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## The change management story of the UN Communications Team in Viet Nam

This report is an attempt to tell the change management story of the UN Communications Team in Viet Nam from spring 2006 to spring 2009. It is hoped that fellow pilot countries working to establish functional clustering, the UN system in general and in particular other teams in Viet Nam will learn from these experiences.

It is important to note that the Communications Team (the Team) was not following a change strategy at the time, their own or for the UN as a whole. So, this attempt at a change management analysis of the Team is being done looking back, with the benefit of hindsight and models of change management theorists not known at the time.

In telling this story, this report will make reference to change management theories, but in particular to those of John P. Kotter<sup>1</sup>, Harvard Professor and creator of the eight-step change process first described in his 1996 book, *Leading Change*. He is widely considered the foremost authority on leadership and organizational change management. There are of course many other theories and theorists, but for practical purposes Kotter's 8-steps will largely serve as the lens through which the Communications Team story will be told.

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<sup>1</sup> Kotter's best-known works on this subject are: *Leading Change* (1996); *The Heart of Change* (2002), *A Sense of Urgency* (2008) all published by Harvard Business Press.



## Part 1: Setting the stage:

At the World Summit in September 2005, the United Nations in Viet Nam presented its vision of a reformed UN at the country level: more efficient, relevant and responsively able to meet the needs of a rapidly changing country<sup>2</sup>. But to do so, radical changes in how the UN operates were presented. In this paper the authors, then UN Resident Coordinator Jordan Ryan, and UNICEF Country Representative Jesper Morch argue that incremental change is no longer an option, that operations be streamlined, and formally request that Viet Nam be permitted to trial a “One UN” model at the country level.

***“One United Nations means one chain of command, one budget and one plan. One United Nations means mobilising technical expertise at the country level rather than at a distance in headquarters and regional centres. It means minimising administrative costs, duplication and waste... Some people will dismiss the proposal to establish One United Nations country representation as too radical. They will counsel caution and recommend gradual reform. But a preference for incrementalism assumes that time is on our side. It is not.” – UN Reform: A Country Perspective, September 2005***

By early 2006 the mood was one of urgency, excitement and not a little uncertainty. What was clear was that it would not be business as usual for the UN in Viet Nam.

Talk was of rapid change toward a new model of country-level operations, one led by improved effectiveness and efficiency and not tradition and territory. Innovation would be at the heart of the transformation process.

Central to this process, the UN would increasingly move to fill a policy advice and advisory role to Government. Strategic joint teams were envisioned bringing the best cross-agency knowledge and expertise together.

### ***What is Change Management?***

*At its most basic it is the structured passage of an individual, organization or team from its current state to a more desired state for lasting change. A founding father of organizational change, Kurt Lewin described this process as stages of unfreezing, changing and freezing in 1947. But change management is simply an attempt to advise and provide structure and predictability to a change process.*

*Most change management theories can be broadly divided into stages of strategy and assessment; senior support and participation; communications; education and training; and sustaining the change.*

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<sup>2</sup> Much has already been written on the overall change process in Viet Nam. For further reading, please see the One UN documents section at: [www.un.org.vn](http://www.un.org.vn) and for overall UN reform information see [www.undq.org](http://www.undq.org)

## The Case for Communications:

It is essential to recognize that the idea for a One UN Communication Team was born out of this time and this mood.

It was at first an initiative by Ex-Com agencies (UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA) and early thinking was that the Communications Team would mirror the wider reform process. As agencies broke down barriers and worked more closely together through the One Plan, these same agencies would participate in the Team.

A proposed joint Policy Team presented an opportunity for communications to reinforce the UN's advocacy work, while setting the communications and media agenda for the UN as a whole through this new source of targeted policy research.

In the Spring of 2006, communications shared the same challenges as the wider UN family in Viet Nam.

There was little communication or information-sharing, except through irregular "Communications Working Group" (CWG) meetings managed by the Resident Coordinator's Office;

There were few permanent communications jobs and limited capacity outside of UNDP and UNICEF;

There was inadequate involvement by agencies in what were considered UN-wide issues;

Media were left dealing with different contacts for different agencies;

And in general communications and outreach were agency-based, with little strategy around issues that overlap mandates and priorities (see climate change, human rights, maternal health...).

By early 2006, the communications heads of UNDP and UNICEF began to formally meet to plan how to play an active role in the wider change process. It was agreed that communications should be at the beginning of the change process and more than taking part, that a joint communications capacity could do a lot to support the wider reform process. But how to move forward?

***"Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past  
or present are certain to miss the future."***

**John F. Kennedy (1917 - 1963)**

## What are Kotter's 8 Steps?

We are motivated to change by emotion, not logic says John P. Kotter. Change will not occur until it is felt, until the change proposed appeals to people's emotions and not only to their analytical or logical sides. Changing behaviour instead almost always comes from helping people to see a truth, which brings an emotional response, which then leads to change (See-Feel-Change). His 8-Step analysis of organizational change lays out a framework where steps can overlap, and occur concurrently, but generally all need to be followed to achieve any lasting large-scale organizational change.

### 1 Create a Sense of Urgency

Examine market and competitive realities

Identify and discuss crises, potential crises, or major opportunities

### 2 Build the Guiding Team

Assemble a group with enough power to lead the change effort

Encourage the group to work as a team with trust

### 3 Get the Vision Right

Create a vision to help direct the change effort

Develop strategies for achieving that vision

### 4 Communicate for Buy-In

Use every vehicle possible to communicate the new vision and strategies

Teach new behaviours by the example of the guiding coalition

### 5 Empower Action

Get rid of obstacles to change

Change systems or structures that seriously undermine the vision

Encourage risk-taking and non-traditional ideas, activities, and actions

### 6 Create Short-Term Wins

Plan for visible performance improvements

Create those improvements

Recognize and reward employees involved in the improvements

### 7 Don't Let Up

Use increased credibility to change systems, structures, and policies that don't fit the vision

