

## Welcome Back, Kotter

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[plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose](#)

How do you create change? If you are comedian Daniel Tosh, you save it in a jar and then fill your cargo pockets, and give it away to the first person to ask you for it. Creating real change and actual culture shifts are much harder than simply handing coins to the first person interested.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same,” is the translation for the French phrase above. I came across this phrase in the Greek Leadership Academy curriculum at the Eastern Michigan University (EMU) when I served as a small group facilitator in 2011. At the time, the position of Coordinator for Greek Life, Student Organization, and Leadership had opened up at EMU; I knew I had the opportunity to apply for the position and work for the institution which had such a strong impact on my development as a student leader and as a professional. As I considered the opportunity, I remember pondering that phrase about change and wondering what it would be like to work at my undergraduate institution. I knew I would have big shoes to fill, but I was ready.

Fast-forward to the fall of 2013. I have been working at EMU for about a year and a half in the aforementioned position. The past year and a half has been turbulent, exciting, stressful, busy, and very rewarding. There has been quite a bit of institutional change, and yet, many of the programs and activities that are offered in the fraternity/sorority community have persisted. In fact, many of the programs I was involved in developing as an undergraduate have grown and expanded. However, the community as a whole has not. Numerous community members have expressed a feeling the community has hit a plateau and become stagnant. It is my job to facilitate change, but where do I start when everything feels so familiar? How do you create meaningful change within organizations that is meant to persist? [Kotter’s 8-Step Process for Leading Change](#) provides some structure for how to get the process started (Mind Tools, n.d.).

If creating change is such a simple process according to Kotter, why has it been so difficult for EMU to move forward as a community? I have been able to create change in my personal life, from keeping New Year’s resolutions to learning new skills. Upon reflection, I realized the reason I was able to do those things is because they were important to *me*. I bought into those changes because they meant something to me. Student-led initiatives at EMU have always caused the most drastic, impactful, and lasting change.

For example, let’s flash back to 2005. I am sitting in the very same office I work in now, except as a junior in college. My fraternity/sorority advisor is telling me I have some serious leadership development to do if I want to be Panhellenic President. That was difficult for me to hear, but it was also the most motivated I have ever been to change. We started working to create an assessment process for the fraternity and sorority community, along with other leaders. By the end of that year, it had been adopted by the community, implemented, and now, years later, the assessment process culminates annually in March. That assessment program has shifted the entire culture of our community. Why? Students cared about it then, and they continue to care about it now.

So this becomes the starting point for me. If the community is stagnant, we have to adjust the expectations and standards we expect them to meet. My past experience as a student leader and purposeful reflection as a professional will allow me to implement this process again to move the current community forward.

To begin a major culture shift, you have to have the right people on the bus. By encouraging and developing strong leaders who community members can look up to, we have started this process. I have leaders who tirelessly work for their peers. They truly value the fraternal experience and want to provide a positive one for their community members and many students to come. They model the way with all that they do. And, they are willing to have the one-on-one conversations necessary to generate buy-in for real change in our community. I have to begin to identify what is important to them in order to inspire them to move forward. I have to abandon my to-do list of goals for the community and ask, "What changes do they want to see, and how can I shift my thinking to help support them in getting there?" Maybe the more things change, the more they stay the same is true when we do not shift our thinking and when we focus only on what we want. It does not take a genius to notice when something is not working, but there have been men and women in our time that have boiled it down to what we, as leaders in higher education, and our students need to do to see real, impactful change.

"The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking."

-Albert Einstein

### **References**

Mind Tools. (n.d.) *Implementing Change Powerfully and Successfully*. Retrieved October 1, 2013, from [http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM\\_82.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_82.htm).