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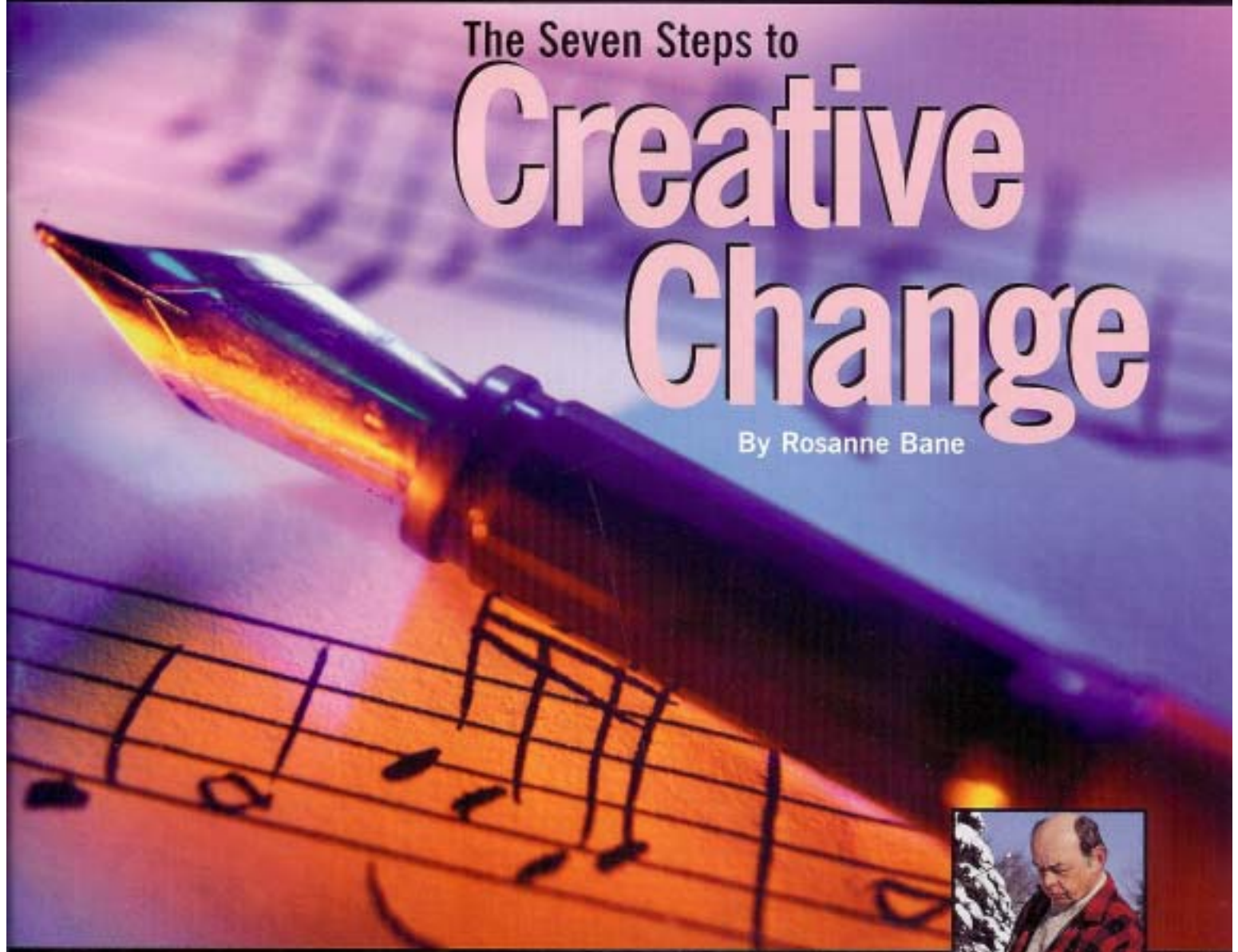
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The Seven Steps to

## Creative Change

By Rosanne Bane



18 The Work



*The Seven Steps to*  
**Creative  
Change**

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**A**s professionally creative people, we're in the change business. Because creativity is change. We are constantly changing "what is" into a new, and hopefully improved, "what is." Relying as we do on our creative talent for our professional well being, we need to be masters of change. Welcome then the insights of change guru John P. Kotter.