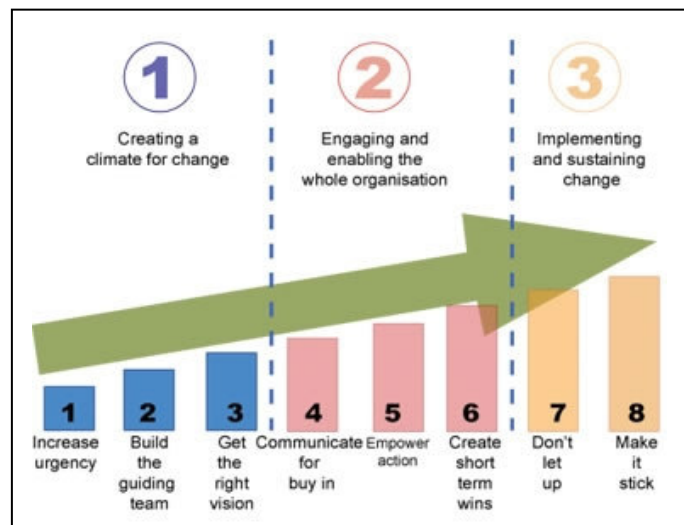
Hire, promote, and develop employees who can implement the vision

Reinvigorate the process with new projects, themes, and change agents

### 8 Make Change Stick

Articulate the connections between the new behaviours and organizational success

Develop the means to ensure leadership development and succession



Please find original diagram here:

<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/verychildmatters/uploads/jpg/180C87C5E6D806F7DA71A98E8BBBD3B5.jpg>



## Part 2: On the cusp of change and the need for something better (March 2006 to August 2006)

With the UN in Viet Nam widely discussing change and how to function better, UNICEF's Communications Chief Caroline den Dulk and UNDP's head of communications, Michael Coleman began discussing how best to fit into the process to ensure that communications was not only relevant in a new One UN reality, but supporting the transformation itself.

They were motivated by a few factors:

1. Issues were being presented from agency perspectives, limiting the overall effectiveness and diligence of the messages. This resulted in competition for media space and confusing and incomplete information from multiple sources
2. Existing UN-wide communications efforts were informal, lacking a strategic plan and depended on the goodwill and free time of individuals. It was generally managed and driven by RCO, which did not have the capacity to do much beyond international days and a few minor events
3. International and national journalists found the UN system confusing and difficult to manoeuvre. E.g. "Why isn't there a single point of contact for UN queries?"
4. The overall change process would require a strong communications function, both for internal and external communications
5. The UN's key messages covering the work of all agencies could generally be built around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), providing an agency-neutral framework for messages

Finding this common ground and seeing early successes in cross-agency cooperation, including the May 2006 visit of former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, it was decided that these discussions should be summarised to provide respective senior managers, in this case of UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and the Resident Coordinator, with something to respond to.

### **Drafting a vision**

The resulting paper, "One UN, One Voice," was written in May 2006. In it the vision for a "One UN Communications Team" was explained including, a single working environment, workplan, manager and joint work organized around the key areas of advocacy, internal communications, thematic communications (programme) and partnerships (fundraising). Meant to be strictly an internal document, it was shared beyond Viet Nam causing a great deal of concern from the regional and global offices of the agencies involved.

This included a discussion at a global communications retreat in Vienna where it was discussed by a panel of communications personnel from UN agencies including UNICEF and UNDP. Viet Nam was not consulted on this discussion nor asked to participate, hearing about it through regional colleagues.

Unintentionally, the report had clearly struck a chord. Generally, it was criticized for being overly focused on a single voice and visual identity and the perceived threat the model held to individual agency identity and speciality. Though this was not the aim and they were not the audience, it was to be the first of many heated responses to the proposal and progress of the UN Communications Team.

*Some questions that were raised at the Vienna meeting:*

- *Is UN reform best served by 'one UN, one voice'? or is there a 'Unity in Diversity' model that meets our objectives?*
- *Will our voices be stronger or will our individual agency issues become invisible?*
- *How does a single logo and branding concept potentially fit into this scheme? Will it impact each agencies identity, and therefore it's voice of authority and mission? And what happens if not all agencies in VN buy into it?*
- *Does it meet issues of accountability and transparency for donors and?*
- *How would one team operate during an emergency, without jeopardizing timeliness and speed?*
- *And finally are we not putting the Communication Cart before the UN horse?*

The immediate priority was for country level buy-in and understanding of what was being proposed. To do this, the two communications managers brought the agency heads together, along with the RC and the Head of the RC Office. There, the report was discussed, questions were asked but in the end an enthusiastic green light was given to move forward. A clear plan would now have to be drawn up for a final decision.

### **Step #1 Increase Urgency:**

## **LESSONS IN CHANGE**

Kotter and other change management gurus emphasize that the need for change must be felt through emotion and a feeling that there is no turning back. People need to want it and all those involved, particularly in management, must share this feeling. Significant time therefore, must be spent on creating a sense of urgency that a change is desperately needed.

In the case of the Communications Team the sense of urgency was fed by the overall process of change in Viet Nam but harnessed by the communications managers. In doing so, they surveyed the existing environment in communications and media, evaluated and found it to be unsustainable, inefficient and ill equipped to respond to the new One UN reality. From the point of view of the managers, urgent change was needed. It should be said that this was not generally a widely shared view at-first by other team members or even the senior management.

### **Selling change**

In a sense, the heads of UNDP and UNICEF communications sold the need for change after a levelheaded analysis of challenges of continuing on the current path, and the presentation of a "better way." This better way, included UN-wide advocacy initiatives, the efficiency of shared resources and simplifying outreach, especially for media, as well as the important role Communications could play in supporting the overall change process.

The sense of urgency was palpable and a daily reality in the Spring of 2006 and the message was that the UN had to change. So, the urgency was not specific to communications, but the Communications Managers used it to trigger smaller-scale change in the UN's media and communications work.

This requisite change and the resulting urgency was captured in the first communications paper (see below); arguably a "vision" step that would come later in Kotter's methodology.

In fact, a report, according to Kotter, would be a weak tool to create urgency; it didn't appeal to the emotions of its intended audience. Instead it relied on logical argument and an appeal for better business practice. It also had a relatively limited audience, designed primarily to form an influential Guiding Team made up of the heads of the involved agencies. In this way, the report also had limited effect, as its primary aim was not to influence and reach communications colleagues, who would become critical agents in any future change effort.

