

Organizational change has shifted from an episodic managerial intervention to a persistent condition of contemporary organizational life. Technological disruption, artificial intelligence (AI), digital transformation, globalization, regulatory reform, economic uncertainty, workforce transformation, sustainability pressures, and changing stakeholder expectations have accelerated the speed, scope, and complexity of organizational transformation. Although change management has generated numerous theories, models, and intervention frameworks, organizations continue to struggle to implement, sustain, and institutionalize change. This article critically examines contemporary challenges facing change management theory, practice, and research through an integrative review of recent literature, with particular attention to scholarship published between 2024 and 2026. The article argues that the principal challenge is no longer the absence of change models but the persistence of assumptions that organizational change is predictable, sequential, and substantially controllable. Contemporary scholarship increasingly portrays change as dynamic, context-dependent, multilevel, and socially constructed, with employee responses shaped by timing, culture, leadership, emotions, justice perceptions, work environments, learning, and technological conditions. Digital transformation and AI further complicate change by generating new forms of technological, occupational, psychological, and structural uncertainty. The article identifies theoretical fragmentation, linearity, contextual variation, employee ambivalence, leadership and communication challenges, organizational culture, digital transformation, AI, change fatigue, and methodological limitations as major contemporary challenges. It proposes a shift from model-centered change management toward an adaptive organizational change capability perspective. From this perspective, sustainable transformation depends on the interaction of strategic direction, adaptive leadership, employee participation and readiness, sensemaking, technological capability, organizational culture, psychological safety, organizational learning, and continuous adaptation. The article concludes with a research agenda emphasizing longitudinal, multilevel, comparative, mixed-methods, digital, and context-sensitive approaches. Its central contribution is to reposition change management from the management of discrete transformation initiatives toward the development of an enduring organizational capability to interpret, mobilize, learn, adapt, and institutionalize change under conditions of uncertainty.

Keywords: *organizational change, change management, change theories, employee responses, resistance to change, digital transformation, artificial intelligence, change leadership, organizational culture, organizational change capability*

1. Introduction

Organizational change has become a defining feature of contemporary organizational life. Rather than moving periodically between relatively stable states, organizations increasingly operate amid persistent disruption across technological, economic, regulatory, social, and competitive domains. Digitalization, artificial intelligence, automation, hybrid work, globalization, shifting employee expectations, sustainability pressures, and institutional demands require organizations to continually reconfigure strategies, structures, processes, technologies, and cultures. This shift has significant implications for change management theory and practice. Classical approaches emphasize diagnosis, preparation, implementation, and institutionalization. Lewin's (1947) three-stage model conceptualizes change as a movement through unfreezing, changing, and refreezing, while Kotter (1995) emphasizes urgency, coalition building, vision, communication, empowerment, short-term wins, consolidation, and institutionalization. These frameworks remain influential because they provide managers with structure and identify mechanisms considered essential to successful transformation.

Nevertheless, contemporary conditions challenge the assumption that organizations can reliably progress through predetermined stages toward a stable end state. Weick and Quinn's (1999) distinction between episodic and continuous change remains particularly relevant, as organizations increasingly experience multiple, overlapping transformations rather than isolated change episodes. Acciarini et al. (2024), for example, demonstrate that strategic change involves complex interactions among antecedents, actors, processes, sensemaking, sensegiving, and outcomes. This perspective frames change less as a linear managerial intervention and more as a process involving multiple organizational actors. The complexity is particularly evident in employees' responses to change. In a review of 215 studies, Kanitz et al. (2026) identify diverse theoretical perspectives through which employee responses have been examined, including motivational-attitudinal, relational, sensemaking, work-environment, emotional, morality and justice, individual-difference, and learning perspectives. Oreg and Sverdlik (2026) likewise emphasize the importance of ambivalence, timing, cultural context, and multilevel analysis in understanding responses to organizational change.

