



The Science Behind the Way We Work

Mastering Change Management: Evidence-Informed Insights for Successful Organisational Change

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“There is nothing so practical as a good theory”

Kurt Lewin

1. Introduction: Living in a BANI world

Over the last few years major global disruptions — such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the rapid advances in AI and large language model technologies — have shaken up our old ways of looking at the world and cast shadows on what is ahead in the future.

This has led anthropologist Jamais Cascio to propose the **BANI** - **B**rittle, **A**nxious, **N**onlinear, **I**ncomprehensible - **framework** to capture the main distinctive features of our times. Whether we agree

or not with the picture he draws, it is undoubtedly true that uncertainty is pervasive in today's world.

And this holds true even with respect to the way we work. In today's workplace, change-readiness should be a core competence of organisations in order to survive and to seize new opportunities.

Handling change well is not only a skill that can be learned by teams but also a strategic goal that change management should apply.¹

This article will explore scientific literature on change management and provide tips for change agents on how to manage and navigate change. Rather than being a comprehensive scientific overview, this article aims to provide some evidence-informed tips for managers.

¹ Another publication in this series ([Change: The science of why it's so hard and what we can do about it](#)) looks at tips for individuals and teams on how to better cope with change (and the reason why change can be so frightening) whereas this

article will be more focused on the field known as “change management”. The two publications can (and should) be seen as complementary to each other.

2. The Challenge: The paradox of organisational change

The [HR strategy](#) emphasises the need for the Commission to adapt to the rapidly evolving trends of flexible workplaces and digitalisation.

However, evidence suggests that executives believe that only one of three planned organisational change interventions actually succeeds (Jarrel, 2017; Meaney and Pung, 2008), suggesting that **a significant majority of these initiatives fail to meet their objectives**. This can often be attributed to a mixture of causes which often have to do with both poor strategic vision and natural resistance to change.²

So, the main question any change manager should answer is: how do we ensure that changes in our work practices can be introduced successfully while receiving full support from employees who have to both undergo and apply those changes in their daily work?

As organisational psychologists David Waldman and David Bowen have clearly stated, most organisations struggle with the paradox: **pursuing the urge for organisational continuity while simultaneously pursuing change** (Waldman and Bowen 2016). Change managers face the difficult task of striking a balance between the need to acknowledge resistance to change and a decisive push towards the future. Hence, the main ingredient of successful organisational change lies in navigating the need to accompany and support employees during the transition period while steadily moving towards new ways of working.

This is no easy task, but one that science can help with.

3. The science: Unfreeze, move, re-freeze

Rosenbaum and colleagues have recently shown how most contemporary planned organisational change models remain largely based on an early

model of organisational change that has been developed in the 1940s by German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin (Rosenbaum et al. 2018).

Between 1946 and 1947, **Lewin developed the so-called three- step change model of organisational change, which consists of “unfreezing” the status quo, “moving” towards an envisioned goal and “refreezing” the new ways of doing things.**

The present article will follow the structure of Lewin’s framework. Each of the following sections will introduce the three phases and highlight some crucial aspects to be mindful of for successful change initiatives.

This three-step model should not be understood as a linear process where one phase strictly follows the completion of the other. Transformation is an iterative process, which means that you might have to move back and forth between the activities described in the three steps (Rosenbaum et al. 2018; White et al. 2023). However, the framework allows for a structured approach to transformation processes, allowing for a more organised planning and execution of the steps required.

a. Unfreeze: Preparing the ground for change

Before launching any kind of transformation process, change managers need to have a clear picture not only of where they want to go but also of where they depart from.

One crucial aspect to **take into account is the organisation’s readiness to change.**

An organisation’s capacity to transform and its employees’ disposition to redesign the way they work can be assessed by looking at a few important aspects.

² See our publication [Change: The science of why it’s so hard and what we can do about it](#) to know more on the science behind resistance to change.

The importance of a compelling vision.

While understanding and addressing the past and the present are key enablers of change, envisioning the future is a further crucial aspect of transforming organisations. For this reason, creating a compelling vision of how the future will look at the end of the transformation is usually regarded as one of the most important aspects to address during any change process (White et al., 2023; Rousseau and ten Have, 2020). A vision of the future is what will allow employees to see more clearly the objective at the end of the journey and the added value that it will bring to the way they work. Placing emphasis on a compelling vision should be distinguished from what is usually referred to in change management as “creating a sense of urgency”, i.e., representing change as essential and unavoidable. Indeed, even if this phrase is often repeated as a mantra there is little to no scientific evidence supporting this claim (Stouten et al., 2018). If anything, early studies suggest that urgency could lead to fear and avoidance and hence it may backfire rather than support change (Staw et al., 1981). More than “a call to arms”, a compelling vision should be more like a “motivating script” which makes the end goal’s added value (and the process to get there) clear, attainable, and concrete.