## **#2 Build the Guiding Team:**

What the report and subsequent face-to-face meetings did do is help put together a powerful guiding coalition. The urgency expressed helped bring together the Heads of UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and the Resident Coordinator to rally around this proposal. This would prove an essential step as this group continues to be Communications' most vocal, and powerful advocate.

During this step the communications staff was also introduced to the idea and began meeting together to discuss the proposal and possible next steps. Though feedback and input was sought, many of the core ideas were already established by the time the Team was consulted. If we consider the report an expression of vision, then this limited the value and depth of this discussion and arguably weakened the shared sense of mission and urgency on the part of the entire team. The process would have benefitted from further consultation from the staff who would be at the frontlines of change.

On the positive side, the Communications Team began meeting regularly and discussing how to take the plan forward. Quick bonds were formed and working together, they saw some early benefits. Undoubtedly, this was helped by compatible personalities on the teams, rather than uniting around a sense of shared vision.

The Guiding Team in this case had the authority, connections and skills to provide the credibility, but they provided limited guidance as to how the team would be formed, operate or why. Their concerns, understandably, began with their own agency sphere of interest – how to operationalise the plan, accountability and how this would impact the wider process. But critically, the Guiding Team offered much more by plugging the Communications Managers into the larger vision of the change process and providing encouragement for them to follow it. So the Guiding Team supplied all the basic elements to move the process to the next phase, including inspiration, but the specific strategic vision for Communications was left to the prerogative of the managers.

### #3 Get the vision right:

These early days provided the foundation for the vision of the Team, though Kotter would argue that the vision step should normally come later in the process, after the Guiding Team has been formed and led to the vision step by a shared sense of vital purpose. In other words, it is the Guiding Team that comes up with the vision in order to capture the values they consider central to the change. In the case of Communications, the vision was created first and was used as a tool to help influence and explain the sense of urgency and to recruit the Guiding Team.

*“People change what they do less because they are given analysis that shifts their thinking than because they are shown a truth that influences their feelings.” – John P.*

#### **Kotter, The Heart of Change**

Kotter would likely argue that the vision could have further benefitted from more inspiration, and less reference to operational plans, organigrams and strategies. If the emotions that may potentially block the change process in the future are not dealt with at this stage, future resistance to change is likely. The vision he says should create an emotional connection and appeal to more than just the logic of its audience. Objects, symbols or anecdotes that capture the essence of the vision are often good triggers for the need for change.

This is not to say that the Team was not consulted. They expressed early trepidation from the beginning, particularly in the areas of job security, a lack of understanding of the wider change, and a level of comfort in the *status quo*. But at the same time, there was an openness and trust in the management to give it a try, as well as a sense of excitement to be involved in something different. This was reinforced with further support from the Guiding Team, in the senior management. Cultural factors may have also played a role here (see sidebar: “Culture and Change”). But again, the vision could have benefitted from early input from the team; this would come later.

#### **Culture and change**

*Culture is made up of the values, assumptions, norms and tradition of members of an organization that influence their behaviours. The cultures of profession, of agency, of nations and all the sub-cultures therein, can hinder the process of creating a shared third-culture, one that addresses the needs of the change process and a new working style that all can subscribe to.*

*Cultural sensitivity in the course of a change process is a complex task, particularly when it is as multi-layered and international an organization as the United Nations. In this case, establishing a change process that recognizes the cultural norms and expectations of the majority of staff is very important. For example, can we make generalizations about how Vietnamese respond to authority, contribute ideas, participate in meetings? What is the best way to gather input, encourage flexibility and openness to change?*

*This should be balanced by an honest look at existing organizational cultures and identifying the obstacles to change. This is a major motive for the change process, after all, which can often be arrived at by a crisis point (see Kotter’s step 1 on urgency). Intercultural understanding and communications training is essential, but it is impossible to address the specific needs of all.*

*Instead, this is where Kotter’s appeal to emotion as a motivating force can be a useful guide. There may be a sense of motivating urgency, but no clear description of what the change should be. Establishing a set of values (efficiency, better service, etc.) based on wide input that all can subscribe to is critical. Agreeing to a vision is already an enormous step toward adopting a new work culture. But confronting the myriad ways of interpreting, contributing to and achieving that vision is something to constantly be sensitive to in order to make lasting change.*





### Part 3: Concrete Changes (August – December 2006):

With the Guiding Team formed, a vision on paper and the Communications Team slowly getting on-board with the idea of change, they began to look at concrete action and a new way of working. Already, there were some early successes that had shown the potential of working with fewer barriers.

Again, it is impossible to completely separate communications from the rest of the One UN change process. Viet Nam was named the first UN pilot country as part of the High Level Panel Report of November 2006.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps as important, there was a sense that communications was a good place to pilot an experience of inter-agency cooperation that could be learned from, and replicated. There were fewer limitations from formalized and direct agreements with Government that would need to be renegotiated. While the rest of the One UN process was forced to consider Country Programme agreements with the Government, while trying to sort out individual strengths in programme focus, by comparison communications could establish this team, with this vision relatively simply.

Instead, communications proposed to improve service to their respective agencies and to work under a completely new model of service delivery, eliminating the CWG, shifting to issue-based, instead of agency-based communications where possible and providing greater support to the RC Office and wider change process.

In this short, but intensive phase the Communications Team set to work ensuring that a) senior managers were equipped with sufficient information to make an informed decision and that team-members understood the proposed changes while ensuring that b) the benefits of working together were visible and demonstrated early.

By this time the 10 members of the UNDP and UNICEF teams, as well as the UNFPA communications Junior Professional Officer were meeting regularly and identifying opportunities for working together for greater impact. The aim was to set a track record of success and ensure that these successes were visible and useful beyond the involved agencies the Team.

***Bringing the major communications functions together will improve efficiency, present a UN-wide voice, take advantage of natural synergies, and help drive the change process. Communications efforts done in concert will help resolve the issues of competition for the same media space and the lack of coordination in event planning and campaign efforts. It will strengthen UN-wide messaging through the MDGs, focussing on issues and not organizations. Furthermore, it will bring a group of highly skilled individuals into one team, taking advantage of their diversity of backgrounds, experience and talents. – (From November 2006 paper, One UN Communication Team Plan)***

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<sup>3</sup> The High Level Panel was established by the Secretary-General to explore how the United Nations system could work more coherently and effectively across the world in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance and the environment. The HLP Report <http://www.un.org/events/panel/> among other things, helped lead to the establishment of eight pilot countries to pilot country-level reform initiatives.

