GoldinKollar

Change Management

Change management: what it is, the types, the steps and why people resist

Change management is the work of getting people to adopt a change. The types of change, ten steps the evidence supports, why employees resist, and how to know it has landed.



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The short answer: change management is the work of helping people adopt a change, so that the change delivers what it was meant to. It covers why the change is needed, who leads it, what people must do differently and how they are supported. A new system or structure that people do not use has changed nothing.

A company in Riyadh moves leave requests from paper to an app. The launch goes well: the app works, the email goes out, the vendor is paid. Three months later, half the managers still sign paper forms, and HR keys them in by hand. The project was delivered. The change was not.

What is change management?

Prosci, the firm behind the ADKAR model, describes change management as "an enabling framework for managing the people side of change". Every change has two sides.

- **The technical side** is the thing being built: the system, the structure, the policy, the process. Project management delivers it.
- **The people side** is whether people understand it, accept it and work in the new way. Change management delivers that.

It is also more than an announcement. Prosci makes the same point: managing change is often reduced to a communications plan, and it is much more than telling people what is changing. People need a reason, the skills, the time and a manager who works the new way too.

What are the types of organizational change?

Researchers Karl Weick and Robert Quinn (1999) separate change by its tempo.

Type	What it looks like	Examples	The sequence
Episodic change	Planned, occasional and large; it has a start and an end	A restructure, a merger, a new system, a move to a new office	Unfreeze, transition, refreeze
Continuous change	Small, ongoing adjustments that add up	Teams improving a process every month; a service that changes with its customers	Freeze, rebalance, unfreeze

In practice it also helps to ask what is changing: the structure (who reports to whom), the process or technology (how work is done), or the culture (what people treat as normal). The third usually takes longest; see our guide to whether organizational culture can be changed.

What are the steps of change management?

Popular models give four, five or eight steps. A review of both the popular models and the research found that the models more often rest on expert opinion than on scientific evidence, and drew out ten steps the evidence supports (Stouten, Rousseau and De Cremer, 2018).

1. **Assess the problem or opportunity behind the change.** Be able to say what is wrong today, with facts.
2. **Choose and support a guiding coalition.** A group with the authority and credibility to lead it.
3. **Form a clear, compelling vision.** What will be different, in words a new joiner would understand.
4. **Communicate the vision.** More than once, and from the people employees trust.
5. **Mobilise energy for the change.** Involve the people affected in planning it.
6. **Empower others to act.** Remove the approvals and rules that block the new way.
7. **Build the knowledge and ability the change needs.** Training, practice and time.
8. **Identify short-term wins and use them.** Show early proof that it works.
9. **Monitor and strengthen the change over time.** Measure, adjust and keep going.
10. **Make it part of the culture, the practices and how leaders are chosen.** Otherwise it fades when its sponsor moves on.

For steps 3 and 4, our change management communication plan has a phased template and a sample announcement. To compare Lewin, Kotter, ADKAR and the influence model, see culture change models compared.

Why do employees resist change?

"Resistance" is often treated as a fault in the employee. The research reads it differently. A review of 79 quantitative studies published between 1948 and 2007 found that how people react to a change depends on five things (Oreg, Vakola and Armenakis, 2011):

What shapes the reaction	The question the employee is asking
Who the person is	Have I coped with change before?
The situation before the change	Do I trust the people running this place?
How the change is run	Was I told early, and was I asked?
Expected benefit or harm	What do I gain, and what do I lose?
What the change is	Does it touch my job, my pay or my status?

Most of these are in the hands of the people leading the change: how it is run, what it contains and how honestly gains and losses are explained. That is why an earlier paper separates readiness from resistance. Readiness is what people believe, feel and intend before the change starts, and leaders can build it; the credibility of whoever carries the message is part of that (Armenakis, Harris and Mossholder, 1993).

In practice:

- **Say what people will lose, not only what they will gain.** They have already worked it out.
- **Let the direct manager explain the change to the team.** A message from the top starts the conversation; it does not finish it.
- **Ask before you decide where you can.** Even a small choice, such as the order of the rollout, changes how the rest is received.

Do 70% of change programmes fail?

You will read that 70% of change programmes fail. Mark Hughes (2011) traced five published sources of that figure and found no valid and reliable evidence behind any of them. Success depends on the change, the context and who is judging. Do not plan from a slogan. Decide at the start what success means for this change, and measure that.

How do you know a change has landed?

Measure three things, in this order.

- **Adoption.** Are people working the new way? Count it: forms submitted in the app, meetings held in the new format.
- **Understanding.** Can people say what changed and why, in their own words? A few pulse survey questions four weeks after launch will tell you.
- **Belief.** Do people think it was worth it, and that it will last? Small focus groups explain a low score better than another survey.

Your next step

Take one change you are running now. Write down, in one sentence each, why it is needed, what people will do differently and what they will lose. If you cannot, the plan is not ready to announce.

Frequently asked questions

What is change management in simple words?

It is everything a company does to help its people move from the old way of working to a new one: explaining why, preparing managers, training, removing obstacles and checking that the new way is used. Without it, a change exists on paper only.

What are the types of change in an organization?

By tempo, change is episodic (planned, large and occasional, such as a restructure or a new system) or continuous (small, constant adjustments). By content, it touches structure, process and technology, or culture. Culture change usually takes longest.

What are the main steps of change management?

Diagnose the problem, form a group to lead the change, set and communicate a clear vision, involve and empower the people affected, build the skills they need, show early wins, keep measuring, and make the change part of how the company works.

Why do employees resist change?

Mostly for reasons leaders control: they heard late, they were not asked, or they expect to lose something that nobody has named. Research on 79 studies found that how a change is run and what people expect to gain or lose shape the reaction.

What is the difference between change management and project management?

Project management delivers the new system, structure or process on time and on budget. Change management makes sure people adopt it. A change needs both: a project that goes live with nobody using it has not succeeded.

Which change management model is best?

No model has been proven best. Each fits a different situation: a merger, a new system and a single team changing one habit call for different tools. Our comparison of culture change models shows which fits which.

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