Employees’ mental and physical bandwidth.

Coping with change can be negatively impacted by high task demands and the inherent distress any change initiative brings with it. A panel study of more than 90,000 workers found that organisational change led to increased use of stress-related medication (Dahl, 2011). If people are overworked or distracted, they are likely to embrace change less easily. In such cases change managers might need to scale back the change, roll it out more slowly or/and provide additional support. Recently, researchers and practitioners have started to emphasise the importance of acknowledging and addressing the emotional dimension of change processes. Organisational transformations are risky endeavours with a high likelihood of failure. Consequently, there is a chance that employees reject a change process right from the beginning because of negative emotions associated with past failed change

processes (Rousseau and ten Have, 2022). It is therefore crucial to acknowledge the troubled change history and to actively separate the present from the past by emphasising what will be done differently from the last time and that will lead to a successful transformation this time. Alternatively, if the employees have experienced successful change processes in the past, leaders can make sure to identify the key elements of success and highlight the continuities between the past and the future transformation.

Leaders’ willingness to be change agents.

If leaders want to transform an organisation, they need to embody the change that they would like to see in their team in their day-to-day habits. They need to be ready to disrupt their own habits and routines and go through the challenges that might come along the process (White et al., 2023). Indeed, leaders’ conduct and behaviour has been identified as a vital factor in achieving the change that is expected from the broader team, highlighting the importance in an organisational context of an alignment between managers’ stated values and objectives and their real actions (e.g., Yaffe and Kark 2011; Boiral et al., 2013; Zhang and Cui, 2022). There is some truth in the idea that rather than doing what their managers say, they rather follow what they do. Therefore, leaders leading by example can have immediate positive spillovers in their teams, ensuring that a larger number of employees take up a desired behaviour due to the need to align with their managers’ practices (Eldor, 2021). Thus, to serve as effective agents of change, leaders should embody the transformation that they wish to see reflected in their team.

b. Move: Transitioning to new ways of working

Change should not only be planned and visualised but should also be implemented. Once the

strategic vision has been developed at the outset of the change process, it should be communicated repeatedly throughout the entire transformation as it gives direction and can help re-energise when the change loses momentum and promote understanding when it gets tough. **Research suggests that vision communication is most successful when referred to on repeated occasions** - ranging from public communication, unit meetings, and private conversations - and when making use of pre-existing group loyalties by targeting intact social networks (Rousseau and ten Have, 2022). This would also provide employees with **multiple chances to understand the reason behind change**, which research has revealed correlates with a more favourable attitude towards it (Stouten et al., 2018).

Another key activity in this phase is the **involvement and empowerment of stakeholders at all levels** (Rousseau and ten Have, 2022). This does not only include training and seeking feedback from managers and employees but also creating the space for local experimentation and innovation (as well as for small failures) to empower employees to take initiative and become “champions” of local change initiatives and address existing issues themselves (Knight et al., 2017).

In pilot projects and bottom-up initiatives, more junior employees might identify innovative solutions or opportunities and by making local adjustments to the broader change plan create “small” or “quick wins” that provide visible signs for the change’s potential (Phillips and Klein, 2022). These visible signs of change should be **supported and complemented by ongoing monitoring** aimed at verifying the status of implementation over time and identifying potential areas of resistance and bottlenecks early on. Of course, change can be successful if adequate resources are provided to continuously support and sustain it over time via provision of learning opportunities, trainings, and technical support (Wiedner et al., 2017; Cummings and Worley, 2009).

Creativity, continuous learning, and experimentation can only flourish in a corporate culture of trust and psychological safety.

