

Running Head: Theories of Leadership

Theories of Leadership and Their Application to Change:  
A Comparison and Contrast of the Leadership Theories of Max De Pree and Jim Collins  
With Discussion on Leading Change Applying Theories of John Kotter

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## Introduction

For nearly 15 years, Max De Pree served as the CEO and Chairman of his family's furniture company, The Herman Miller Company, which was founded in 1923. During at least the past two decades, the company has been lauded by *Fortune* magazine, *Business Ethics* journal, and *Human Resources Executive* in such categories as Top 10 Most Admired Companies in the United States, 100 Best Corporate Citizens, and 50 Most Admired Companies for Human Resource Practices. In his book, *Leadership Is an Art*, De Pree (2004) writes about the leadership experiences and philosophies that earned him and the company these honors and dozens more.

Long after Max De Pree stepped down from his company's board, Jim Collins, a Stanford professor turned management researcher, embarked on a five-year study of systematically selected Fortune 500 companies to learn how good companies make the leap to great. (Herman Miller, a Fortune 1000 company, was not eligible to be considered for study.) His national bestseller *Good to Great* resulted in, among other things, what Collins (2001a) describes as timeless principles of leadership (p. 15).

The original purpose of this research paper was to compare and contrast the principles of leadership as experienced first hand by Max De Pree and as researched and compiled by Jim Collins. Ultimately, however, the authors' experiences and findings are similarly rooted in several key themes including: character, vision, team, communication, and momentum. While there are some points of contrast in their approach to these themes, their key requirements for effective leadership are quite comparable.

The five themes noted above make up the key sections of this paper. Using John Kotter's (1996, 2001) theories about leading change, each section includes discussion about how the highlighted leadership principle can be applied specifically to a change endeavor.

## Character

Max De Pree (2004) and Jim Collins agree that a true leader is not, in any way, egotistical. Collins's (2001a) studies show, for example, that leaders are compellingly modest, mild-mannered, gracious, and understated, (p. 27). Collins (2001a) further notes that great leaders, whom he calls "Level 5 leaders," channel attention away from themselves and toward the people (and a certain amount of luck) who contributed to the company's success. He calls this the "window and the mirror." He explains that these self-effacing, humble leaders will look in the mirror when something goes wrong, looking only to themselves for blame and accountability. When things go right, however, they immediately go to the window to give credit to their followers and good fortune. Yes, I like the mirror and the window concept. The Level 5 leader's ambition has to be for the greatness of the work and the company, rather than for self and ego (Collins, 2001a, pp. 33-35). During his research, one of Collins's (2001a) many observations about egotistical leaders was the number of times they used the pronoun "I" versus "we." In one example, the I-centered leader used "I" 44 times and "we" only 16 times (p. 26).

Similarly, De Pree (2004) refers to the leader as a humble steward and a servant. He writes that a good leader does not think about what the institution owes the leader but, rather, what the leader owes the institution. He refers to the leader in this way as servant (p. 12). As a point of contrast, Collins (2001a) and his research team are adamant that the term "servant" does not adequately describe a Level 5 leader because, while humble, modest, and self-effacing, the Level 5 leader also has ferocious resolve (p. 30). Paradoxically, in their quiet, humble way, the Level 5 leader is "...fanatically driven, infected with an incurable need to produce results" (Collins, 2001a, p. 30). Effective leaders make tough decisions, in the best interest of the company (not themselves), if that is what it takes.

The character of an effective leader does, of course, expand beyond ego. De Pree (2004) writes at length about a leader's maturity that is expressed by their sense of self-worth, belonging, expectancy, responsibility, accountability, and equality. He says that the mature leader fosters an environment that values trust, dignity, and personal development (p. 16). Ultimately, it is clear that both authors believe that great leaders do not sit on pedestals; rather, they walk among the people in a very ordinary way.

### *Character and Change*

In his book, *Leading Change*, John Kotter (1996) says that the problem with big egos is that they fill up the room, leaving little space for anybody else (p. 59). During a change effort, therefore, the leader must be held accountable to keep their ego in check. A consultant should listen to the leader's language and observe their behavior. Ultimately, what is the intent for change? Is it for personal gain and "savior" status? Or is it first and foremost for the health and well being of the company and its stakeholders?

An appreciative inquiry exercise might be one way to move the focus off an I-centric leader and onto others. For example, a consultant might ask the leader: "Name five people in this organization whose presence you would really miss if they were gone tomorrow. For each person, name three of their most outstanding gifts and/or contributions to the organization." To take the exercise one step further, the leader might be required to speak face-to-face with each person and express their gratitude for that team member's contributions. Nice exercise idea.