Digital transformation has further expanded the theoretical and practical boundaries of change management. Cieslak and Valor (2025), in an integrative review of 63 studies, demonstrate that employee resistance to digital transformation cannot be adequately explained by assuming an inherent aversion to technological change. Perceived job vulnerability, technological characteristics, work resources, and organizational conditions interact to shape employee responses. The emergence of AI intensifies these challenges by altering work processes, competencies, decision-making structures, professional identities, and organizational routines. Against this background, this article critically examines contemporary challenges facing change management theory, practice, and research. It argues for a shift from model selection to organizational change capability: the capacity to interpret environmental signals, mobilize stakeholders, experiment, learn, adapt interventions, and institutionalize appropriate practices. The central proposition is that organizations increasingly require not merely the capacity to implement change but the capability to remain adaptive amid continuous transformation.

2. Evolution of Change Management Theory

Change management theory has evolved from predominantly planned approaches to perspectives that recognize continuous, emergent, and context-dependent transformation. Lewin's (1947) model was a foundational planned-change perspective, conceptualizing organizational change as movement from an existing equilibrium through unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Its enduring value lies in emphasizing the disruption of established patterns and the stabilization of new behaviors. Kotter (1995) extended planned-change thinking by emphasizing urgency, guiding coalitions, vision, communication, empowerment, short-term wins, consolidation, and institutionalization. The model broadened attention beyond technical implementation to highlight leadership and social processes. Both approaches remain useful as organizing heuristics, particularly when organizations face defined transformation objectives.

However, the increasingly dynamic nature of organizational environments has encouraged a broader conception of change. Weick and Quinn (1999) distinguished episodic change from continuous change, emphasizing that organizations may adapt incrementally through ongoing processes rather than discrete transformation episodes. Contemporary scholarship extends this perspective by examining how organizational members interpret change, negotiate its meaning, respond cognitively and emotionally, learn during implementation, and modify interventions in response to emerging conditions. Acciarini et al. (2024) reflect this theoretical development by organizing strategic-change research around antecedents, processes, actors, and outcomes, with particular attention to initiation, implementation, sensemaking, and sensegiving. Consequently, contemporary change theory increasingly recognizes that change is not simply imposed by managers but is a multi-actor process whose direction and outcomes may evolve during implementation.

3. Theoretical Fragmentation as a Contemporary Challenge

The fragmentation of change-management theory poses a significant challenge to cumulative knowledge development. Organizational change is studied across organizational behavior, psychology, strategic management, leadership, organizational development, institutional theory, organizational learning, complexity theory, social exchange theory, psychological contract theory, and technology-adoption research. Each perspective illuminates specific mechanisms, but their coexistence can produce conceptual fragmentation because researchers employ different definitions of change, explanatory assumptions, outcome measures, levels of analysis, and theoretical traditions. Kanitz et al. (2026) illustrate this fragmentation in their systematic review of 215 empirical studies, which identifies eight theoretical communities concerned with employee responses to change: motivational-attitudinal, relational, sensemaking, work-environment, emotional, morality and justice, individual-difference, and learning perspectives. This finding is theoretically consequential because employee responses cannot plausibly be reduced to a single explanatory mechanism.

An employee may oppose a change because of anticipated job insecurity, perceive it as procedurally unfair, distrust leadership, lack the required competencies, or view it as inconsistent with professional identity. These mechanisms may coexist and interact rather than serve as mutually exclusive explanations. Oreg and Sverdlik (2026) likewise call for greater integration across conceptualizations of change responses, including tripartite approaches, circumplex models, ambivalence, timing, national culture, and multiple levels of analysis. The implication is not that theoretical diversity should be eliminated. Rather, future scholarship

should develop integrative frameworks that explain how cognitive, emotional, relational, cultural, technological, and institutional mechanisms interact across levels and over time.

4. The Challenge of Linear Change Models

A second major challenge concerns the persistence of linear assumptions in contexts marked by uncertainty and continuous transformation. Traditional models often imply a sequence of diagnosis, preparation, implementation, adoption, and institutionalization. Such sequencing can provide useful managerial structure, but it may inadequately represent transformations in which organizational actors continually revise objectives and interventions in response to emerging information.

Contemporary change may instead unfold through a recursive process:

Pressure → interpretation → experimentation → resistance → adaptation → learning → redesign → further transformation.