## Early Results

By January 2007, two UN-wide communications training sessions had been held, the visit of then UNDP Administrator Kemal Derviş was handled jointly, a UN-wide news summary service was expanded to include all the UN (*What's Making News*), a joint media response was managed for December Avian Influenza outbreaks and for the first time a joint Human Development Report launch had been held involving WHO, UNDP, UNICEF and the Ministry Of Agriculture. Normally a UNDP-only affair, the launch took advantage of the strengths of individual agencies to provide a more comprehensive picture of the subject of that year's Report, water and sanitation. It would prove an important example of how the Team saw its new role in action.

Meanwhile the Team had met several times, including a retreat to discuss and agree to next steps, to design a joint workplan and joint task teams had been put together to begin planning for UN Day celebrations, a new UN website and One UN information kit. A previously designed UN logo was resurrected and this new corporate identity was now being used for selected press releases and other publicity items (see "More than a business card").

A detailed proposal was presented to the Guiding Team outlining where the Comms Team wanted to go and proposing a new working structure and even new office space. It captured many of the fears and risks of this move including, increased isolation for team-members having to leave their "home agencies," increased workload, different rankings of staff performing the same task from different agencies, a lack of clarity in setting priorities and how best to remain connected to agencies and their core work.

### ***More than a business card:***

*In the Fall of 2006, the team set out to signal that things were different with the Communications Team. Logos, branding and individual identity had been a massive issue with headquarters already, with UN agencies rightly wanting to preserve the investment, legitimacy and fundraising powers of their individual corporate identities. Not wanting to eliminate this either, the Team created a folded business card. The card, based on the simple metaphor that where appropriate the team was putting the UN and its voice upfront, featured a single UN Viet Nam logo folded over the individual agency logo the team member belonged to. It became a symbol of the change and an inspiration to many in Viet Nam for what was possible within the confines of the current set-up of the United Nations. In this way, the card became a critical part of what Kotter would describe as the Team's vision.*

It was clear that the proposal (new space, one plan, dual management, and new work structure) was ambitious and not without risk, but the Guiding Team approved it and by December 11 communications staff from UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA were working side-by-side in a space provided by UNICEF. A neutral telephone line was installed, the team adopted the business cards and agreed to only three titles (manager, officer and assistant) to help combat the challenges already presenting themselves by the different human resources standards in titles and levels.

**#1 Urgency and #3 vision:**

The sense of **urgency** was maintained throughout, helped by continued progress in the overall One UN process. While the **vision** was becoming more fully realized with further team consultation, and the subsequent retreat and report to the **Guiding Team**.

One of the key products of this vision (in addition to the card) was to become known as the “10 Commandments.” Written by the Team itself, the Commandments went beyond the Team set-up, mission and workplan but also outlined the principles and philosophy of the Team, it also described how the Team was to work, highlighting creativity, innovation and balance as key components of how business would be done. This has become an invaluable touchstone, updated at every retreat to reflect current realities, while progress to goals such as having a life outside of work, are critically assessed and used as openings for further discussion.

**#4 Communicate for Buy-In:**

This has been an essential step in the progress of the change process as the Team recognized early the necessity for information and updates to reach stakeholders both within Viet Nam and outside of it. In just six months of existence, two major proposals were written and shared; meeting minutes were kept and distributed; a major retreat was held, along with several strategy meetings with the Guiding Team. Much more would come in the months to come.

Perhaps more importantly, the Team began communicating its vision of the Team, simply by operating within it. From at least August onwards, work began as one team, providing services and support that blurred agency lines, while providing tools and products for all in the UN family that were branded as UN. In this way, the Team demonstrated and communicated the change through example.

**#5 Empower Action:**

In Kotter’s fifth step, systems or structures that undermine the vision must be removed, while encouraging risk-taking and non-traditional ideas, activities and actions.

Though not put in these terms at the time, the Team and its managers were actively seeking to do things differently and found that the existing structure of separate offices, focusing on agency priorities only and limited inter-agency communications was not consistent with their vision. In this phase, the Communication Working Group was officially dissolved, a new office was set-up, complete with neutral contact information and identity; task teams were established to break down agency barriers on tasks and; team members were encouraged to challenge old ways and look for innovative solutions to existing problems.

As the first such team in the world, there was no roadmap for these changes. Thanks to the support of the Guiding Team, pilot changes were approved before formal structures or even global approval had been sought. The sense of being a pilot was very real and team members, and their supporters were willing to take some risks to see the vision through.

This however, did not help quell the sense of insecurity among team-members. There was overall support for the new direction, but constant fears over job security, loss of agency direction and being associated with a failed change experiment.

**#6 Create short-term wins:**

Visible goals with wide exposure in Viet Nam were important and considered critical to the success and sustainability of the Team. In a relatively short time, these included the UN-wide news summary service (*What's Making News*), managing the media and communications for the visit of UNDP Administrator Kemal Derviş, organizing UN-wide training sessions, the visit of Kofi Annan, the UN business cards, the joint Human Development Report launch and others. This was essential to both influence the decision-makers, inspire the team and to make a statement that things were different in Viet Nam.

Arguably, communications had never had a higher profile in the UN in Viet Nam.

This was just the beginning of progress in this phase, but they were important successes that the Team would build on in future stages.



#### **Part 4: Getting to work (January 2007 to January 2008)**

With the Team now established in one place, working under one workplan and with a few early successes under their belt, the job now was to ensure that not only would there be no disruption in service to home agencies, but that it would be better than ever. Meanwhile new levels of support would be provided to the UN as a whole and to individual agencies where appropriate.

The first step was to make the existence of the Team known, in particular to UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA staff -- those who were facing the largest change in working with the new communications set-up. An open house was held at the new office and all-staff orientation sessions were presented at each agency to go over the vision, structure and how to best use the Team in the new reality. The objective was to calm fears of losing agency communications capacity, while introducing the concept and faces behind the Team that would now provide them service.

