Review Article

A Primer for Organizational Change: Key Models, Theories, and Practices

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Abstract

Challenges related to implementing organizational change initiatives can be significant and, if not carefully navigated, can lead to failure in achieving desired outcomes. Given the extensive body of work on organizational change, there is a clear need for a succinct introduction to the various models and theories that inform current insights into organizational evolution and transformation. Talented leadership, communication, and employee engagement are essential in managing change, thus addressing organizations' common challenges and resistances to change. Therefore, change implementation strategies are critical, including aligning change initiatives with organizational culture, the interplay of internal communication, technological adaptation, and change management methodologies. The role of innovation in change processes is also essential to build a resilient organizational structure that can adapt to evolving market demands and internal dynamics. This brief review is anticipated to serve as a valuable introductory resource for business leaders, managers, and change practitioners seeking to be better equipped with the necessary tools and strategies to navigate the contemporary complexities of change. It serves as a primer for learners, leaders, and organizations seeking concise guidance to integrate their constituencies more smoothly in a change movement. This article, therefore, supports the growth and development essential for leaders to effectively guide their organizations through periods of change, nurturing a culture that welcomes transformation and securing long-term success in a fast-evolving business landscape.

Keywords: Organizational change; Leadership; Employee engagement; Business transformation; Change initiative

Introduction

Organizational change is driven by many factors, including technological advancements, market dynamics, political and regulatory shifts, and evolving consumer demands [1,2]. Understanding and effectively managing moments of organizational change is a strategic advantage and crucial for organizational sustainability and success. The objectives of this article include 1) delivering a concise summary of different models, theories, and approaches concerning organizational change and 2) presenting an accessible guide for learners and leaders who are in search of knowledge to comprehend, steer, and execute organizational change initiatives effectively. The article is not intended to be an exhaustive examination of every piece of literature or technique but to act as an informative foundation providing a pathway to further exploration and discovery. Consequently, this article is intended to be a valuable primer for practitioners eager to participate in and implement organizational change initiatives.

Organizational change is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon encompassing business process and strategy alterations, organizational culture shifts, employee behaviors, and operational models. Organizations face a challenging landscape due to the intricacies of political, regulatory, and technological changes [3]. The periodicity of change in organizations has evolved from traditional episodic adjustments to more continuous and dynamic transformations [4]. This shift reflects the increasing need for organizations to remain agile and responsive to the rapidly changing external environment [5]. The literature on organizational change highlights the importance of transformative learning and transformational change [6]. This perspective emphasizes the need for change at individual and organizational levels to navigate periods of disruption [6]. For example, Doolin [7] highlighted the role of narratives and discourse in organizational change, indicating that how change is communicated and understood within an organization is critical

to its success. Armenakis and Bedeian [7] further provided a comprehensive review of the organizational change literature, emphasizing the importance of understanding the content, context, process, and criteria of change initiatives. Gersick [9] explored the phases of the punctuated equilibrium paradigm in organizational change, highlighting the alternation between periods of stability and revolutionary upheaval. The forthcoming sections will delve into models and theories related to organizational change, examine the dynamics of process alterations and resistance, and discuss the execution of change initiatives.

Understanding Organizational Change: Models and Theories

Organizational change is a complex field with various models and theories that provide insights into how organizations navigate transitions. The Kurt Lewin model [10,11] is a cornerstone in this field that highlights three critical stages: unfreezing, movement, and refreezing. The model emphasizes preparing, implementing, and integrating change into organizational fabric (i.e., culture). Complementing Lewin's model are various process models of organizational change, including teleology, life cycle, dialectics, and evolution, representing planned, regulated, conflictive, and competitive changes, respectively [12]. Dunphy and Stace [13] challenged the universality of Organizational Development theory, advocating for a differentiated contingency model that accommodates incremental and transformational changes, participation, and coercion methods. The organizational change landscape was advanced by Laughlin [14], who proposed models (rebuttal, reorientation, colonization, and evolution) that address environmental disturbances, illustrating the adaptability of organizations to external changes.

The 7-S framework by McKinsey is a model proposed for managing organizational change, breaking organizational change down into seven specific elements [15]. Similarly, the ADKAR (awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement) model for change management, outlined by Kiani and Shah [16], has five crucial stages, including a phase of desire that necessitates convincing efforts until there is unanimous agreement (i.e., consensus or, buy-in) on the suggested changes. Another notable approach is the Kubler-Ross change management curve, explored by Kearney and Hyle [17], among other authors. Despite advancements in recent years, complicated integrated aspects of truth and buy-in are not explicitly incorporated in these models of organizational change processes. However, this issue may be important because buy-in requires truth-telling [2,18], is critical for effective leadership and employee engagement, and is essential to implementing Lewin's model and most others [10]. Suddaby and Foster [19] supported this concept by introducing the perspective of historical consciousness into organizational change studies, exploring different models based on varying assumptions about history, and offering a distinctive lens through which to view change. There are, ultimately, several previous authors that have highlighted the importance of understanding the complexities of organizational change processes and content, helping develop models that evaluate and guide change efforts effectively [2,20].