### Vision

De Pree (2004) writes, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality" (p. 11). He further describes the vision as a well-thought-out strategy that is easily communicated to the organization with specific directions and plans (p. 18). Followers look to the leader for a description of the destination.

Collins (2001a) uses the behavior of hedgehogs — which have a simple and easily engaged defense mechanism — to explain the leader’s formulation of the vision. Leaders, like hedgehogs, simplify a complex world into a single, organizing idea, the kind of basic principle that unifies, organizes, and guides all decisions (p. 91).

De Pree (2004) and Collins (2001a) differ, however, in how and when the vision is formulated and revealed to the organization. De Pree (2004) contends that leadership starts with the vision (p. 11); the leader creates their vision and rallies their people around it. Conversely, Collins (2001a), using the analogy of a bus, suggests that first the leader gets the right people in the right seats on the bus; together, the leader and the people then decide where the bus is going; the leader and their team together create the vision only after they have organized themselves (pp. 41-42).

### *Vision and Change*

Vision is essential to a change effort. Cummings and Worley (2005) write, “In the absence of vision, change is likely to be disorganized and diffuse” (p. 157). Kotter (1996) contends that the most effective vision can be described in five minutes or less; therefore, any employee can describe and grasp the vision. Without this level of interest and understanding from the employees, there could be trouble (p. 9).

The change leader must be coached about the value of a simplistic and consistent vision as a critical success factor. Ultimately, the vision is what directs, aligns, and inspires the employees. The vision tells people where they are going and how to get there. The change leader must be coached to create a clear, concise, and memorable vision statement without which a change effort will likely derail.

## Team

As with all leadership theories, team rises to the top — or close to it. Not surprisingly, therefore, De Pree (2004) and Collins (2001a) agree in the imperative of a good team. For example, using the metaphor of a body, De Pree (2004) says, “The measure of leadership is not in the quality of the head, but the tone of the body. The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers” (De Pree, 2004, p. 12). He goes on to say that a good leader recognizes that each person brings unique and special gifts and talents to the organization. In the diversity of those special gifts and talents, the leader and the team members recognize that each person is needed (p. 9). “The art of leadership lies in polishing and liberating and enabling those gifts” (De Pree, 2004, p.10).

While De Pree (2004) and Collins (2001a) do have similar views on team, Collins actually takes the idea to another level. His research shows that it is not enough to have “the people”; rather, an organization must have the *right* people. According to Collins (2001a), the old HR slogan, “People are our most important asset” turns out to be wrong. “People are *not* your most important asset. The *right* people are” (p. 13). In fact, he implores leaders to excuse the people who no longer benefit the organization, replace them with the right people, get all the right people in the right positions, and only when the right people are in place, figure out where to go with them (Collins, 2001a, 43-45). And whereas De Pree (2004) discusses how the leader needs to polish the gifts of the employees, Collins (2001b) believes that the right people are so exceptionally skilled and gifted, they bring their own level of motivation to the team (p. 1).

Another key requirement for leading the team is to involve the people in the journey. De Pree (2004) calls this “participative management” and explains that participative management begins with recognition of the special gifts employees bring to their jobs. He believes that every employee has the right to have a voice and the ability to influence problem solving and decision

making. He further explains that participative management is rooted in relationships. The leader's job is to foster those rights and relationships (p. 25). Collins (2001a) agrees that involving people in the journey is a critical success factor. He explains that the follower of a Level 5 leader is not the type of person who blindly takes orders with a "do as told" mentality. Instead, the follower "...is a strong leader in their own right, so driven and talented that she builds her arena into one of the best in the world" (p. 60).

### *Teams and Change*

A leader without people is like a conductor without musicians — unimaginable. A leader cannot make music without their employees. Often, however, the burden for change rests on the shoulder of a few executives at the top level of the organization. To relieve that burden, De Pree (2004) and Collins (2001a) reason that involving more people in the process will not only ease the burden but, more importantly, it will also expand the array of ideas, generate acceptance for the change, and reduce resistance. This is where Collins's position on people is compelling and creates a good principle for the change leader: surround yourself with the *right* people.

When working on a change effort with a client organization, it is imperative to coach the change leader in creating a new team — or reorganizing an existing team — that is equally committed as the leader to achieving the desired state. Kotter (1996) offers suggestions about creating a team of change agents which he calls "the guiding coalition" (p. 52). Among the compelling reasons for a guiding coalition are that the coalition can process more information faster and act more quickly than an individual can. Kotter recommends four key characteristics of the guiding coalition: position power — enough people in power positions so that efforts toward change are not easily blocked; expertise — various points of view and experience so that the team makes informed decisions; credibility — a credible team will be taken seriously by the

other employees; and leadership — the team should include enough proven leaders to drive the change process (p. 57). Collins's (2001b) offers a great "bottom line" on the importance of the right team: "Great vision with mediocre people still produces mediocre results" (p. 1).