The distinction is consequential. In a linear conception, managers define a desired future state and design interventions to achieve it. In an adaptive conception, both the intervention and the future state may evolve as organizational members interpret environmental developments and learn from implementation. This does not render classical models obsolete. Rather, their value depends on how they are used. Linear models can provide coordination, sequencing, and strategic direction without being treated as deterministic prescriptions. Acciarini et al. (2024) emphasize the interplay among antecedents, processes, actors, and outcomes, while Kanitz et al. (2026) demonstrate the importance of integrating theoretical mechanisms and examining employee responses over time. The theoretical challenge is therefore to develop frameworks that provide enough structure to coordinate collective action and enough flexibility to accommodate uncertainty, feedback, experimentation, and learning.

5. Employee Resistance and Ambivalence

Employee resistance remains central to change-management scholarship, but its conceptualization has grown increasingly nuanced. Earlier approaches often treated resistance as a dysfunctional response to be overcome. Contemporary perspectives instead recognize that employees may experience both positive and negative reactions to the same change. Oreg and Sverdlik (2026) particularly emphasize ambivalence, timing, and response activation. An employee may support the strategic rationale for a transformation while fearing its implications for employment, status, workload, competence, or professional identity. Similarly, an employee may value a new technology while questioning whether adequate skills, resources, or support are available for successful adoption. Trust in senior leadership may also coexist with distrust of local implementation processes.

Accordingly, binary classifications of employees as either “supporters” or “resisters” offer an incomplete account of organizational behavior. Resistance may serve as a meaningful diagnostic signal of inadequate communication, resource constraints, unrealistic timelines, perceived injustice, competence gaps, workload pressures, or threats to identity. This reframing has practical benefits. Instead of automatically dismissing resistance, change leaders should analyze the information it offers. Constructive dissent can uncover implementation issues and produce feedback that enhances intervention design. As a result, resistance can be seen as potentially valuable rather than inherently harmful.

6. Digital Transformation as a New Frontier of Change Management

Digital transformation has expanded the scope and complexity of organizational change because it can simultaneously alter technologies, structures, workflows, competencies, decision-making processes, customer relationships, and organizational identities. Cieslak and Valor (2025), in their integrative review of 63 studies, demonstrate that employee resistance to digital transformation is linked to perceived job vulnerability and to interactions among technological characteristics, work resources, and organizational conditions. These findings challenge explanations that attribute technological resistance primarily to individual unwillingness to change.

Digital transformation therefore requires a sociotechnical perspective that examines technology in relation to people, organizational processes, leadership, culture, competencies, and institutional arrangements. Treating technology implementation as a purely technical exercise risks overlooking the social and behavioral processes through which technology becomes embedded in organizational practice. The rise of AI makes this challenge more pronounced. AI can reshape professional tasks, decision rights, knowledge processes, organizational structures, and occupational identities. Organizations may therefore need to redesign jobs, develop new competencies, establish appropriate governance mechanisms, reconsider decision authority, and address concerns about employment security and professional identity. Contemporary change management therefore requires integrating technological literacy with reskilling, ethical governance, employee participation, psychological safety, and human-centered implementation.

7. Leadership and the Changing Nature of Change Leadership

Leadership continues to be key in organizational change, yet the role of change leadership is shifting. Traditionally, senior leaders are seen as the main designers of change, with employees acting as executors. Nowadays, modern organizations depend more on distributed expertise, professional knowledge, digital connections, and decentralized decision-making. Effective change leadership requires more than formal authority. Leaders must facilitate dialogue, build trust, create psychological safety, mobilize distributed expertise, encourage experimentation, manage competing interests, and enable organizational learning. Contemporary digital leadership likewise requires a clear strategic vision, innovative capacity, technological understanding, and change-management competence.

Change leaders play various roles: setting strategic goals, shaping meaning, coordinating stakeholders, distributing resources, handling uncertainty, ensuring psychological safety, and promoting learning. Effectiveness in leadership is thus not just about guiding change but also about fostering an environment where organizational members can understand, implement, question, and adapt to change.