The Process of Change

The process of organizational change is a nuanced and multilayered phenomenon. Successful change requires systematic steps, each requiring careful consideration and execution. Previous authors highlighted the importance of management's role in understanding and articulating the need for change, defin-

ing its phases, and emphasizing that the change process is as crucial as its outcomes. Thus, successful navigation necessitates understanding how change occurs and what changes within an organization are necessary for success [20]. Stelzer and Mellis [21] discussed the factors affecting organizational change in software process improvement, stressing the importance of managing these factors effectively to ensure successful change. Baumol [22] noted the need to integrate cultural aspects into the principles of business process management for successful organizational change, especially given the pivotal role of culture in the change process. Gokmen [23] illustrated the elements of an effective change process, including openness to change, flexibility, and effective planning, underscoring the multifaceted nature of organizational change. Faber [24] proposed a model describing change as a discursive process, highlighting the role of realigning organizational narratives and images in facilitating change. Still, other authors presented strategic frameworks for change management, focusing on critical steps to improve change management and emphasizing the importance of aligning organizational culture with new processes for successful change implementation [25,26]. Ultimately, organizational change involves various dimensions, including management's role, cultural integration, strategic planning, and aligning narratives. Each aspect plays a critical role in shaping the trajectory of change and determining its success. Understanding these multiple facets is essential for organizations aiming to navigate the complexities of change effectively.

Challenges and Resistance to Change

Organizational change initiatives are often fraught with challenges and resistance, making them complex and intricate [18]. Zafar and Naveed [27] discussed the intensity of resistance that arises during the incorporation of change, emphasizing that the type of change and how it is introduced significantly influences the level of resistance experienced. Roberts [28] presented a diagnostic change resistance typology, identifying various motivational attributes contributing to opposing change and outlining a change management process to overcome resistance. Hamidianpour Esmailpour and Zarei [29] emphasized the role of managers' cultural intelligence and transformational leadership style and talent in impacting employees' resistance to change, highlighting that talented and effective leadership can significantly mitigate resistance, a perspective shared by many previous authors [1,2,18,30,31]. These attributes may be particularly relevant in institutions of higher education where the slow pace of change can lead to heightened resistance due to a balance of tradition and innovation (32). For example, Moerschell [33] discussed the challenges in promoting the utilization of new technology in academia and managing resistance by faculty.

Other investigators have advocated for new research based on a reconceptualization of individual responses to change as multidimensional attitudes, moving beyond the traditional view of resistance as an opposing force (34). For example, Vithessonthi [35] presented an alternative view of resistance to change as an issue of selling (i.e., effectively marketing an initiative), particularly in multinational firms, suggesting that resistance can be beneficial if managed effectively. Bateh, Castaneda and Farah [36] emphasized the importance of understanding resistance to change for managers, as it enables them to reduce conflict and increase collaboration in change initiatives. Still, other authors highlighted that organizational change, especially in implementing privacy and security standards, often meets

resistance and resentment, necessitating specific strategies to foster acceptance of change [37]. Goksov [38] discussed the impact of psychological empowerment and organizational citizenship behaviors on employee resistance, suggesting that these factors can significantly lower resistance levels. To summarize, previous studies emphasize that managing resistance to change requires understanding its roots and a multifaceted approach that includes effective leadership, communication, cultural intelligence, and employee empowerment. It is a challenge that demands and deserves both strategic vision and tactical finesse.

Implementing Successful Change

Implementing successful organizational change requires a blend of effective management practices, clear communication, and a deep understanding of organizational dynamics [2]. Muarray Woodside and Braunscheidel [39] emphasized the importance of combining project management and change management practices, highlighting that effective communication and cohesive action are crucial for positive employee reactions and successful change. Other authors discussed the significance of organizational culture in change management, noting that aligning organizational culture with new processes is vital for the successful implementation and outcomes of change [25]. Krovi [40] identified the relationship between organizational change and Information System (IS) implementation, suggesting that addressing technical and organizational aspects is essential for overcoming resistance to change. Stelzer and Mellis [21] highlighted ten factors affecting organizational change in software process improvement initiatives, underscoring the importance of addressing those factors for successful change management. Temesgen [41] examined the effects of internal communication, leadership, information communication technology usage, organizational culture, and change management methods on the success of change implementation, indicating that these elements play a significant role in determining the outcome of change efforts. Ouedraogo and Ouakouak [42] studied the impacts of personal trust and communication on change success through affective commitment, demonstrating that these factors' direct and indirect impacts are crucial for successful change implementation. Additionally, Vakola and Nikolaou [43] discussed the relationship between employee attitudes toward organizational change and job performance, indicating that positive employee attitudes are integral to successful change implementation. Successful change implementation in organizations requires a comprehensive approach encompassing effective visioning, strategic communication, trust-building, alignment with organizational culture, and addressing change's technical and behavioral aspects. An integrated approach can ensure that change is implemented effectively, embraced, and sustained.

Conclusion

Organizational change is multifaceted and dynamic, requiring a strategic and holistic approach to ensure positive outcomes. Effective leadership and clear, transparent communication are central to the success of any organizational change initiative. Leaders must not only be the proponents of change but also actively foster a culture of trust, empowerment, and open dialogue. This approach is crucial in mitigating resistance, enhancing adaptability, and ensuring that employees are receptive to change and active participants in the change process. Additionally, aligning a change initiative with an organization's culture is critical. Change should not be perceived as an isolated or disruptive force but as an opportunity to augment and enhance the organization's core values and practices. This approach ensures effective and sustainable change, embedding new practices and attitudes within the organization's culture and operations.

It is worth restating that implementing organizational change is far from a linear process involving a dynamic interplay of various critical factors. These critical factors include (and are not limited to) internal communication, the strategic use of technology, the application of cultural intelligence, and the adoption of effective change management methods. Each of these key elements encapsulates complex processes that play a significant role in the overall success of a change initiative. Effectively managing these factors leads to a smoother transition, minimizing disruptions and maximizing acceptance across the organization. Ultimately, the success of organizational change initiatives lies in the ability to adapt to evolving circumstances in situ, maintain open communication, and engage all stakeholders in a collaborative effort. By embracing these principles, organizations can transform the challenges associated with change into opportunities for growth, innovation, and enhanced competitiveness in an ever-changing business landscape.

Author Statements

Acknowledgments

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