



Change Management: From Theory to Practice

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Abstract

This article presents a set of change management strategies found across several models and frameworks and identifies how frequently change management practitioners implement these strategies in practice. We searched the literature to identify 15 common strategies found in 16 different change management models and frameworks. We also created a questionnaire based on the literature and distributed it to change management practitioners. Findings suggest that strategies related to communication, stakeholder involvement, encouragement, organizational culture, vision, and mission should be used when implementing organizational change.

Keywords Change management · Organizational development · Performance improvement · Strategies

Organizations must change to survive. There are many approaches to influence change; these differences require change managers to consider various strategies that increase acceptance and reduce barriers. A change manager is responsible for planning, developing, leading, evaluating, assessing, supporting, and sustaining a change implementation. Change management consists of models and strategies to help employees accept new organizational developments.

Change management practitioners and academic researchers view organizational change differently (Hughes, 2007; Pollack & Pollack, 2015). Saka (2003) states, “there is a gap between what the rational-linear change management approach prescribes and what change agents do” (p. 483). This disconnect may make it difficult to determine the suitability and appropriateness of using different techniques to promote change (Pollack & Pollack, 2015). Hughes (2007) thinks that practitioners and academics may have trouble communicating because they use different terms. Whereas academics use the terms, models, theories, and concepts,

practitioners use tools and techniques. A tool is a stand-alone application, and a technique is an integrated approach (Dale & McQuater, 1998). Hughes (2007) expresses that classifying change management tools and techniques can help academics identify what practitioners do in the field and evaluate the effectiveness of practitioners’ implementations.

There is little empirical evidence that supports a preferred change management model (Hallencreutz & Turner, 2011). However, there are many similar strategies found across change management models (Raineri, 2011). Bamford and Forrester’s (2003) case study showed that “[change] managers in a company generally ignored the popular change literature” (p. 560). The authors followed Pettigrew’s (1987) suggestions that change managers should not use abstract theories; instead, they should relate change theories to the context of the change. Neves’ (2009) exploratory factor analysis of employees experiencing the implementation of a new performance appraisal system at a public university suggested that (a) change appropriateness (if the employee felt the change was beneficial to the organization) was positively related with affective commitment (how much the employee liked their job), and (b) affective commitment mediated the relationship between change appropriateness and individual change (how much the employee shifted to the new system). It is unlikely that there is a universal change management approach that works in all settings (Saka, 2003). Because change is chaotic, one specific model or framework may not be useful in multiple contexts (Buchanan & Boddy, 1992; Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991). This requires change managers

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to consider various approaches for different implementations (Pettigrew, 1987). Change managers may face uncertainties that cannot be addressed by a planned sequence of steps (Carnall, 2007; Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991). Different stakeholders within an organization may complete steps at different times (Pollack & Pollack, 2015). Although there may not be one perspective change management approach, many models and frameworks consist of similar change management strategies.

Anderson and Ackerman Anderson (2001) discuss the differences between change frameworks and change process models. They state that a *change framework* identifies topics that are relevant to the change and explains the procedures that organizations should acknowledge during the change. However, the framework does not provide details about how to accomplish the steps of the change or the sequence in which the change manager should perform the steps. Additionally, Anderson and Ackerman Anderson (2001) explain that *change process models* describe what actions are necessary to accomplish the change and the order in which to facilitate the actions. Whereas frameworks may identify variables or theories required to promote change, models focus on the specific processes that lead to change. Based on the literature, we define a change strategy as a process or action from a model or framework. Multiple models and frameworks contain similar strategies. Change managers use models and frameworks contextually; some change management strategies may be used across numerous models and frameworks.

The purpose of this article is to present a common set of change management strategies found across numerous models and frameworks and identify how frequently change management practitioners implement these common strategies in practice. We also compare current practice with models and frameworks from the literature. Some change management models and frameworks have been around for decades and others are more recent. This comparison may assist practitioners and theorists to consider different strategies that fall outside a specific model.

Method

Common Strategies in the Change Management Literature

We examined highly-cited publications ($n > 1000$ citations) from the last 20 years, business websites, and university websites to select organizational change management models and frameworks. First, we searched two indexes—Google Scholar and Web of Science’s Social Science Citation Index. We used the following keywords in both indexes: “change management” OR “organizational

change” OR “organizational development” AND (models or frameworks). Additionally, we used the same search terms in a Google search to identify models mentioned on university and business websites. This helped us identify change management models that had less presence in popular research. We only included models and frameworks from our search results that were mentioned on multiple websites. We reached saturation when multiple publications stopped identifying new models and frameworks.