In his best-selling book, *Leading Change*, Kotter points out that the majority of corporate change initiatives not only fail to deliver what they promise, but create situations where "the carnage has been appalling, with wasted resources and burned-out, scared or frustrated employees."

Kotter, a professor of leadership at Harvard Business School, identifies eight common errors causing this carnage. He then turns those errors upside-down to develop an eight-stage change process to lead effective change within organizations.

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One of Kotter's most significant insights is that these stages are not linear, but iterative. That is, you don't do the first step, cross it off the list and forget about it. Instead, you start the first stage and keep doing that while you begin the second. When you're handling those first two stages fairly well, you add a third ball to juggle. When you've got the three balls in a stable rhythm, you add a fourth, and so. Until you've juggled all eight long enough to call the change fully and solidly implemented. Still, Kotter emphasizes the importance of working with each stage in the order listed to achieve the momentum to overcome the powerful forces of resistance and inertia.

Kotter's approach makes a great deal of sense, yet it is designed to facilitate imposed change in large corporations. As a creativity coach, instructor and speaker, I work primarily with creative individuals who actively seek and initiate change for the sake of the creative opportunities it brings. So I adapted Kotter's model into a seven-step process for creative change that better reflects the needs and interest of my clients and students:

1. Recognize the Urgency
2. Enlist Allies
3. Clarify Your Vision and Develop a Strategy
4. Share the Vision
5. Empower Action
6. Generate and Celebrate Intermediate Success
7. Anchor the Change

Professionally creative people tend to take these steps naturally and intuitively. But we also tend to skip the steps that don't fit our personality quirks. Conscious awareness and application of all seven steps will help you apply them fully and in the right order to build the momentum you need.

## Step 1: Recognize the Urgency

Individuals and small companies don't need to create urgency; they need to recognize the urgency that is already there. We have an abundance of things we'd like to do, but we have limited time, so we have to choose. The urgency is just this: You will not have enough time on this earth to do all the things you want to do, but you will have enough time to do the things that are truly most important to you if you take action.

"Initially, urgency caught me by surprise. I'd never thought about my personal goals and my craft in that way before," says Sarah Tieck, associate editor at *Minnesota Monthly*, novelist and creative writing teacher. Having worked through the seven steps in a Loft class, Tieck credits this first step of recognizing the urgency with having the biggest impact on her creative work. "When a friend asked me what I wanted to be doing for my whole life, I realized it

was my fiction. But that was what I was giving the least attention to."

Karen Karsten, an editor at a local publishing house and freelance poet and writer, highlights the importance of seeing the urgency without getting caught up in anxiety. "My sense of urgency is still there, but it is a sense of urgency, not emergency. So I'm not going full speed ahead, sirens blaring."

Urgency is not anxiety. Anxiety is fear-based. Urgency is awareness-based. Urgency is not getting yourself into a frenzy or wringing your hands about how little time you have. It is consciously, deliberately accepting the reality that you have limited time and choosing to act accordingly. Anxiety does not support change. Urgency does.

Laura and Scott Sommers have experienced so much change in the past few years, they've become change masters. In the past year, they have moved their home and Laura's Whole Brained Creative design and communication firm from the Twin Cities to Ohio so Scott could take a job as partner in an internationally known design firm. Laura transitioned to serving Minnesota clients long distance and adding new Ohio-based clients. Meanwhile, Scott quickly discovered that there were serious leadership issues at the new firm.

"That created urgency," says Scott. Laura observes how Scott used urgency to fuel interest and excitement. "When Scott opened up to the idea that he could go out on his own, after watching me do it for three years, he got really excited. The excitement of stepping into a new identity can help carry you along." Deciding to grow Whole Brained Creative together dominoed into more changes including another move into a house with a home office big enough for two.

## Step 2: Enlist Allies

A group of powerful, trustworthy allies can make the difference between your desired change happening or languishing. Allies bring new information and insight. They bring new perspectives and possibilities. They add their skills and resources to the mix. Their excitement and enthusiasm help you maintain your commitment to your creative change.

