



Challenge
#14

*Based on the solutions for 50 recognizable change dilemmas,
described in the book 'De Notenkraker' © 2021 – A. Kloosterboer.
Business Contact.*

Change from above or change from below?

The time has come. Everyone agrees that business-as-usual will lead to disaster. People want change. If the 'top' doesn't immediately chart a strategic course toward a better future for all, then certainly the 'bottom' will take action and begin implementing operational changes.

Whether one discusses the basic needs of developing countries, the necessity of political reforms, or the restructuring of an enormous corporate business, *one issue continuously arises* in thoughtful, nuanced discussions on how change happens.

If what people want is the most positive change for the most significant number of people involved, then which approach is the most effective, efficient, and sustainable in the long term?

Does transformation flow from top-down or grow from bottom-up?

Throughout the 20th century, heated discussions, often but not always in good faith, between 'grassroots' coalitions and respected 'titans of industry' could never quite agree on where to begin.

At the best of times, the bottom might demand that the top leadership take responsibility and act to ameliorate grievances. The top would typically respond: "make us do it," or "you give it a go then!" In other words, the bottom might demand a top-down strategy, and the top might refuse and instead insist on a bottom-up operational approach. During the worst of times, this dilemma leads to a direct conflict over who is *actually in charge* of the organisation.

Top-down change evokes an unfortunate and false notion of an insulated group of privileged egoists ignorant of conditions 'on the ground', lacking the empathy and practical skillsets to navigate through real-world entanglements.

Bottom-up change evokes a similarly unfortunate and false notion; that of a 'rabble-rousing', aimless and purposeless mob of discontented upstarts who lack the long-term vision and strategic oversight to steer the organisation toward a better future.

We are all familiar with these stereotypes, which is why this dilemma is so toxic and outdated. Top-down change, it turns out, is just about as effective as bottom-up change and vice versa.



People do want to change.
No one wants to be
changed.

The issue is *not whether* the top or the bottom should initiate change. Change originates from both. How should leaders from the top and bottom - who share mutual trust and belief in the organisation's mission - approach differently according to their functional roles?

Politics aside, the truth emerges quite quickly with egos in check and resources secured. The entire discussion is based on the false premise that only one or the other scenario is possible - that the top and bottom, the strategy-minded and operations-minded, must remain forever in opposition. This is false. There is no dilemma!

The Dual Approach

Let us think of things differently. Rather than focusing on the clash of egos and interests involved in change, let's look at another thought experiment from our colleague Anne Kloosterboer, described in her book, *De Notenkraker*.

Kloosterboer paints a picture of *exploration* in the name of change. Which approach to exploration should we follow? Should we *board a cruise* or go backpacking? There are clear advantages and disadvantages to both. But why should we be limited to one or the other?

Shall we plan a change cruise or go backpacking for change?

Managing top-down change differs from "forcing" or "imposing" top-down change. You can select a *push or a pull approach* when choosing your change journey. Compare it with going on a cruise or going backpacking.

A cruise has clear timelines and milestones and has a defined character with a clear start and end point. The approach feels more rigorous and is more often experienced as a push. A cruise approach generally works well when changing more rational issues such as organisational structure, processes, and systems.

Going backpacking generally means taking a more flexible and organic path. Principles and goals are presented, but people direct their change process; it is experienced as a 'pull'. This approach usually helps to change behaviour and ways of working.

But is it one or the other?

Success Story

Take your backpack on the cruise

Duelling directors decide on a dual approach

Let's look at the example of a well-known company and its fashion-conscious consumers. They decided their mission would be to transform from a traditional to a circular organisation in five years.

However, the company's two most influential directors could not agree on how this mission should be achieved. One of the two believed in a centrally led, strict change approach, arguing that this would be faster. On the other hand, their colleague felt in an organic process because it would change a ripple effect.

After weeks and months of heated discussion, the directors concluded that one approach could not exist without the other. Establishing and anchoring the circular

strategy in the organisational structure requires an organised process. It was managed centrally and had a start and end date: a cruise.

The result was a clearly formulated objective at the heart of the corporate strategy- 'People and Planet' – built on environmental sustainability and labour fairness. A sustainability impact board was set up with directors from each discipline responsible for implementing the plan.

To change their beliefs, behaviour, and ways of working, they went “back-packing” and chose a flexible route. Large groups of managers and employees were stimulated to find out how they could organise their daily work differently in line with the circular idea.

This dual approach ultimately led to a balanced change process in which co-creation took place with employees within clear corporate strategy and organisational structure frameworks.

Why only go cruising when you can go backpacking as well? Why go for one or the other when you can do both?

In this article, we've shown that the change dilemma of top-down vs bottom-up is a false dilemma, an outdated mode of thinking that defines strategic leadership in eternal opposition to the operational shop floor.

Implementing these two approaches simultaneously gives people room to explore while providing guidance by setting frameworks. When going for a dual approach, you lead your transformation by pushing and pulling at the same time.

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