After we identified the models and frameworks, we analyzed the original publications by the authors to identify observable strategies included in the models and frameworks. We coded the strategies by comparing new strategies with our previously coded strategies, and we combined similar strategies or created a new strategy. Our list of strategies was not exhaustive, but we included the most common strategies found in the publications. Finally, we omitted publications that did not provide details about the change management strategies. Although many of these publications were highly cited and identified change implementation processes or phases, the authors did not identify a specific strategy.

Table 1 shows the 16 models and frameworks that we analyzed and the 15 common strategies that we identified from this analysis. Ackerman-Anderson and Anderson (2001) believe that it is important for process models to consider organizational imperatives as well as human dynamics and needs. Therefore, the list of strategies considers organizational imperatives such as *create a vision for the change that aligns with the organization’s mission* and strategies regarding human dynamics and needs such as *listen to employees’ concerns about the change*. We have presented the strategies in order of how frequently the strategies appear in the models and frameworks. Table 1 only includes strategies found in at least six of the models or frameworks.

Strategies Used by Change Managers

We developed an online questionnaire to determine how frequently change managers used the strategies identified in our review of the literature. The Qualtrics-hosted survey consisted of 28 questions including sliding-scale, multiple-choice, and Likert-type items. Demographic questions focused on (a) how long the participant had been involved in the practice of change management, (b) how many change projects the participant had led, (c) the types of industries in which the participant led change implementations, (d) what percentage of job responsibilities involved working as a change manager and a project manager, and (e) where the participant learned to conduct change management. Twenty-one Likert-type items asked how often the participant used the strategies identified by our review of common change management models and

Table 1 Common strategies in the change management literature

Strategy	Models & frameworks															
	A	AA	B	BB	BH	C	CW	FB	GE	K	KSJ	L	LK	M	N	PW
Provide all members of the organization with clear communication about the change	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Have open support and commitment from the administration	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Focus on changing organizational culture	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Distinguish the differences between leadership and management	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Create a vision for the change that aligns with the organization's mission	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Reward new behavior	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Listen to employees' concerns about the change	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Include employees in change decisions	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Prepare for unexpected shifts	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Generate short-term wins	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Create groups or subsystems to tackle the change	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Provide employees with training	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Concentrate on ending old habits before starting new ones	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Train managers and supervisors to be change agents	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Gain support from opinion leaders	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

A = ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006); AA = Ackerman Anderson and Anderson (2001); B = Bridges (1991); BB = Buchanan and Boddy (1992); BH = Beckhard and Harris (1987); C = Carnall (2007); CW = Cummings and Worley (1993); FB = French and Bell (1999); GE = GE CAP model (Neri et al., 2008; Polk, 2011); K = Kotter (2012); KSJ = Kanter et al. (1992); L = Lewin's Three-step model (Bakari et al., 2017; Lewin, 1951); LK = Luecke (2003); M = McKinsey's 7-S framework (Cox et al., 2019; Waterman et al., 1980); N = Nadler and Tushman (1997); PW = Pettigrew and Whipp (1993)

frameworks. Participants could select never, sometimes, most of the time, and always. The Cronbach's Alpha of the Likert-scale questions was 0.86.

The procedures for the questionnaire followed the steps suggested by Gall et al. (2003). The first steps were to define the research objectives, select the sample, and design the questionnaire format. The fourth step was to pretest the questionnaire. We conducted cognitive laboratory interviews by sending the questionnaire and interview questions to one person who was in the field of change management, one person who was in the field of performance improvement, and one person who was in the field of survey development (Fowler, 2014). We met with the reviewers through Zoom to evaluate the questionnaire by asking them to read the directions and each item for clarity. Then, reviewers were directed to point out mistakes or areas of confusion. Having multiple

people review the survey instruments improved the reliability of the responses (Fowler, 2014).

We used purposeful sampling to distribute the online questionnaire throughout the following organizations: the Association for Talent Development (ATD), Change Management Institute (CMI), and the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI). We also launched a call for participation to department chairs of United States universities who had Instructional Systems Design graduate programs with a focus on Performance Improvement. We used snowball sampling to gain participants by requesting that the department chairs forward the questionnaire to practitioners who had led at least one organizational change.