### Communication

An effective leader is a good communicator. Both De Pree (2004) and Collins (2001a) give significant space to this essential leadership skill. De Pree (2004) challenges leaders to use communication so well that it becomes a "handy and well-used tool" (p. 103). He suggests that good communication is the result of sending and receiving accurate information and of, more importantly, good listening. He offers the tradition of the conch shell as a wonderful cultural symbol from the South Pacific. A speaker holds a conch shell as a temporary symbol of authority. Knowing that they do not have all the answers, a leader must understand who holds the conch — who should be listened to and when (p. 20). He further writes, "It [communication] is the way people can bridge the gaps formed by a growing company, stay in touch, build trust, ask for help, monitor performance, and share their vision" (De Pree, 2004, p. 102). He defines good communication as truthful, clear, and simple and reminds leaders that the only way people can get their job done is with timely, pertinent information. By providing such information, leaders free their employees to get the job done (De Pree, 2004, p. 107).

Collins (2001a) agrees. "Leadership is equally about creating a climate where the truth is heard and the brutal facts confronted" (p. 74). He suggests four basic practices for creating a communicative environment: lead with questions, not answers — leaders should have enough humility to realize they do not have all the answers; engage in dialogue and debate, not coercion; conduct autopsies without blame — in other words, be willing to look at what went wrong, but do not point fingers; and build "red flag" mechanisms which provides the team with "everybody

stop what you're doing and listen to me" opportunities, particularly when the information is viewed as critically important to achieving the vision (Collins, 2001a, pp. 74-80).

### *Communication and Change*

Kotter (1996) explains that frequent, credible communication is the way to capture employees' hearts and minds. He sites three patterns of communication that will sink a transformation effort. The first is actually a lack of communication: when the new vision is infrequently communicated. The second destructive pattern is when only the top leader is sharing the message; other key team members, although supportive of the vision, remain quiet. The third pattern is when the top leaders espouse the new vision and then act in ways that are inconsistent with the message — employee cynicism ensues.

In short, the transformational leader must be coached to walk the talk of the new vision. The new vision must be communicated, communicated, communicated. The leader's behavior and messages must be consistent with the desired state. Various important topics for communication should include, but are not limited to, why the change is occurring, how it will benefit the people and the organization, and expectations for how the people will be involved in making the vision a reality.

In addition to being fastidious about the messages they send, leaders must also be alert to the messages they receive. For example, a leader who observes and listens carefully will be able to guide employees through their resistance. So, the leader should be coached to pay attention to how employees are communicating their resistance to change. What are they saying, or not saying, and/or how are they behaving that communicates their messages of resistance? The change leader, if listening for it, will also hear from their employees about what is working or not working, a process of self-correction during implementation of change.

## Momentum

Momentum is a physics term which refers to an object's motion. The more motion an object has, the more momentum it has. The more momentum it has, the harder it is to stop the object. According to both De Pree (2004) and Collins (2001a), an effective leader is able to create momentum among their team. De Pree (2004) suggests that the leader has to make space for momentum to gather. They do this by clearly articulating the vision and expectations for the organization (p. 17). Strength or force builds as individual employees begin to fulfill their responsibilities toward meeting the goals of the organization. Momentum becomes even greater as the individuals become intertwined in their execution of the vision and strategies (De Pree, 2004, p. 17-18).

Similarly, Collins (2001a) uses the flywheel — a massive, 5,000 pound metal disk mounted horizontally on an axis — as a symbol of momentum. The leader begins with very small nudges on the heavy flywheel. These nudges might be, for example, the slow formulation of the leader's vision or preparing his team for change. The movement of the flywheel (the organization) might be barely perceptible at this point. Then, the vision becomes more clear and solidified; now the leader is pushing a bit harder on the flywheel (consistent messages), and small amounts of movement can be seen. Soon, the employees gather around and see that the goal (the company's vision) is to move the flywheel, so they join in by executing their responsibilities in alignment with the vision. And with each push on the flywheel, it begins to move faster and faster toward the goal (p. 164-165).