***Vision is usually communicated most effectively when many different vehicles are used: large group meetings, memos, newspapers, posters, informal one-on-one talks. When the same message comes at people from six different directions, it stands a better chance of being heard and remembered, on both intellectual and emotional levels. -- Kotter, Leading Change***

Few people outside of the agencies involved knew of the Team, and even some within them, so it was critical that an outreach take place to orient the Team's new set-up, vision and contact to those needing communications help. The so-called "Five Steps" forms were created to quickly clarify how the Team could support in media release and speech preparation, event organization and in producing publications. A Team brochure with contact information was produced. A new UN website was also designed, built and launched, putting a united face forward to the UN family and public at large. This was done in phases, seeking input from agency Heads on what would be their website.

Anxious to get a jump on the UN intranet, a teleconference was organized with UNICEF and UNDP IT staff on how they could support us with this plan. It was an ambitious one, requiring access to global intranets and ideally introducing such innovations as a "single sign-on" and making some areas of agency intranets shared. Though the project would be delayed, the meeting was an encouraging development, and for the first time, the Team felt genuinely supported in this initiative beyond Viet Nam by their parent agencies.

## **Beyond borders**

Outreach was also occurring beyond Viet Nam's borders with reports, and major results being shared with respective agency communications colleagues in New York and Bangkok. In fact the Team gave support to the global Heads of the involved agencies including the missions of Ann Veneman, Kemal Derviş and Thoraya Ahmed. This in addition to visits from a 10-delegate group of UNICEF National Committees, the Spanish International Cooperation Minister and the Chairman of UNICEF's Standing Group of National Committees. These were complicated tasks requiring coordination, event and media management as well as preparation of materials.

The Team was also attracting interest from donors. During one open house session, representatives from Norway, France and the United Kingdom came to discuss the new set-up with the Team managers. This led to the funding of the writer/editor position by the Republic of Ireland, judging this to be a working example of the One UN in action. From the Team point of view, this was a major achievement as it represented the first post not funded from a specific agency, but rather would be managed by the Resident Coordinator's Office.

In May the Team managers travelled to Johannesburg to present their model of "One UN Communication", and to participate in a pilot country communications conference. Here, the wide difference in approach was clear with the other pilot countries. Far more advanced than most in their thinking and development, the difference was later described as on one side, communicating *about* One UN, as was being done in most other pilot countries, and communicating *as* One UN. This difference is, and has been central, to the One UN Communications Team in Viet Nam.

## **Reality meets vision**

Disappointingly, no major progress had been made by end of 2007 on the critical human resources issues. Staff was continually asked to go far beyond their current job descriptions, but were limited by their current salaries and levels, which in many cases were not synchronized with each other. A UNICEF staff person doing the same or similar work was almost always paid more and ranked higher than someone of similar responsibility and experience at UNDP.

***"Evaluation and rewards can disempower when they are at odds with the direction of needed change." – Kotter, The Heart of Change***

Workload was also being highlighted as a major issue, along with the challenges of prioritization. Staff was having trouble juggling their individual agency demands with the UN-wide tasks that they were now suddenly responsible for. They were starting to feel further removed from the work of their home agencies, disconnected and vulnerable to the possibility that the change progress to-date could be dismantled or not accepted.

Old habits also proved difficult to break with team-members reflexively working together with those from their home agencies. It was a natural outcome. Working together was familiar and often based on many years of trusted collaboration. So tasks were gradually expanded to include members from all agencies. This was not always efficient from the point of view of time management, but the cross-agency learning was essential and it was invaluable to have the team beginning to better understand each other's skills. Still, scepticism amongst some team-

members persisted that just because they were sitting in the same office, didn't mean they were actually working as one.

There were many other examples of challenge and progress, but to put it simply, the Team was starting to work together and to see themselves differently. Results were stacking up. So much so, that discussions began with UNESCO, UNV and UNAIDS to expand membership of the Team. This was a critical moment to reflect on how the Team would be run and managed.

## LESSONS IN CHANGE

The **urgency** continued, but team-members moved into a, "let's stop talking and just get to work" mindset. Discussions of change, the new set-up and all the attention to the Team was appreciated, but the overall feeling was that now was the time to see if it would work in practice.

The **Guiding Team** continued to provide essential support, while the ever-increasing attention and early victories provided essential legitimacy and pride among team-members. **Quick wins** continued to abound, including the website and successful results of an online all-staff survey, as well as on the fundraising side finding money for an editor/writer and to hire a company for an HR Review.

In this phase, with the vision limited by the overall change process and the structural issues continuing to face the Team, energy was put into what would fit into Kotter's fourth, fifth, and sixth steps.

### **#4 Communicate for Buy-In:**

International interest and attention, not all of it positive, was a constant reality the Team worked under. Delegations and official visits were hosted, donors were updated, and the UN Country Team was regularly briefed on all communications issues after the Team requested a seat on the Senior Management table. Further communications was done at international meetings and with colleagues at headquarters and regional levels, ensuring that they were aware of what was happening in Viet Nam, and ideally could support when needed.

Yet most of the communication was directed at the agencies involved in the Team, and within the Team itself. Retreats, meetings, open houses, reports, reviews and regular opportunities for feedback were a massive undertaking on top of the everyday tasks being asked of the Team managers.

As Kotter suggests, feedback from the Team on their anxieties and fears was encouraged. But many of these frustrations could not be addressed by the managers or even the Guiding Team. The structure of the Team was still informal, the HR issues still unresolved and in the meantime many of the successes experienced were directly related to the issue of increased workload. This left an unsatisfying end to feedback sessions, knowing that the Team was doing all it could, but much of it was out of the managers' control and worse, the risk of having to return to the ways things were seemed for the first time, a real possibility.

**# 5 Empower Action:**

In this step, organizational structure, job description and compensation arrangements are often examined with a view to eliminating unnecessary obstacles. Much work was being done to answer these calls for change. It was becoming clearer that the Team had gone as far as it could. But clearly, some obstacles were unchangeable, like the global agency communications culture, the HR structure, the lack of investment from some agencies in communications etc.

Calls for HR missions, and reports detailing personnel issues ended finally with the Team taking the initiative, producing a ToR for a human resources consultant who would do an analysis of the team and make recommendations. This was an important step to move toward a neutral assessment of the Team, its set-up and needs.

An online survey was also created to gather feedback at the end of year one, providing another boost for the Team. Generally, feedback was positive and nearly 25% of all UN staff responded, representing 13 agencies.