8. Organizational Culture and Institutional Inertia

Organizational culture is another enduring challenge because shared assumptions, values, norms, routines, and identities can both facilitate and constrain change. Cultures that reward

experimentation and learning may enable adaptation, whereas those characterized by rigid routines, hierarchical authority, or punitive responses to failure may reinforce institutional inertia. Oyo's (2026) systematic review conceptualizes cultural resistance as multilayered, encompassing surface-level preferences, behavioral patterns, reward structures, and deeply embedded assumptions about knowledge and authority. This perspective moves beyond treating culture as an attitudinal variable and instead positions it as an embedded organizational system.

The distinction is important because organizations may formally endorse transformation even as their systems continue to reproduce existing behaviors. An organization may advocate innovation while penalizing experimentation and failure, or promote collaboration while maintaining reward systems that are predominantly based on individual performance. Achieving sustainable transformation requires alignment across culture, leadership actions, structures, incentives, routines, and performance management. If formal communications conflict with the actual behaviors promoted by organizational systems, genuine change is unlikely to take hold.

9. Change Fatigue and Continuous Transformation

Continuous transformation creates an additional challenge: change fatigue. Organizations increasingly implement overlapping initiatives, including digital transformation, restructuring, strategic realignment, cost containment, regulatory compliance, and process redesign. When multiple initiatives compete for employees' attention and adaptive capacity, uncertainty, cognitive overload, emotional exhaustion, and declining trust may arise. The contemporary problem is therefore not necessarily resistance to a particular initiative but rather fatigue from repeated transformation. This issue is particularly salient in the context of AI and digital transformation, where technological developments can create new organizational demands before employees have consolidated previous changes. Change management must therefore address the human sustainability of transformation. This requires attention to workload, learning capacity, psychological safety, recovery, perceived organizational support, and the sequencing and prioritization of initiatives. Organizational adaptability should not be pursued at the expense of employees' capacity to adapt.

10. Communication, Sensemaking, and Trust

Communication remains fundamental to change, but its role extends beyond transmitting information. Contemporary perspectives conceptualize communication as a process through which organizational members construct meaning about what is changing, why, how it affects them, and whether organizational leaders can be trusted. Acciarini et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change. Employees interpret managerial messages through prior experiences, organizational history, perceptions of leadership credibility, and judgments of fairness. Consequently, communication cannot compensate for weak leadership, inconsistent implementation, or poorly designed interventions. When employees perceive a gap between managerial rhetoric and organizational practice, communication may reinforce distrust rather than reduce it. Effective change communication should therefore be continuous, dialogical, transparent, context-sensitive, and supported by observable managerial behavior.

11. The Theory–Practice Gap

The ongoing disconnect between change-management research and actual organizational practice continues to be a challenge. While researchers can create advanced theoretical models, practitioners face urgent operational pressures, limited resources, incomplete information, political factors, competing priorities, and the need for quick results. Recent reviews show that change-management scholarship is growing and remains conceptually diverse. Roy and Manimekalai (2025) highlight key themes such as leadership, organizational culture, employee perspectives, personality traits, technological progress, and market forces. The main challenge is to develop theories that produce practical knowledge, while managerial practice offers realistic settings for testing these theories. Future research should therefore move beyond asking whether particular models “work” and examine how practitioners actually use, combine, adapt, or abandon change frameworks. This would reposition change models as flexible resources rather than universal prescriptions.

12. Methodological Challenges in Change Management Research

Methodological limitations restrict change research from fully explaining complex and evolving organizational processes. First, there is a need for more longitudinal studies, as employee responses and organizational outcomes change over time. While cross-sectional designs can show useful associations, they offer limited understanding of the temporal sequence, adaptation, and causality. Second, multilevel research is necessary because change unfolds simultaneously across individual, team, organizational, interorganizational, and institutional levels. Third, mixed-methods designs can integrate quantitative evidence on relationships among variables with qualitative insight into how organizational members interpret and experience transformation. Fourth, change outcomes require more comprehensive measurement. Conventional indicators such as project completion, implementation speed, and budget adherence do not adequately capture whether change is sustained or whether it yields desirable organizational and human outcomes. Future studies should therefore consider behavioral adoption, employee well-being, organizational learning, innovation, operational performance, stakeholder outcomes, and the durability of newly institutionalized practices.

