ADAPTIVE CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL ERA: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATION MODELS

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Abstract: *This research paper aims to examine the evolving dynamics of change management in the context of rapid technological advancement and digital transformation, highlighting the strategic necessity for organizations to adopt adaptive frameworks to remain competitive and resilient. Classical models of change, grounded in established organizational theories, provide structured approaches to managing transformation but face limitations in today's fast-paced, innovation-driven environment. Contemporary models, emphasizing agility, stakeholder engagement, and continuous adaptation, offer enhanced responsiveness to the complexities of digital disruption. By comparing foundational and modern approaches, this paper explores how organizations can synthesize these paradigms into a cohesive and flexible change management strategy. This integration not only improves organizational responsiveness and resilience but also empowers leaders to navigate transformation with greater clarity and efficiency. Ongoing innovation and future research are essential to further refine adaptive models capable of supporting long-term organizational success in an era defined by constant change.*
Keywords: *change management, organizational development, adaptive models, innovation in management*

INTRODUCTION

Organizational change is a crucial aspect of organizational transformation, allowing managers and decision-makers to understand the extent of interventions implemented. Incremental changes are the least disruptive form, aiming to improve existing processes, increase efficiency, or improve the work environment without disrupting the basic structure. Simple communication and continuous training are necessary, but they fall short in situations that necessitate radical changes.

Transformational changes, unlike incremental ones, affect multiple levels and require a fundamental overhaul of the organization's operations. They often involve a clear vision, strong leadership, and focused change management (Burnes, 2004; Busari et al., 2019). In practice, they involve a project-based approach, mapping of key risks, and ongoing leadership support (Wu, 2021).

Strategic changes aim to reshape the organization's long-term position in the market, requiring significant resource mobilization and systemic alignment of internal structures with new priorities (Zajac & Kraatz, 1993; Nugraha et al., 2022). Cultural changes are considered the most challenging as they deal with employees' core values, beliefs, and behaviors. They occur gradually through behavioral modeling, symbolic actions, and continuous communication but have a profound and long-lasting impact when successfully implemented (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999).

Structural changes affect the formal aspects of the organization, such as hierarchy, lines of responsibility, division of labor, and coordination mechanisms. They can be technical in nature but may also significantly influence power dynamics and internal relations (Weick & Quinn, 1999). A comparative analysis of different levels of organizational change allows for a more profound understanding of their applicability, effectiveness, and role in different circumstances (Burnes, 2004).

Incremental changes are most effective in stable environments where continuous improvement is required, while transformational and strategic changes are appropriate in crises or when the organization must radically change its approach (Zare et al., 2015). Cultural changes are essential for the long-term sustainability of any transformation, as they affect the very foundations of organizational functioning (Henderson, 2002; Nadifa et al., 2022).

Accurately identifying the level of organizational change is the foundation for effective planning, implementation, and sustainable change. Management's ability to recognize the right moment and the nature of the necessary change—and to adapt tools and approaches to the context depends on understanding the theoretical foundations and empirical adaptation (Yeo & Ajam, 2010; Waal & Heijtel, 2016).

THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND CONCEPTS OF TRANSFORMATION

Organizational transformation is a critical process that requires a comprehensive understanding of various theories and concepts. Social Identity Theory, which suggests that individuals are defined by their affiliation with social groups, is a key factor in shaping employee behavior and commitment to change initiatives. This theory suggests that employees who have a strong connection to their organization are more likely to support transformation efforts (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999).

Organizational cognition, which includes collective beliefs, mental models, and interpretations that influence how employees respond to change, is essential for leaders to effectively anticipate and manage those reactions. This knowledge can improve the effectiveness of change initiatives and contribute to the development of communication strategies and decision-making (Bass, 1999; Cox, 2019).

Multilevel theories of change emphasize the complexity of organizational dynamics at different levels, including individual, team, and organizational. This approach allows organizations to develop strategies that consider both individual behaviors and broader systemic interactions (Manubrahma et al., 2024; Wu, 2021).

The psychological contract, which refers to unwritten expectations and obligations between employees and employers, plays a significant role in the change process. A strong psychological contract fosters a cooperative environment, essential for successful change implementation (Henderson, 2002).

Field theory provides a framework for understanding the forces that influence behavior within an organization. By mapping these forces, strategies can be identified to overcome resistance and facilitate change implementation (Burnes, 2004).
Behavioral theories of organizational change emphasize the importance of understanding how individual behaviors can facilitate or hinder the change process (Busari et al., 2019; Weick & Quinn, 1999).