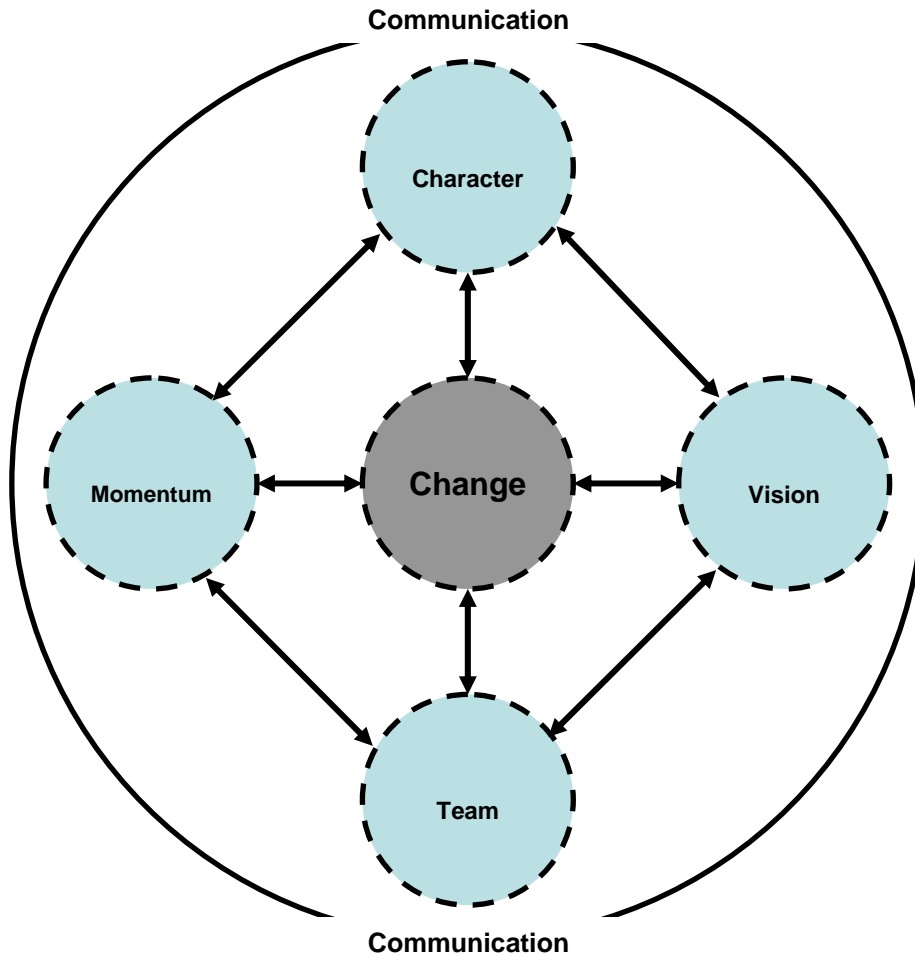
### *Momentum and Change*

De Pree (2004) and Collins (2001a) raise two important points about momentum. The first is that, although momentum is nearly imperceptible in the beginning, eventually employees begin to experience the sense of movement and energy that occurs when their actions become intertwined. There is a rhythm or a flow to that sense of interconnectedness that is highly motivating. The second important point is that momentum starts and builds very slowly. Although it might feel as though there was suddenly a breakthrough, there actually is no exact point in time — no one particular push on the flywheel — where the team says, “Aha! That was *the* push that put this thing in motion.”

Kotter (2001) writes, “A central feature of modern organization is interdependence, where no one has complete autonomy...unless many individuals line up and move together in the same direction, people will tend to fall all over one another.” The lesson for the change leader is that change is slow and deliberate. The breakthrough may feel or appear sudden, but there is actually a buildup toward the breakthrough. The change leader should be coached to steadfastly exert pressure on the flywheel all the while making room for the team to gather and join in.

### Conclusion

The key areas for comparison and contrast in this paper were presented into neatly organized and individual themes: character, vision, team, communication, and momentum. In reality, however, there are no definitive boundaries between these various aspects of leadership. They are clearly interconnected. The diagram on the following page represents how character, vision, team, momentum, and communication might appear as a change leadership model.



Change is a long-term, methodical proposition. Collins (2001b) uses the analogy of a chicken that finally breaks the shell and jumps out of the egg. From the outside world's perspective, the chicken suddenly, in one moment, on one day, broke through the egg. To the chicken, however, the moment of breakthrough was not so sudden. Rather, it was one more step in a chain of steps, not a radical transformation (p.1). "Ask the good-to-great executives when changed happened. They cannot pinpoint a single key event that exemplified their successful transition" (Collins, 2001b, p. 1). Change is not a single event; it is not a program or a "flavor of the month." Change is the culmination of events, maneuvers, ideas, strategies, thinking, practices, etc. It is the culmination of the leader's character, vision, team, and momentum, and the way the leader communicates consistently and continually throughout the transformation.