**#7 Don't Let Up:**

Already the feeling that constant feedback, reporting and successes would need to be achieved to keep the momentum and interest in the Team up. Increased credibility had already allowed the Team to challenge existing procedures, policies and structures that were incompatible for the vision. In this phase with much input from the Team, and support from the Guiding Team the essential components were being put together to expand the communications unit, take on major new projects like a UN-wide Intranet and to handle the human resource challenges.

But keeping this energy and sense of urgency at this intensity takes a lot of energy. Inevitably, the Team has experienced periods when energy was low and the change process was more of a burden than benefit. This was due in large part to the extended nature of this change process and the lack of tangible progress beyond the Team.

***“Deep into a transformation, even if urgency remains high, even if people want to take on big problems, and even if they succeed in generating waves of change they can still fail because of exhaustion. They find they have to keep the organization running, which means doing all the old work. On top of that they have to handle addition work to create the future. So people are overwhelmed and eventually start to resent it.” – Kotter, Heart of Change***

Kotter suggests that in successful transformations the solution is to get rid of work that isn't important or reduce it, delegate it or allow others to do it. But when there is no one to delegate to, important decisions need to be made about what work is now being accepted and how. This is where the Team's protocols and regulations came in, to protect the Team. This in addition to small but important efforts to keep meetings to an efficient length and frequency and taking advantage of opportunities to rejuvenate change waves, like the recent move to a new, larger space for the growing Team.





## Part 5: Expansion and human resource challenges - 2008

Much of the preparation done in the first year of operation resulted in an intensive 2008 filled with further innovations and demands for structural flexibility. The Team is unquestionably operating in this phase, but the need for outside support on some of the key human resource issues was becoming critical and for the first time, the original vision was being actively questioned at the year-end retreat in December 2007.

By now, it was known that the joint policy team was not going to be a reality and though the One Plan had been signed off by six of the 14 agencies, the others were still in negotiation and a One Plan-Two was in the works. The pace of change was much slower than had been anticipated and suddenly the Team felt vulnerable and left alone far ahead of anyone else.

Why push further if the rest of the change process was lagging so far behind? And why were many of the original issues related to staff levels and evaluation still unresolved? This was compounded even more by the fact that the global reform process was happening even more slowly, with some agencies seeming to actively want to dismantle the pilot country projects in favour of something more moderate.

### A retreat turns to advance

In December 2007, with nearly a year-and-a-half of a completely changed work culture and environment and many victories behind them, the Team paused to review the progress to that point and see if the original vision was still compelling and relevant.

To confront the issues, the first step was to gather the Guiding Team together again to meet with the Team. They heard their concerns while praising their professionalism and courage for continuing to inspire the rest of the UN Country Team. “You are the pilot within the pilot,” said one Representative. The overall message was that the Team would be supported to go further, but that it was true that the overall direction of change had not gone according to plan. “It’s up to you now how far you want to go.”

The messages from the Heads of Agency, a mix of inspiring and cautious, were openly discussed as part of the subsequent two-day meeting held outside of Ha Noi. Here, the Team tackled two main questions: “Are we still true to our vision?” and “Have we really moved from agency- to issue-based communications?” But before even getting started, the feeling was unanimous that another year like the last would not be an option. It was too uncertain and informal in structure and policy, and the resulting workload was unsustainable. *The Team had come to a crisis point.*

Here, the group was empowered to make the decision, and three main options were presented: To continue; To go back to the way things were or; To continue to push further.

Following an intensive and honest discussion, the consensus was to continue to move with the change process, but under strict conditions. Namely that, with the backing of the Heads of Agency, protocols would need to be established for working with the team to protect it from unrealistic demands; that human resource, IT and budgetary issues must be dealt with; that the

2008 workplan must be signed off on by the Heads of Agency with plenty of room for 'surge capacity', and that UN advocacy messages should be agreed upon to guide the Team's work.

Protocols *were* developed and analyzing the three agency year-end review formats, a separate staff evaluation form was created by the managers and used during 2007 year-end performance reviews with staff. The online survey results, and documentation to-date would also be better disseminated to better tell the story of the Team (see Kotter # 4) both in and outside of the country. But some of the most important commitments were related to human resources.

### **Human Resource Progress:**

#### ***PWC***

Following a review of proposals, Price Waterhouse Coopers was hired with RCO funding to do a human resource analysis of the Team and to make recommendations on structure and staffing. This was an important step as it added a neutral voice to the call for change, and responded to immediate needs and frustrations of team-members as up to this point, there had been limited interest and response from the agencies involved.

Every single member of the Guiding and Communications Teams was interviewed, documents were reviewed and other pilots were examined. One of the main recommendations in the resulting April 2008 report was, "a 'Professional Service' organizational structure under which the team will be constituted as a single independent unit with a single reporting line to a non-agency specific body." Services would be provided to all UN agencies in return for contributions to the cost of team, through financial and/or human resources.

Though the analysis was sound, the recommendations were unrealistic in a UN context. There is no "non-agency specific body" and most agencies did not have the resources to pay for communications services. The required revision of jobs and their classifications was not something in the purview of the agencies in Viet Nam, let alone the Communications Team itself.

The PWC report did provide some momentum and the legitimacy of a neutral analysis to argue for the fundamental changes required. Clearly more involvement from home agencies was necessary to move forward.

#### ***UN Interagency HR Mission***

In early Spring of 2008 the Communications Team was added to the agenda of an international UN human resources conference. Along with the RCO Head, the two Communications Managers presented their case over videoconference. For most at the meeting, it was the first they'd heard of the Team and they were willing to help, but unsure how.

But finally, after a teleconference in July and many follow up email discussions, an interagency human resource working group with representatives from UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP travelled to Viet Nam in September 2008 to examine the situation with the Team. After a thorough

analysis, this interagency group provided invaluable input and support to help secure the institutional flexibility necessary to move forward in the medium-term.

These included: adopting the UNFPA performance assessment tool for all staff; establishing a management board made-up of the UNDP and UNICEF reps as well as third rotating member from the UNCT and the head of RCO; commitment to a job classification exercise for everyone carried out by an the interagency team; and support to a new organizational structure, including an agency-neutral single manager.