By focusing on aspects such as motivation, communication, and training, organizations can develop strategies that encourage positive behavior and minimize resistance during transition.

OVERVIEW OF THE MOST IMPORTANT MODELS

The following section examines the significance of comprehending theoretical models in the management of organizational change. These models offer a framework for strategizing, executing, and consolidating modifications within the intricate transition process. The chapter delineates the key change management frameworks, commencing with Lewin's three-stage model and Kotter's eight-step model (Kotter, 1996), which underscores the importance of leadership and communication. It subsequently examines overarching theories of organizational transformation, tailored to various stages of the organizational life cycle. Particular emphasis is placed on models tailored for distinct organizational frameworks and intended changes, concentrating on strategy, analysis, and management of the change process.

Lewin's model

Kurt Lewin's model of change management, known as unfreezing, change, refreezing, is a systematic approach to implementing enduring change within an organization (Lewin, 1947). The unfreezing phase involves reassessing prevailing beliefs, attitudes, and practices to eliminate resistance and enhance change catalysts. The transformation phase is the most challenging and dynamic, involving process redesign and the introduction of new structures, technologies, competencies, or behaviors. This phase involves executing modifications through structured cycles and adjusting initial plans based on feedback and employee feedback. Activities include establishing a change team, distributing resources, executing changes, mitigating resistance, and progressively broadening changes into routine operations. The final phase aims to solidify the new state and ensure the transformation becomes an enduring aspect of the company culture (Haynes et al., 2022). The model has been successful in extensive reorganizations, such as British Airways in the 1980s. It emphasizes psychological readiness, ongoing communication, and stabilization of outcomes.

Kotter's model

John Kotter's eight-step framework (Kotter, 1996) is a structured method for implementing transformations in large corporations. It is based on empirical studies and offers a dynamic sequence of activities that lead to lasting and sustainable change. Common failures in implementation include a lack of urgency, weak coalition, unclear vision, systemic obstacles, short-term wins, premature declarations of victory, and inadequate integration of change into the culture. Kotter's model has become a standard in modern change management theory and practice, with its value in detailed articulation of the process, logical connection of phases, and focus on leadership, communication, and cultural transformation. Consistent application of this model increases the chance of implementing deep, accepted, and sustainable changes.

General models of organizational change are based on universal theoretical assumptions about management and organizational theory, providing a structured but flexible approach to change that can be adapted to different contexts without deep intervention in the organizational architecture. These models encourage managers to recognize the need for change, identify key causes, and plan and control transformation activities, with special emphasis on overcoming resistance and engaging resources. The general model of organizational change has five phases: data collection, data analysis, solution identification, action planning, and implementation and control. Specific models such as the ADKAR model, Beckhard–Harris model, Biro model, and Daft's model of planned changes are often classified within the framework of general models due to their conceptual comprehensiveness and applicability in different organizations.

The ADKAR model structures change through individual stages: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement (Hiatt, 2006). Microsoft successfully applied this model when introducing Office 365, enabling a high rate of acceptance of new tools through systematic work with users. Biro's model defines six steps: mobilizing energy, defining the vision, building consensus, spreading the change, formalization, and control. The critical path model, also known as the critical path method, is applicable in organizations where changes must be driven "widely" by involving a large number of employees (Beer, M. 1980).

Daft's model of planned change highlights four phases: identification of driving forces, recognition of the need, initiation, and implementation (Daft, 2001). The role of promoters, sponsors, and critics is particularly important, as is the application of techniques for overcoming resistance. The model is often combined with data-driven change models for more precise identification of driving forces and priority areas for change.

Models adapted to organizational structures

The Weissbord model visualizes an organization through six interconnected blocks: purpose, structure, connections, support, rewards, and leadership (Weisbord, 1976). The purpose of the model is to diagnose potential conflicts and alignment of organizational elements. Southwest Airlines has applied this model to improve internal communication and service culture (Hardiyansyah and Aprini, 2023).

The Nadler–Tashman model views the organization as a system with inputs (resources, strategy), transformation (employees, structure), and outputs (performance). The central concept is congruence or a measure of alignment between components. The model has been applied in higher education to measure the impact of digital transformation (Katere et al., 2022).