Table 2 provides a summary of the characteristics of the 49 participants who completed the questionnaire. Most had over ten years of experience practicing change management

Table 2 Characteristics of participants

Traits	Frequency
Percentage of job responsibilities spent as a change manager	53.5%
Percentage of job responsibilities spent as a project manager	37.6%
Years of experience	
10+ years	37
7–10 years	3
4–6 years	3
1–3 years	4
Less than one year	2
Number of change projects	
10+ projects	32
7–10 projects	4
4–6 projects	6
1–3 projects	7
Where they learned how to conduct change management	
On-the-job	47
Books	31
Academic journal articles	22
College or university courses	20
Professional organization websites	17
Certification training	16
Other	9
Mentors	3
The most common industries where they have worked	
Technology	21
Education	13
Manufacturing	13
Healthcare	11
Government	9
Pharmaceuticals	8
Finance	8
Chemical or fuel	6
Retail	6
Telecommunications	6
Food and food processing	5
Transportation	4
Military and law enforcement	2

($n = 49$)

($n = 37$) and had completed over ten change projects ($n = 32$). The participants learned how to conduct change management on-the-job ($n = 47$), through books ($n = 31$), through academic journal articles ($n = 22$), and from college or university courses ($n = 20$). The participants had worked in 13 different industries.

Table 3 shows how frequently participants indicated that they used the change management strategies included on the questionnaire. Forty or more participants said they used the following strategies most often or always: (1) Asked members of senior leadership to support the change; (2) Listened to managers’ concerns about the change; (3) Aligned an intended change with an organization’s mission; (4) Listened to employees’ concerns about the change; (5) Aligned an intended change with an organization’s vision; (6) Created measurable short-term goals; (7) Asked managers for feedback to improve the change, and (8) Focused on organizational culture.

Table 4 identifies how frequently the strategies appeared in the models and frameworks and the rate at which practitioners indicated they used the strategies most often or always. The strategies found in the top 25% of both ($n > 36$ for practitioner use and $n > 11$ in models and frameworks) focused on communication, including senior leadership and the employees in change decisions, aligning the change with

the vision and mission of the organization, and focusing on organizational culture. Practitioners used several strategies more commonly than the literature suggested, especially concerning the topic of middle management. Practitioners focused on listening to middle managers’ concerns about the change, asking managers for feedback to improve the change, and ensuring that managers were trained to promote the change. Meanwhile, practitioners did not engage in the following strategies as often as the models and frameworks suggested that they should: provide all members of the organization with clear communication about the change, distinguish the differences between leadership and management, reward new behavior, and include employees in change decisions.

Discussion

Common Strategies Used by Practitioners and Found in the Literature

The purpose of this article was to present a common set of change management strategies found across numerous models and frameworks and to identify how frequently change management practitioners implement these common

Table 3 Strategies used by change managers

Strategy	Never 0	Sometimes 1	Most of the time 2	Always 3	Total of always and most of the time
Asked members of senior leadership to support the change	0	1	7	41	48
Listened to managers’ concerns about the change	0	2	18	29	47
Aligned an intended change with an organization’s mission	2	1	21	25	46
Listened to employees’ concerns about the change	1	3	22	23	45
Aligned an intended change with an organization’s vision	2	3	17	27	44
Created measurable short-term goals	0	5	21	23	44
Asked managers for feedback to improve the change	1	5	16	27	43
Focused on organizational culture	1	7	16	25	41
Asked employees for feedback to improve the change	2	9	9	29	38
Provided verbal or written encouragement to employees about the change	1	11	14	23	37
Ensured that employees were trained for new change initiatives	1	10	18	20	38
Ensured that managers were trained to promote the change	0	12	21	16	37
Measured the success of your change initiative	0	13	22	14	36
Notified all members of the organization about the change	2	14	17	16	33
Used opinion leaders to promote the change	2	16	19	12	31
Developed managers into leaders	1	20	16	12	28
Adjusted your change implementation because of reactions from senior administrators	1	20	17	11	28
Adjusted your change implementation because of reactions from employees	1	25	12	11	23
Focused on diversity and inclusion when conducting a change	4	22	19	4	23
Helped create an organization’s vision statement	6	24	15	4	19
Provided employees with incentives to implement the change	13	24	11	1	12

Table 4 A comparison of the strategies used by practitioners to the strategies found in the literature