In follow-up, the HR Working Group provided guidance and expert advice to the Manager in the revision of job descriptions (JD) based on the agreed new organisational structure. It was proposed and agreed by the group to use UNICEF's job format for the revised and generic JDs for the Team. In total six JDs were revised and three new ones were developed.

This mission and its results were a massive step forward in bringing the human resource challenges better in-line with the guiding vision of the team. It had the additional benefit of improving morale and helping the Team feel that it was not working alone, invaluable at this time of uncertainty in the overall One UN process. And the recommendations that were formulated by the HR Working Group were now inline with the earlier discussions and thoughts that the Team had already developed. It was therefore a welcome confirmation of the Team's own analysis and identified needs.

From the point of view of Kotter's change theory, it could be argued that the Guiding Team now included colleagues from the global human resources departments.

### **Questions of growth:**

By now, there was some interest in further expanding from outside the Team, but the Team itself was concerned that expansion would result in even more work, and a lack of clarity as to how that work was to be done, and who it could be accepted from. The managers met with UNV, UNESCO and UNAIDS to discuss the details of their joining. The reality, as in most UN Country Teams, was that there was very limited communications capacity outside of UNDP and UNICEF. With the exception of WHO, there were no posts established in communications and these were often filled through short-term contracts, UN Volunteers and by giving existing support staff responsibility for communications and media.

The Team was very concerned with ensuring that whatever new work or staff they took on, that it represented a long-term investment that wouldn't ebb and flow with the resources and interest of the new agency. It was also made clear that the Team was not in a position to take on an expanded communications agenda, but rather would absorb the existing communications priorities and plan into the Team's.

By mid-2008, colleagues from UNV and UNAIDS were brought on-board and with the departure of the UNDP Communications Manager in May, a new recruitment was held for a UNDP post that would fit the new model and structure proposed and help trigger the subsequent process to establish a single manager – both much-needed changes in the structure of the Team.

In this phase, the **Guiding Team** was expanded to include the human resources colleagues. The **vision** was further adjusted and work was being done to make it a reality with a revision of the team structure and the serious progress being made on the job classification front.

#### **#4 Communicate for Buy-In:**

Communication continued through the work of the Team itself and the many presentations and reports being shared within the UNCT and beyond. But at the same time, it could be argued that the UNCT as a whole had little interest in the Team, its challenges or needs. Though the priority was to reach the involved agencies, outreach to other agencies could have been a strategic step to help them better understand why this was taking place and laying the foundation for future buy-in.

The likely reason was that what the Team was doing was not relevant to most other agencies. There was no previous communications history or involvement and thus no interest in the Team or plans to be involved. A better explanation was needed of the lessons of the Team being useful beyond the area of communications, and that the entire UN in Viet Nam was already benefitting from its services and work. New technology here can play a role in how the change is communicated and it's expected that the UN intranet will provide a valuable platform for such discussions.

In Kotter's world, communicating for buy-in must consider people's anxieties, fears and distrust. Though this was done regularly with team-members, it is unclear as to whether they felt their fears and emotions were being responded to, or that this was simply a process that could not be stopped.

#### **#5 Empower Action:**

This was a key step in this phase of the Team's development. With the HR colleagues now on-board, obstacles were being temporarily removed to help fully realize the guiding vision. Through this process, team-members had an opportunity to share their views and fears directly to an outside party on at least three occasions: through the PWC interviews, the HR mission interviews and through interviews for a first year report.

This was essential as in Kotter's view removing obstacles for action is critical if you have a team of people who have signed onto the change process.

In that regard, obstacles include those that may be internal to team-members and their anxieties about the change process. This too was being confronted as much as possible, but progress was limited by the lack of power to change concrete obstacles.

**# 7 Don't Let Up:**

This was a mantra of the Team. As successes, attention and praise were being heaped on the Team for work done to support the UNCT, work behind the scenes was happening to make the changes stick. After some early discouraging reactions from headquarters, rather than give up, the money was mobilized for an independent evaluation through Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC). This helped point out the institutional and cultural challenges the Team was facing. What PWC proposed made a lot of sense, but was virtually impossible to implement in a UN context. This neutral analysis provided significant legitimacy and helped lead to the international HR presentation and the subsequent mission.

Kotter's recommendations of getting rid of or improving work that was relevant in the past but is no longer, was also required. By now, demands on the Team were significant. In addition to the heavy workload compounded by the regular introduction of new products and ideas and official visits, there was a need to document, support and strategize the change process. This work was not accounted for on any workplan or evaluation, but was essential to help ensure that the story was being told and that the team had all the tools at their disposal to lobby and influence decision makers.

Visible successes were still coming out of the Team, and the fact that it was even still functioning after two plus years was a surprise to some. But there was some cost and continues to be. That the Team has not yet reached a "new normal," a secure routine, has created some change fatigue and a daily feeling of the risk that the ultimate goal might never be reached. Embedded bureaucratic obstacles still exist, the wider change process is much different from its original vision, and the global change process no longer seems to be high on the agenda of the UN. In this context this team of now 14 is a small fish in a very, very large pond and though able to celebrate the successes so far, the Team is aware that the risk is always there that this will be for naught, should key change agents leave Viet Nam or the overarching vision become inconsistent with the direction of the Team.

***"A great deal of work can be blown away***

***by the winds of tradition***

***in a remarkably short period of time."***

***Kotter – Heart of Change***



## Part 6: Moving Forward and Making Change Stick 2009 +

By June 2009, the One UN Communications Team had been operating as a single interagency team for two-and-a-half years, already a major achievement. No other team in Viet Nam or beyond, has gone as far in such a short time.

In Kotter's world, this has come largely from a strong vision, an influential and engaged Guiding Team, producing visible quick wins, and doing everything possible to remove the obstacles to change.

In many ways using Kotter's theory to analyze the change process of a small team is tricky. Kotter's eight steps have been used to guide massive change processes of corporations and applying them to a small department, in a small team, which is part of a very large corporation is difficult. There may be a feeling looking back that the challenges of the change process were entirely predictable. But this is where the context is essential.

The Team was responding to a reality that has since been watered down. With significant progress, there is a reluctance to go back having seen so much evidence as to why the change makes sense.