The Sommers use their allies to create a virtual team of creative talent available through Whole Brained Creative. Having a talent pool to draw from without paying the overhead of a permanent staff gives Whole Brained its competitive position of providing excellent creative work to big clients at much lower costs.

Kathy Kuhl of Kuhl Thinking, a promotional marketing company, has also discovered the benefits of using allies to create a larger virtual company. Kuhl is part of a newly formed

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consortium of art directors, copywriters and media buyers that share contacts and resources so they all can offer a broader range of services to clients.

Kuhl's allies also helped prepare her for the realities of becoming a freelancer. "I'd meet one woman who'd already gone through the change of becoming a freelancer on a regular basis for coffee. It was good to hear her perspective on how she got started, what pitfalls she went through and what to expect."

Tieck relies on a critique group to give her the kind of feedback she needs to polish her fiction. But she also acknowledges the contributions of her non-writing friends. "I've been telling one friend about my stories for years. When I told her I was struggling with a question about one of my characters, she started cataloguing all these things I'd told her about him. I hadn't thought of her as ally until then. I was surprised she had heard me so well."

## **Step 3: Clarify Your Vision, Develop a Strategy**

It may not be clear yet, but a vision is implied in the decision to make a change. You don't have to create the vision, you only have to clarify what the vision already is or select which of many visions to focus on.

"Because we're creative people, we have a lot of ideas and visions," Laura Sommers reflects. "We're always entertaining six or 10 ways we could build our lives, so that when an opportunity comes along, we've already envisioned it somewhat."

Scott Sommers highlights the importance of knowing what isn't part of the change vision. "We knew early on what we didn't want to be. There have been opportunities to get sucked into that, so it was important to know what we just wouldn't do."

Rick Cornish, president and creative director at Flying Colors film, video, music and events production studio, echoes Sommers' opinion: "Everything around us is changing so rapidly, there is more than ever an impetus to do knee-jerk change. We want to embrace change wisely. A change isn't an improvement unless our clients value it."

Cornish emphasizes the importance of vision and strategy in providing meaningful change. Every project Flying Colors does for a client has its own vision and strategy detailed into plans and schedules.

Developing a change strategy for a client that relies on proven methods is relatively easy for professionally creative people. But identifying the strategy for our own creative change is often more difficult, in part because we're trying new methods. Creative changes, by definition, allow us to do something we haven't done before, so it's hard to develop a clear cut strategy.

"We have a strategic approach for how we want to run our business, but we don't have a written strategic plan," reports Scott Sommers. "We know what we're going to do, but sometimes we have no idea how."

Tieck refers to "the willingness to reinvent yourself" as the essential creative strategy. "What was true for you 10 years ago or even a month ago may not be true anymore. You have to be open to reinventing yourself."

## **Step 4: Share the Vision**

Of the seven steps, sharing the vision often looks the easiest. But making a public announcement detailing a change you have until now shared only with a few, trusted allies means you'll need to carefully craft exactly what you'll share about your vision, with whom, and when. Sharing your vision builds synergy by expanding the number of people who know what you're doing, and in the process exponentially expanding the number of contacts, allies, clients, collaborators, advisors and supporters.

Demonstrating the iterative nature of the creative change process, Kuhl credits her discussions with allies in helping her clarify and share her vision. "For me, these two go hand in hand. As I shared my vision, the vision clarified and shifted into what it is now."

Sharing the vision not only gives you another opportunity to clarify and improve it, it also builds your belief and enthusiasm for the change. Tieck finds that telling others about her writing "reminds me that it is important. Saying I'm working on my first novel sounds very big for me to say, but now people are expecting me to do it. For me to be accountable to myself, I need to claim and create that reality for myself."

The Sommers find sharing their vision with friends "helps crystallize for us what we do in the world."

For Flying Colors, sharing the vision begins with an initial client briefing. Then they develop a creative brief by comparing "this is what they told us, this is how we think they see it, this is how we see it. It separates the personal emotional observations from the objective observations."

## **Step 5: Empower Action**

In Step 5, the rubber meets the road. You finally take the action you may have wanted to jump into right away. Empowering the action means identifying and building structures, relationships and beliefs that support the change. It also means identifying and eliminating unsupportive structures, relationships and beliefs. In Step 5, the change gets challenging, so you need to remember the urgency, rely on your allies, and focus on the vision and strategy you've identified and shared.

