical extension of my earlier work. I started out with case studies in the mid 1990’s about the most common pitfalls one comes across when leading change.

My book The Heart of Change was a best seller all over the world, but was mainly bought by managers and CEO’s. For change to really happen, you need the whole organisation to understand the dynamics of it. To start a discussion about change, you need to make it understandable.

### HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH SUCH AN IDEA?

People, who I respected dearly, came to me and told me their whole organisation should understand my work on change or at least recognize the dynamics. At the same moment,

### YOUR BOOK WILL BE PUBLISHED IN SEVERAL LANGUAGES. EVEN IN DUTCH. THIS RAISES THE QUESTION IF YOUR MODEL ALSO WORKS IN OTHER CULTURES?

Today, I received an email of a group of young people in India. They feel that the country has to change. Those people are thinking nation wide and use the framework to help them doing it. Their question was mainly ‘How can you change the basic social norms in creating leadership and entrepreneurship?’ So they started talking with universities and created a board of trustees of distinguished people.

*“My middle level penguins are those who are going to start the fire.”*

This is mainly step one and two of my 8-step model, establishing a sense of urgency and creating a powerful coalition that can guide the change process. 75% of my work is build up from cases about corporate organisations from the US. But many governmental institutions have used my work with success in totally different countries. I often get messages of churches and the first to pick up on the

## Eight Steps to Transform Your Organization

1. Establish a Sense of Urgency
2. Form a Powerful Guiding Coalition
3. Create a Vision
4. Communicate the Vision
5. Empower Others to Act on the Vision
6. Plan for and Create Short-Term Wins
7. Consolidate Improvements and Produce Still More Change
8. Institutionalize New Approaches



penguin book was the US Military. It is topic neutral, it is system neutral and, most of all, it is cultural neutral.

### BUT DOES IT ALWAYS REQUIRE A TOP-DOWN APPROACH?

Certainly not! Just as in my story change often starts in the middle of the organisation. Fred is not a leader of the pack, nor is he an absolute beginner. He is just a middle management penguin. It starts in the middle of the organisation. The top of the organisation is vast asleep. It’s just this curious penguin that starts the process. Of course, when you have a brilliant leader then it radiates down the organisation very fast, but those people are very scarce. The point is that change can commence everywhere. It is not a chaotic process.

### CLIMATE CHANGE IS AN TOPIC RUUD LUBBERS ALSO ADDRESSES IN THIS ISSUE. HOW DOES YOUR VIEW ON CHANGE MANAGEMENT RELATE TO THIS?

The change you are talking about is huge. People tend to even underestimate this in much smaller changes. They tell me they are trying to jump 5 metres, but what they have to cross is more about 50 metres. Al Gore’s movie, The Inconvenient Truth, came out over

here a few months ago, and what he is trying to do, more than anything, is to create a sense of urgency. He created not just a presentation, but he included drama and a story. I wish we had better measures to see if the way he is doing this, is working out. You can get a significant amount people in the USA and at least a quarter of them will deny that there is a global climate problem. Of these people, those who are really on their toes are just 10 percent. This needs to be more around the 60 percent. You need them, if you really want to start a fire. It is hard to get leverage on this. If you dig underneath,... it is just not there. People have no appealing argument to change their way of life. In the oil industry they use the burning platform metaphor. People start to feel the sense of urgency when the platform is on fire. But then it is too late. You won’t get much change, when everybody is dead.

### OUR ICEBERG IS MELTING

The Dutch version of Kotter’s book has ISBN 90.470.0092.7 The book’s rights have been sold for every of the 12 main languages except for one language in Europe. “No interest from the French. Lord help us”

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