### LESSONS IN CHANGE

#### #8 Make Change Stick:

This is Kotter's last stage. With the influence and recommendations of the Human Resources mission, the UN Communications Team can now take valuable steps toward this goal.

1. A Management Board has been established to handle issues of how the Team with a neutral manager will be managed, and help protect the individual investment of the agencies involved by keeping oversight on the annual planning and budgeting for the Team, monitoring of progress and evaluating actual achievements. It will also make decisions on how and if the Team will be expanded to include other agencies.
2. Reclassification of all posts was completed by an interagency classification team. A rollout plan is currently being implemented that will fix many of the inequalities that currently exist and ensure long-term investment in the Team through regular fixed-term posts.
3. The recruitment for a Communications Manager is complete. This will allow the UNICEF Communications Chief to take on this role and focus exclusively on the Team.

4. Recruitment for the UNDP liaison officer is complete and the UNICEF and General (representing all other teams involved) Liaison Officers is ongoing. Once finished, this will provide the Team with a middle layer of management reporting to agencies, and allow the other Team-members to work on any project for any agency based on their skill set.

### **Finding Roots**

“It isn’t over until the changes have roots,” says Kotter in *The Heart of Change*. These are concrete steps meant to give the Team a much-needed foundation, at least in the medium-term while hopefully, the wider One UN process in Viet Nam is established. These steps are critical to move the change beyond one that is dependent on the goodwill of individuals; on those who are interested in the idea but have little in the way of security beyond the word of their managers.

In many ways the sustainability of the changes in the Team, its ability to find roots, is largely dependent on the country-level and perhaps even more so, the global level change process. It is hoped that the tremendous progress with the Communications Team in Viet Nam will have an influence on the larger process. But like the ant talking with the elephant from below, the Team runs the risk of not being heard, or worse being stepped on.

Reaching this final stage of Kotter’s model will be largely out of the Team’s hands. Progress has been made largely without the benefit of support or advice “from above.” If UN agencies are to allow a permanent UN team of this nature much needs to change in its ways of thinking and in the flexibility and responsiveness of its systems

## Part 7: Some final thoughts

### When does change end?

When the change process started in Viet Nam many argued that the work here was not for wider influence, discussion or approval. “What is happening here is an appropriate response for Viet Nam.” This has undoubtedly helped the Team reach the level of success that it has in a relatively short time. Yet by ignoring the larger influences, the Team may have also limited its progress.

In an institution of this size, it can't be done alone – at least not to the last stage of Kotter's steps. Even with senior local-level support, progress has reached a ceiling without global attention, buy-in and involvement. Ideally, adding influential regional and global members to the **Guiding Team** would have been a good idea to increase broad understanding and ensure there were important advocates at the international levels – or at the very least, people there who were aware and fully understood the process.

*“CEOs, division presidents, and other major players in organizations are still critical. Try to run around them and you will suffer failure. Try to do anything in those situations except work on Step 1, raising their urgency, and frustration is almost inevitable.” Kotter, The Heart of Change*

Despite this overall progress has been impressive, made more so by these very limitations of procedure and deep-seeded organizational cultures. The Team has shown what can be done with vision, a powerful guiding team, quick results and a lot of work. It has also resulted in the added benefit of an unprecedented recognition and investment by the UN in communications in Viet Nam.

### The never-ending pilot?

There is a danger that for those members of the Team, already in a state of change for over two years, that this sense of being a pilot will only continue, along with the associated insecurity. The One UN is a work in progress. UN-wide Program Coordination Groups under the One Plan (II) have only recently been set-up. The One UN House is an estimated 18 months away and it remains to be seen if or how UN reform will stay on the global UN agenda.

There is still significant concern that Communications has operated as a separate island from the larger change process. This has provided some amount of liberty, inspiration and lessons learned for the rest of the UNCT as it moves to functional clustering, but runs the risk of the Communications Team having to regress or dismantle some of its significant change if it is incompatible with the reform direction of the UN.



This is not to say the Team cannot exist as an exception, with its own specific culture and working norms, but this will be a tremendous task and one that can easily be undone with new blood on the Team and changes in senior management positions.

It could be reasonably argued that as a result, the Communications Team will be going through a constant change process, cycling through Kotter's steps continually as it moves forward and they must shift to the changing reality around them. In this way, the influence of external factors on the Team's change cannot be discounted. Even in the most controlled and successful transformation, change is a constant and needs to become part of people's daily work.

Kotter's assertion that emotion motivates more than logic is critical to this change process. The Team now has a store of what he calls, "facilitating emotions." Things like faith, trust, optimism pride, passion and enthusiasm.

In the spirit of piloting, the changes and the consistent and impressive lobbying of the Team and its supporters have allowed for some major concessions, and out of the box thinking. But can it really "stick" to use Kotter's language, if there is no appetite or ability (i.e. agency-neutral funding mechanism, long-term hr solutions) to put the changes into long-term effect?

The UN Communications Team has achieved a great deal in a relatively short time. What is important in any change process is that the change be sustainable, and anchored in something stable. Despite the fact that the Team and its structures have now moved away from one built on personalities and goodwill, to one that is institutionalized and taking advantage of the best of existing UN systems and regulations, the current reality suggests that this stability will not happen for some time. The UN in Viet Nam is still establishing its new way of operation in Viet Nam and the global systems and procedures will need to adjust to this new reality. Until then, major changes to the Team are temporary, if only because there is not corresponding progress in the essential systems surrounding and supporting it.

***"Example is not the main thing influencing others.***

***It is the only thing."***

***Albert Schweitzer***

For the Team to continue on its current course, there will be a need for a future, independent evaluation of the Team by the end of 2010. By this time, the Team will have been in operation under its HR structure for more than a year and the Team itself working under its vision for over three years. External funding will be necessary but the lessons garnered from such a review will be invaluable to future One UN style Teams in Viet Nam and beyond.

Kotter regularly warns against declaring victory too early in any change process. To its credit, the Communications Team is not doing so. Instead it is doing its best to challenge convention and will influence the system and its culture as long as possible. "Victory" will largely depend on what the UN chooses to do with its change agenda and external forces, on, if not the adoption of this model widely, then at least the acceptance of it and the mechanisms put in place to make it work for the long-term.

*Paper written by Michael Coleman for the UN Communications Team. Hanoi, June 2009*