The Bjurke–Litwin model develops a systems approach that distinguishes three

levels (Coruzzi, 2020):
1) strategic (mission, culture),
2) group (climate, relationships),
3) Individual (values, motivation).
A particular focus is on the chain reaction of change: change at one level triggers change at other levels. FedEx has applied this model to align leadership capabilities with its growth strategy.

Planned transformation models are a systematic approach to change based on predefined phases, strategic foresight, and clear direction towards organizational goals. They involve proactive change management through analysis, planning, and continuous monitoring of implementation.
Examples include Daft's Planned Change Model, which identifies four critical phases: recognizing driving forces, identifying the need for change, initiating the initiative, and implementing the solution. The role of sponsors, promoters, and critics is crucial in securing internal support and overcoming resistance.

The Beckhard-Harris model emphasizes balancing vision, dissatisfaction with the current state, and first steps against resistance, making it easier to measure readiness for change (Kuzmin et al., 2021).

The ADKAR model partially falls into this category, offering a methodology for the planned adoption of change through individual phases leading to long-term consolidation of results (Sataić, 2021).

Critical elements of planned transformations include preparation, anticipation, employee involvement, and continuous monitoring of alignment with strategic direction. Adapting the model to specificities, culture, and goals increases the likelihood of successful implementation in complex organizational environments.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT – MODERN ADAPTIVE FRAMEWORK - "4F MODEL"

In a climate of constant instability, rapid technological innovation, and global disruption, traditional change management models (such as Lewin, Kotter, and ADKAR models) provide a foundation but often require adaptation to industry specifics, organizational size, cultural maturity, and market dynamics.
From these needs, the “4F Model” of change management emerges, based on an integrated and practical framework that encompasses four key phases: Prepare, Implement, Sustain, and Reflect.

Authors Đukić and Doljanica introduced this model as a novel solution, intended to enhance current methodologies and address modern issues in change management within organizational development. Grounded in a synthesis of classical frameworks and contemporary organizational needs, the model responds to these challenges through a structure that is simultaneously systemic, flexible, and easy to apply, thereby filling a recognized gap in the literature regarding adaptable, digitally aligned change strategies.

Each phase is supported by clear processes, roles, and tools that enable an effective transition from the current to the desired state of the organization.

The stages of the proposed model consist of 4 parts:

Preparation Phase: The Basis for Change Success

The preparation phase serves as the foundation of the transformation process. Without quality diagnostics and communication, each subsequent phase risks losing support, resources, and legitimacy. Three critical subprocesses stand out in this phase:

♣ Analysis of Change Needs - Systematic review of internal and external factors (SWOT analysis, market dynamics, competitive analysis) and determination of the strategic reason for intervention.

♣ Communication with stakeholders - Transparency and inclusion of all relevant actors (management, employees, partners, clients) in the dialogue on the motives and goals of change.

♣ Formulation of the change strategy - Defining the approach, timeframe, resource needs, and roles, with special emphasis on risk management and scenario planning.

Implementation Phase: Operationalizing the transformation

This phase refers to the concrete implementation of changes in practice and requires operational readiness and organizational discipline. The three main processes are

♣ Training and skill development - Targeted development of competencies among managers and employees is necessary for the adoption of new technologies, processes, or cultural patterns.

♣ Support and mentoring - Providing an internal support infrastructure through mentoring teams, interactive platforms, and constant communication with the front lines of change.

♣ Progress monitoring - Continuous measurement of progress indicators (KPIs), timely response to resistance, and correction of strategies in real time.

Maintenance Phase: Institutionalization of the new state

Sustainability of change is a common challenge. This is precisely why this phase aims to ensure that new behaviors, processes, and values become a permanent part of the organizational culture.

♣ Creating a culture of change - Integrating innovation into everyday practice through formal policies, symbols, and leadership role models.

♣ Feedback - Establishing a channel for constructive feedback, which allows employees to influence the improvement of the system.

♣ Measuring success - Using indicators such as productivity, talent retention, service quality, and financial results, the objective contribution of changes is determined.

Reflection Phase: Continuous Learning and Adaptation

Reflection is an often neglected phase, but it is the basis for organizational learning and the improvement of future change initiatives.

♣ Evaluation of results - Systematic analysis of achievements in relation to initial goals, using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

♣ Adaptation and improvement - Based on the results obtained, proposals for process improvement and new rounds of optimization are formulated.

♣ Organizational learning - A knowledge base of what worked and what didn't is institutionalized, which serves as a frame of reference for future changes.