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For Kuhl, leaving a large agency to work independently initially felt empowering. Later she realized being on her own was also an obstacle. "I started targeting ad agencies in the beginning because all I could really offer was my strategic thinking. I didn't have art directors or copywriters to back me up. I was working primarily with agencies that had advertising capabilities but no promotional capabilities."

Kuhl's promotional marketing expertise filled that gap for bigger agencies, but limited her opportunities. Once she identified the obstacle, she was open to solutions. "Working with a consortium of freelancers, I'm back to being part of something bigger and my possibilities are widening."

For Cornish, overcoming obstacles is the service Flying Colors provides. "Once we say this is what we're going to accomplish, then we're just solving all the problems that crop up between here and there." To do that, he makes sure his employees have "a good sense of where their authority and responsibility begins and ends."

"Obstacles are going to come," agrees Scott Sommers, "but you can't let them get you sidetracked."

Writing fiction isn't a revenue generator for Tieck, so she faces a different obstacle, but like Cornish and Sommers, she relies on passion and urgency to fuel her efforts and keep her moving. "I often come home completely wiped out from the magazine. I look at the Action Map we created in class and realize if I can just do one small thing, I'll be doing OK."

## Step 6: Generate and Celebrate Intermediate Success

Many creative professionals recognize the need to break a large project into smaller steps and enjoy the intrinsic satisfaction of accomplishing those tasks. But they don't recognize the importance of celebrating small successes along the way.

Yet, the findings of brain researcher Dr. Barry Richmond of the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology in Japan demonstrate the importance of rewards in motivating and reinforcing action. Richmond's research showed that monkeys learning to perform a task have fewer errors when they know a reward is coming. "If you're working toward a distant goal, you must keep working even if you don't like what you're doing," Richmond told *Newsweek*. "The anterior cingulate [portion of the brain] seems to help keep you on task. There is an increased expectancy that is built up for reaching the goal and getting a reward. As you get closer to the goal, you work harder."

The Sommers know the motivating power of acknowledging their progress. "Every time we get a check from a client, we celebrate. It's a very tangible, rewarding measure of success. If they keep paying you, if they keep

calling you to do more work, you are successful," says Laura.


The Sommers make a conscious effort to find new ways to celebrate. "When I have little successes with my writing, I'll share those with a friend or I'll read it to Scott. Or we'll print things to put them up on the wall to celebrate competence."

## Step 7: Anchor the Change

The final step is to anchor the change so the efforts you've made don't get lost in the multitude of everyday details. Little slips, little deviations from the change plan and the new behaviors that came with it may not seem significant, but they do add up. A change is most likely to be gradually lost if the change is not firmly anchored to the individual's values or the organization's culture.

The Sommers are confident their latest creative change to work together to grow Whole Brained Creative is a lasting one because of their commitment, passion and energy. Laura points out that Scott had calls from headhunters and heads of businesses when the word got out that he was leaving his last job. "The first time you turn one of those down, it's very frightening," Laura notes. "We're all in the habit of being responsive to those kinds of things. But once you do that, it's the power of saying 'No.' It reaffirms, 'This is what I'm doing right now.'"

What cements the change for Kuhl is a review of the urgency that sent her out on her own in the first place. "I worked for so many years where it was just a constant grind. I felt I hardly knew anybody. I had to step back and say there was more to life. It was the value of needing to connect with other people and have time for hobbies. The change has enabled me to have a more balanced life. I know I don't want to go back to how life once was."

Having time for what she values not only makes Kuhl happier, it allows her to do her work better, which anchors the change even deeper. "There are times in the darkroom when I think of a solution for a project I'm working on. Instead of feeling like a gerbil on a wheel, I'm able to think ahead and solve problems proactively." 

*Rosanne Bane is a creativity coach; author of Dancing in the Dragon's Den: Rekindling the Creative Fire in Your Shadow; and has been teaching creativity for over 13 years. An apprentice affiliate of the Minnesota chapter of the National Speaker's Assoc., Bane has given presentations on creativity and change for 3M, Land O'Lakes, the American Creativity Assoc. and others. Reach her at [www.RosanneBane.com](http://www.RosanneBane.com).*