

Change Is Hardest in the Middle

by [Rosabeth Moss Kanter](#)

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It's no surprise that moods are sagging in mid-2009. The capital markets are stalling, the banks are barely lending, the federal government stimulus is not stimulating enough, and job losses are mounting. Incumbent politicians promise that things are getting better, but not in your city, where the powers-that-be are shutting down the zoo and raising public transportation fares, making subway rides so expensive that cars still clog the roads.

Even optimists feel anxiety. Perhaps you are a visionary leader, intrepid innovator, or enthusiastic entrepreneur determined to make the best of it, recession or not. But your new projects are stalled like the stock market and the traffic jams. Revenues aren't coming fast enough. Customer layoffs remove your advocates and disrupt communication. Workers are tired and irritable. Budgetary naysayers are louder. You're wondering if you should consider pulling the plug....

Welcome to the miserable middles of change. This is the time when Kanter's Law kicks in. Everything looks like a failure in the middle. Everyone loves inspiring beginnings and happy endings; it is just the middles that involve hard work.

I hit upon this law of management (and life) after observing hundreds of major changes slide into lethargy following the pep rallies and press conferences, as grand promises gave way to the tough challenges of implementation. That's the point in the middle when true believers have doubts. And that happens even without throwing in a gigantic global economic crisis.

All new initiatives – big new government directions, business turnarounds, new venture start-ups, new products, or internal process changes – can run into trouble before reaching fruition. Troubles increase with the number of ways the initiative differs from current approaches. The more innovation, the more problems. Problems tempt people to give up, forget it, and chase the next enticing rainbow. **But stop the effort too soon, and by definition it is a failure.** Stay with it through its hurdles, make appropriate adjustments, and you could be on the way to success. Though some ideas are dead-ends, many simply need mid-course corrections.

The middles of change are miserable for predictable reasons. Forecasts fall short, especially if the situation is novel, and it is hard to know exactly how things will play out. (That's certainly true of the Obama-Geithner stimulus.) Decision-makers are stingy with resources, making it inevitable that funds run out before victory is in sight. (Score another problem for the underfunded federal stimulus.) A successful brand manager for a major consumer goods company has a poster on his wall declaring "New products always take longer and cost more." (Amen, brother.) There are always unexpected obstacles and hidden delays. Leaders must be

prepared to secure additional resources, beg for additional time, or figure out creative ways to stretch scarce resources.

But slipped schedules wouldn't be fatal flaws without another middle problem: rising negativity and slowing momentum. (I'm sure a physicist would have a formula for that.)

Harsh reality sets in: This is harder to do than anyone thought. Conflicts surface. Investors and friends ask why it isn't faster. Critics attack. Partisan bickering makes it harder to find solutions, and the middles get even more miserable.

Whether you are President Obama leading the economy or Cindy CEO trying to keep your business afloat, use this checklist to determine when to persist and when to pull out.

- **Tune into the environment.** What has changed since you began the initiative? Do the original assumptions hold? Is the need still there?
- **Check the vision.** Does the idea still feel inspiring? Is it big enough to make extra efforts worthwhile?
- **Test support.** Are supporters still enthusiastic about the mission? Will new partners join the initiative?
- **Examine progress.** Have promises been kept and milestones passed? Are there early indicators, tangible demonstrations, that this could succeed? Can the next wave of results sustain supporters and silence critics?
- **Search for synergies.** Can the project work well with other activities? Can it be enhanced by alliances?

Too many No's, and it might be time to cut losses and move on. But if the answers are mostly Yes, it is not over yet. You are still in the middle and still in the game. Renew the dream, regroup to remove roadblocks, surround yourself with supporters who cheer you on, and stick with it. **Recognize the struggle of middles, give it some time, and a successful end could be in sight.**

Those who master change persist and persevere. They have stamina. They are flexible. They expect obstacles on the road to success and celebrate each milestone. They keep arguing for what matters. And who knows what might happen? Persistence could keep innovations alive, convince companies to avoid draconian cuts, influence hiring managers to take a second look, or even persuade local politicians to save the city zoo.



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