As outlined in the previous section, change can trigger a range of emotions such as excitement, fear, doubt, or anger. Successful change leaders must embrace the emotional journey that comes with change and continually provide an environment where employees feel safe to share their concerns and opinions. Psychological safety is a rich concept that deserves an article of its own but evidence suggests that supportive leadership behaviours (e.g. leaders encouraging an open and inclusive environment that actively seeks and shares feedback) as well as corporate culture (e.g. providing access to mentoring and support) are associated with higher levels of team psychological safety (Newman et al., 2017).

c. Refreeze: Sustaining the change/ Building new routines

A successful organisational transformation requires institutionalising the new practices. If the change is solidly coded in the organisational culture, processes and procedures and becomes routine it will be taken up even by the most reluctant employees and managers. **For change to be sustainable, impediments to the full uptake of the change must be removed and current systems and infrastructures aligned with the change** (Rousseau and ten Have, 2022). Research highlights the role of establishing new routines within teams and the larger organisation to both introduce and sustain change (Edmondson, 2002; Rerup and Feldman, 2011). For instance, a new routine might consist of the whole team dismissing the habit of sending attachments via outlook and sharing the link to the document to avoid the proliferation of different versions of the same document in people’s email folders. These new routines can be explicitly stated in new codes

of conduct or etiquettes that the team can agree on, to hold each other accountable in light of the desired habit or behaviour. It is important to note that these interventions are likely to last if we take an iterative approach to them, meaning that the implementation of a habit should not be a one-off intervention but a sustained effort to monitor progress collectively and to continuously reaffirm the rationale behind it (Harkin et al., 2016).

Ensuring lasting change extends beyond immediate alterations. It involves **equipping employees with the necessary skills through continuous learning opportunities**. By cultivating a culture steeped in learning and innovation, organisations do more than merely solidify recent changes — they create a robust and adaptable culture poised for future shifts. Research underscores the significance of initiatives that develop skills relevant to change, provide motivational rewards and incentives, and offer chances for employees to engage in change practices within supportive settings (Bos-Nehles et al., 2017; Marin-Garcia and Tomas, 2016).

This approach should encompass not only the specific competence needed for the current change at hand but also **the meta-skill to handle and cope with change more generally**.³

Consequently, 'refreezing' should not be misconstrued as the imposition of a new rigidity. Rather, it should be viewed as a strategic advantage, leveraging the advancements already made while simultaneously laying the groundwork for the inevitable changes to come.

5. ACTs (Actionable Tips)

Based on the evidence reviewed and summarised above, we can summarise the main take-aways of the article as follows:

❖ **Create a compelling vision:** Develop a clear and motivating vision of the future following the change. Communicate it widely and ensure it conveys the added value of the initiative.

❖ **Iterate and sustain effort:** Change is not a one-off intervention, but rather an iterative effort. Continuous monitoring and communicating progress is essential to keep momentum.

❖ **Acknowledge and address the emotional dimension of any change initiative:** Create a psychologically safe environment that allows for open discussion of doubts and concerns. Do not shy away from past failures but use them as lessons learned to specify what will be done differently this time.

❖ **Empower colleagues:** Involve employees at all levels in the change process and decision-making. Encourage local experimentation and the creation of "quick wins" to maintain momentum. Provide learning opportunities to develop the skills relevant for change.

❖ **Lead by example:** Leaders should embody the changes they wish to see by changing their behaviours. This is likely to have positive spillovers in the wider team.

❖ **Make it stick:** Co-design and collectively agree on new routines and practices that align with the change and make them part of the organisational culture.

Tip for tomorrow...

... For managers, identify a behaviour or a routine that you want to be taken up by your team and change it yourself, it will probably be copied by the rest of the team. For instance, when communicating with your team members, start using Teams exclusively rather than emails (unless it is strictly necessary to do otherwise) or replying to emails via Teams.

³ For instance, trainings on how to harness so-called growth mindsets could help employees nurture the cognitive and emotional flexibility required to adapt to

change. See also the other article of this series on this topic for further details.

In a nutshell



“There is nothing so practical as a good theory”

Kurt Lewin

The Challenge

Change is necessary, however implementing it is so hard it fails most of the time. How do we ensure that changes in our work practices can be introduced successfully while receiving full support from employees who have to both undergo and apply those changes in their daily work?

The Science

The science behind change management provides change managers and change agents more general with evidence-informed tips on how to plan, design, communicate, implement change initiatives and ensure they stick over time. Lewin’s framework (unfreeze, move, and re-freeze) provides a simple conceptual scaffold to plan and implement any change related action effectively.

The Solution

Create a compelling vision: Make the added value of the change clear, attainable, and inspiring. **Iterate and sustain effort:** Embrace change as a continuous, steadfast process with regular progress checks. **Address the emotional dimension of change:** Foster open dialogue and learning from past setbacks. **Empower colleagues:** Engage all levels in decision-making and encourage skill development. **Lead by example:** Have leaders personally adopt and demonstrate changes. **Make it stick:** Establish agreed-upon new practices.



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