Strategy used by participants (<i>n</i> = 49)	Total of Always and Most of the time	Strategy found in the models and frameworks (<i>n</i> = 16)	Total models and frameworks that list the strategies
Used by practitioners and suggested by models and frameworks			
Asked members of senior leadership to support the change	48	Have open support and commitment from the administration	16
Aligned an intended change with an organization's mission	46	Create a vision for the change that aligns with the organization's mission	13
Listened to employees' concerns about the change	45	Listen to employees' concerns about the change	12
Aligned an intended change with an organization's vision	44	Create a vision for the change that aligns with the organization's mission	13
Focused on organizational culture	41	Focus on changing organizational culture	15
Asked employees for feedback to improve the change	38	Include employees in change decisions	12
Used more often by practitioners than suggested by models and frameworks			
Listened to managers' concerns about the change	47	Train managers and supervisors to be change agents	7
Created measurable short-term goals	44	Generate short-term wins	10
Asked managers for feedback to improve the change	43	Train managers and supervisors to be change agents	7
Ensured that employees were trained for new change initiatives	38	Provide employees with training	8
Ensured that managers were trained to promote the change	37	Train managers and supervisors to be change agents	7
Suggested more often by models and frameworks than used by practitioners			
Notified all members of the organization about the change	33	Provide all members of the organization with clear communication about the change	16
Developed managers into leaders	28	Distinguish the differences between leadership and management	14
Adjusted your change implementation because of reactions from employees	23	Include employees in change decisions	12
Provided employees with incentives to implement the change	12	Reward new behavior	13

strategies in practice. The five common change management strategies were the following: communicate about the change, involve stakeholders at all levels of the organization, focus on organizational culture, consider the organization's mission and vision, and provide encouragement and incentives to change. Below we discuss our findings with an eye toward presenting a few key recommendations for change management.

Communicate About the Change

Communication is an umbrella term that can include messaging, networking, and negotiating (Buchanan & Boddy, 1992). Our findings revealed that communication is essential for change management. All the models and frameworks we examined suggested that change managers should provide members of the organization with clear

communication about the change. It is interesting that approximately 33% of questionnaire respondents indicated that they sometimes, rather than always or most of the time, notified all members of the organization about the change. This may be the result of change managers communicating through organizational leaders. Instead of communicating directly with everyone in the organization, some participants may have used senior leadership, middle management, or subgroups to communicate the change. Messages sent to employees from leaders can effectively promote change. Regardless of who is responsible for communication, someone in the organization should explain why the change is happening (Connor et al., 2003; Doyle & Brady, 2018; Hiatt, 2006; Kotter, 2012) and provide clear communication throughout the entire change implementation (McKinsey & Company, 2008; Mento et al., 2002).

Involve Stakeholders at All Levels of the Organization

Our results indicate that change managers should involve senior leaders, managers, as well as employees during a change initiative. The items on the questionnaire were based on a review of common change management models and frameworks and many related to some form of stakeholder involvement. Of these strategies, over half were used often by 50% or more respondents. They focused on actions like gaining support from leaders, listening to and getting feedback from managers and employees, and adjusting strategies based on stakeholder input.

Whereas the models and frameworks often identified strategies regarding senior leadership and employees, it is interesting that questionnaire respondents indicated that they often implemented strategies involving middle management in a change implementation. This aligns with Bamford and Forrester's (2003) research describing how middle managers are important communicators of change and provide an organization with the direction for the change. However, the participants did not develop managers into leaders as often as the literature proposed. Burnes and By (2012) expressed that leadership is essential to promote change and mention how the change management field has failed to focus on leadership as much as it should.

Focus on Organizational Culture

All but one of the models and frameworks we analyzed indicated that change managers should focus on changing the culture of an organization and more than 75% of questionnaire respondents revealed that they implemented this strategy always or most of the time. Organizational culture affects the acceptance of change. Changing the organizational culture can prevent employees from returning to the previous status quo (Bullock & Batten, 1985; Kotter, 2012; Mento et al., 2002). Some authors have different views on how to change an organization's culture. For example, Burnes (2000) thinks that change managers should focus on employees who were resistant to the change while Hiatt (2006) suggests that change managers should replicate what strategies they used in the past to change the culture. Change managers require open support and commitment from managers to lead a culture change (Phillips, 2021).