One role of an OD consultant is to observe the change leader — using such competencies as character, vision, team, momentum, and communication — provide feedback, and coach the leader along in implementing the leader’s vision for transformation. Collins (2001a) shares a promising result from his five-year research, “I believe that potential Level 5 leaders exist all around us, if we just know what to look for, and that many people have the potential to evolve into Level 5” (p. 39).

### Following the Leader — Lessons Learned

Fifteen years ago, I was working for what was, at the time, the third largest provider of long term care in the country. Although I worked in a staff position — director of sales and marketing — I reported directly to a VP of Operations with a dotted line to the Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Bill Alberts. I was with the company for several years before Bill came on board, and at the time he arrived, I was on “special assignment” for the Chairman of the Board. My special assignment duty was to roll out the company’s newly created sales training program of which I was a co-designer. The rollout was well received and considered a successful endeavor. At the conclusion of the assignment, I returned to my regular responsibilities as director of sales and marketing for the company’s largest division (in terms of both geography and profit).

Shortly after I returned to my “regular” job and my newly acquired dotted line leader, I began to feel uncomfortable. I could not quite put my finger on it, but something was different. What was wrong with everyone? Had I outgrown my job? Had they learned to live without me while I was gone? What on earth happened?

As it turns out, the sales and marketing department was in the early stage of transformation and, and as they say, the only person who likes change is a wet baby — no

wonder I was feeling so uncomfortable. First, I had a newly established dotted line reporting relationship to “the new guy” who had a vision which didn’t necessarily include the sales program I had tenderly incubated and brought to life. “He obviously doesn’t get it,” I thought. Second, “the new guy” was gathering together the *right* people who brought with them ideas and expectations that, quite frankly, just weren’t “the way we do things around here.” Third, “the new guy” was driving me nuts with all his communication about current state, desired state, and the gap in between. “Gap? What gap?,” I wondered, “There’s no gap. We’ve been doing a perfectly fine job, thank you very much.”

Of course, I write this brief scenario, which doesn’t do my resistance justice, with the intention of poking some fun at myself. The truth is, when I look back on all the leaders I have ever followed, Bill Alberts is in the top tier. What follow are two lessons that, 15 years later, still stand out as key learnings about following the leader. The first lesson is actually about leading; I learned this by observing the leader from my follower’s shoes. The second lesson is about following.

### *The Lesson About Leading*

Be consistent. In spite of the initial (severe) resistance from not only his acquired team but also from his colleagues in operations, Bill stayed true to his vision. He never wavered; he didn’t relinquish. He stayed calm and patient and kept everyone involved in planning and creating the vision. Bill consistently communicated his ideas based on logic, compassion, and sound reasoning — qualities of good communication cited by De Pree (2004, p. 107). To me, specifically, he frequently handed the conch so that he and the new members of the team could learn about lessons from “the field.” (No doubt it was also a strategy on his part to simmer the fire of resistance.) Ultimately, our team was together for nearly four years. We created and

executed some remarkably successful sales and marketing initiatives that would never have occurred without Bill's leadership. Certainly there are a variety lessons in this story: involving the team, listening to them, and managing their resistance, to name a few. But for me, after all these years, the one thing that always stands out above all was Bill's consistency.

### *The Lesson About Following*

Set your ego aside. My own resistance to the changes Bill was implementing was what Cummings and Worley (2005) refer to as political resistance (p. 158). In short, I took Bill's recommendations for change personally — as though his recommendations were somehow intended to make his light shine brighter than mine. In reality, once I lifted the veil of ego, I realized there was nothing to fear. Bill was involving me as much as possible in the transformation, he was incorporating my skill set into the planning, and he was looking out the window and sharing recognition all around.

There is one more thing I gained from Bill. I think of it more as a gift than a lesson. A key qualification that Bill required of the *right* team members (in this case, I am speaking of the employees he hired, not the ones he acquired), was an MBA "from a good school." As a result, rather than focusing on what the new team members did have, I, of course, focused on what I did not have; in seeped more feelings of inadequacy. To this day, I still do not agree entirely with Bill's philosophy about an MBA from a good school (for reasons not applicable to the context of this paper) and the way it was presented to us; what I do agree with, however, is the value of higher education, life-long learning, and expertise, to name a few.

Would I be at JFK today were it not for the leader who espoused higher education and masters degrees? Probably so. But I know for sure that 15 years after the fact, I still felt influenced by him when I made my decision to enroll. However, sorry Bill, it's not an MBA.

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