The key success factors of the 4F change management model are reflected in three interconnected pillars:

- leadership support,
- effective communication, and
- active employee inclusion.

Leaders play a crucial role in all phases of change, as they promote the vision, set new behaviors, and symbolize stability. Their consistent behavior motivates employees and builds trust. Clear, two-way communication is essential for conveying the vision, strategy, and results of change to stakeholders. Employee inclusion is key to creating internal ownership, as they actively contribute to the success of the change process. Traditional change management models like Lewin's Thaw-Float-Freeze, Kotter's Eight Steps to Change, and ADKAR Resistance Management provide a theoretical understanding of organizational transformation, but modern environments require greater adaptation, speed, and integration of digital innovation than these models can fully provide.

The 4F Change Management Model emerges as a contemporary adaptive framework that builds on the key principles of earlier theories but expands them to meet new challenges. While Lewin's model emphasizes the psychological aspects of change, Kotter focuses on leadership and organizational mobilization, and ADKAR focuses on the individual process of accepting change, the 4F model integrates these elements with an emphasis on:

• a systemic approach to planning and implementing change,
• flexibility and scalability in different organizational contexts,
• integration of digital technologies as an integral part of transformation,
• building organizational resilience and continuous learning.

The 4F model encompasses four key phases—Preparation, Implementation, Sustaining, and Reflection—through which an organization's structure, processes, technologies, and culture are systematically changed to achieve the desired future state.

Comparative analysis shows that the 4F model, compared to traditional models, is

• more practical for application in conditions of rapid technological change,
• more suitable for hybrid organizational environments (physical and digital interaction),
• and more focused on the sustainability of the achieved change through the institutionalization of new behavioral patterns.

Therefore, the 4F model can be seen as an evolutionary extension of the classical models, aimed at meeting the complex demands of the digital era and global instability. This model provides a comprehensive framework that covers all aspects of successful change management, from initial preparation to long-term implementation.

The 4F model is a flexible framework suitable for various industries and sectors. It is particularly useful in large corporations for introducing complex information systems, providing a structured framework for digitalization and management reforms. In public institutions, it facilitates a transparent transition to electronic platforms. In healthcare institutions, it helps introduce new treatment protocols or medical technologies, requiring coordinated action from different professional profiles. Educational institutions can use it for teaching process transformation, e-learning transition, or innovative educational technologies.

Startups and small and medium-sized enterprises require a flexible, systemic response to rapid changes. The model is particularly useful in human resource management for strategic cultural changes, such as inclusive work environments and digitization of HR processes.

The 4F model is particularly relevant in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) and rapid digital transformation. It enables structured adaptation of employees and organizational processes and manages challenges arising from technological changes. For instance, when introducing AI systems for data analysis or automated customer services, it provides a framework for ethical implementation, employee education, risk control, and measurement of effects.

However, rapid technological development also presents challenges for organizations. It requires continuous learning, high adaptability, and the introduction of new competencies in short time frames. The 4F model serves as a means of establishing organizational resilience, allowing organizations to respond to rapid changes without losing stability and focusing on strategic goals.

CONCLUSION

Amid rapid digital transformation and increasing organizational complexity, effective change management has emerged as a strategic necessity. Classical approaches, including Lewin’s three-stage framework, Kotter’s eight-step model, and the ADKAR model, have established a robust theoretical basis for comprehending and administering organizational change. Nonetheless, its implementation in the contemporary, technology-oriented landscape frequently necessitates modification to preserve significance and efficacy.

The introduction of the 4F model—comprising the stages of preparation, implementation, sustainability, and reflection—provides a versatile and cohesive framework that corresponds with the requirements of the digital age. The focus on leadership engagement, stakeholder communication, and ongoing education offers a strong solution to the difficulties of organizational change in unpredictable and unstable environments.

This paper illustrates the need for a hybrid, context-sensitive framework by contrasting classical and contemporary models, merging the stability and structure of old approaches with the agility and responsiveness of modern methodology. The applicability of the 4F model across several sectors, including public administration, healthcare, education, and technology, highlights its potential as a complete instrument for effective change management.

Ultimately, successful transformation relies not only on the selection of a model but also on its strategic execution, cultural congruence, and the organization's ability for continuous learning. This paper's findings enhance the debate on change management by emphasizing the essential requirement for models that are both theoretically sound and practically applicable in the digital era.

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