In addition, Pless and Maak (2004) describe the importance of creating a culture of inclusion where diverse viewpoints help an organization reach its organizational objectives. Yet less than half of the participants indicated that they often focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Change managers should consider diverse viewpoints when implementing change, especially for organizations whose vision promotes a diverse and inclusive workforce.

Consider the Organization's Mission and Vision

Several of the models and frameworks we examined mentioned that change managers should consider the mission and vision of the organization (Cummings & Worley, 1993; Hiatt, 2006; Kotter, 2012; Polk, 2011). Furthermore, aligning the change with the organization's mission and vision were among the strategies most often implemented by participants. This was the second most common strategy both used by participants and found in the models and frameworks. A mission of an organization may include its beliefs, values, priorities, strengths, and desired public image (Cummings & Worley, 1993). Leaders are expected to adhere to a company's values and mission (Strebel, 1996).

Provide Encouragement and Incentives to Change

Most of the change management models and frameworks suggested that organizations should reward new behavior, yet most respondents said they did not provide incentives to change. About 75% of participants did indicate that they frequently gave encouragement to employees about the change. The questionnaire may have confused participants by suggesting that they provide incentives *before* the change occurs. Additionally, respondents may have associated incentives with monetary compensation. Employee training can be considered an incentive, and many participants confirmed that they provided employees and managers with training. More information is needed to determine why the participants did not provide incentives and what the participants defined as rewards.

Future Conversations Between Practitioners and Researchers

Table 4 identified five strategies that practitioners used more often than the models and frameworks suggested and four strategies that were suggested more often by the models and frameworks than used by practitioners. One strategy that showed the largest difference was provided employees with incentives to implement the change. Although 81% of the selected models and frameworks suggested that practitioners should provide employees with incentives, only 25% of the practitioners identified that they provided incentives always and most of the time. Conversations between theorists and practitioners could determine if these differences occur because each group uses different terms (Hughes, 2007) or if practitioners just implement change differently than theorists suggest (Saka, 2003).

Additionally, conversations between theorists and practitioners may help promote improvements in the field of change management. For example, practitioners were split on how often they promoted DEI, and the selected models and

frameworks did not focus on DEI in change implementations. Conversations between the two groups would help theorists understand what practitioners are doing to advance the field of change management. These conversations may encourage theorists to modify their models and frameworks to include modern approaches to change.

Limitations

The models and frameworks included in this systematic review were found through academic research and websites on the topic of change management. We did not include strategies contained on websites from change management organizations. Therefore, the identified strategies could skew towards approaches favored by theorists instead of practitioners. Additionally, we used specific publications to identify the strategies found in the models and frameworks. Any amendments to the cited models or frameworks found in future publications could not be included in this research.

We distributed this questionnaire in August 2020. Several participants mentioned that they were not currently conducting change management implementations because of global lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because it can take years to complete a change management implementation (Phillips, 2021), this research does not describe how COVID-19 altered the strategies used by the participants. Furthermore, participants were not provided with definitions of the strategies. Their interpretations of the strategies may differ from the definitions found in the academic literature.

Future Research

Future research should expand upon what strategies the practitioners use to determine (a) how the practitioners use the strategies, and (b) the reasons why practitioners use certain strategies. Participants identified several strategies that they did not use as often as the literature suggested (e.g., provide employees with incentives and adjust the change implementation because of reactions from employees). Future research should investigate why practitioners are not implementing these strategies often.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic may have changed how practitioners implemented change management strategies. Future research should investigate if practitioners have added new strategies or changed the frequency in which they identified using the strategies found in this research.

Conclusion

Our aim was to identify a common set of change management strategies found across several models and frameworks and to identify how frequently change management

practitioners implement these strategies in practice. While our findings relate to specific models, frameworks, and strategies, we caution readers to consider the environment and situation where the change will occur. Therefore, strategies should not be selected for implementation based on their inclusion in highly cited models and frameworks. Our study identified strategies found in the literature and used by change managers, but it does not predict that specific strategies are more likely to promote a successful organizational change. Although we have presented several strategies, we do not suggest combining these strategies to create a new framework. Instead, these strategies should be used to promote conversation between practitioners and theorists. Additionally, we do not suggest that one model or framework is superior to others because it contains more strategies currently used by practitioners. Evaluating the effectiveness of a model or framework by how many common strategies it contains gives an advantage to models and frameworks that contain the most strategies. Instead, this research identifies what practitioners are doing in the field to steer change management literature towards the strategies that are most used to promote change.

Declarations

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