13. Toward an Adaptive Organizational Change Capability Perspective

The evidence discussed here suggests moving from seeing change management mainly as just implementing a set model to viewing it as a fundamental organizational skill. This change capability is best described as an organization's ability to foresee environmental changes, interpret new challenges, engage stakeholders, carry out interventions, learn from results, adapt strategies, and embed effective practices. This capability spans interconnected dimensions. At the strategic level, organizations require environmental scanning, strategic flexibility, and the ability to reprioritize. At the leadership level, they require credible, adaptive leadership. At the employee level, they require readiness, participation, competence, and psychological safety. At the technological level, they require digital capability and responsible technology governance. At the cultural level, they require norms that support learning, experimentation, constructive challenge, and adaptation.

This perspective integrates rather than rejects planned and emergent approaches. Planned change provides strategic direction and coordination, while emergent change offers flexibility when environmental conditions and implementation outcomes cannot be fully anticipated. Organizational change capability lies in the capacity to shift between these modes as circumstances require. The central implication is that organizations should not optimize solely for the successful completion of individual change initiatives. They should develop the capacity

to undertake successive transformations without creating an unsustainable employee burden, organizational fragmentation, or loss of strategic coherence.

14. Future Research Agenda

Contemporary literature highlights several priorities for future research. First, researchers should create more comprehensive theories that link cognitive, emotional, motivational, relational, cultural, technological, and institutional mechanisms. The fragmentation in existing theories, as noted by Kanitz et al. (2026), emphasizes the importance of developing frameworks that can explain how these mechanisms interact, rather than studying each in isolation. Secondly, more focus should be placed on employee ambivalence instead of viewing responses as simply resistance or support. Oreg and Sverdlik (2026) highlight the significance of ambivalence, timing, cultural context, and various levels of analysis.

Third, longitudinal research should examine how employee responses evolve during transformation. Comparative studies should also assess whether change-management mechanisms operate similarly across national cultures, sectors, organizational sizes, institutional environments, and levels of technological maturity. Fourth, AI requires sustained investigation as a transformative force within organizations. Research should examine its implications for employee identity, job security, competencies, leadership, organizational structure, decision-making, trust, psychological safety, and power relations. Fifth, change fatigue requires greater theoretical and empirical attention. Future research should examine how organizations can sequence transformation, manage competing initiatives, and preserve employee capacity for adaptation. Sixth, organizational culture should be examined as a system of rewards, leadership behaviors, informal norms, routines, and assumptions rather than merely as an attitudinal construct. Such research could clarify the mechanisms by which culture either reinforces institutional inertia or facilitates adaptive capacity.

Finally, developing countries, emerging economies, African public institutions, and highly regulated sectors need more focused attention. Theories mainly developed within Western organizational settings cannot be automatically applied elsewhere. Therefore, research tailored to specific contexts is crucial to determine the conditions under which change-management theories are relevant. Methodologically, future research should incorporate integrated longitudinal, multilevel, comparative, and mixed-methods approaches to better examine how individuals, leadership, organizational systems, technology, culture, and institutional environments interact.

15. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The central theoretical contribution of this article is the proposition that change management should be conceptualized as an adaptive organizational capability rather than solely as a discrete managerial intervention. This perspective reconciles planned and emergent approaches by recognizing that organizations require both strategic direction and the capacity to revise actions in response to uncertainty, learning, and employee responses.

The practical contribution is a shift in the managerial question. Rather than asking, “Which change model should we use?”, managers should ask: What characteristics of the organizational context shape the change? What mechanisms influence readiness, ambivalence, or resistance? What capabilities are required? How are employees interpreting the transformation? What unintended consequences are emerging? What evidence indicates that

the intervention should be adapted? And what learning should be institutionalized? This capability-oriented approach shifts the role of change management from implementation support to organizational renewal. Change practitioners become facilitators of sensemaking, learning, experimentation, coordination, and adaptation, rather than merely custodians of predefined implementation plans.

16. Conclusion

The contemporary challenge facing change management is not a shortage of theories or models. Rather, it is the difficulty of applying theories developed under assumptions of relative stability to organizational environments marked by continuous transformation. Contemporary change is increasingly multidimensional, dynamic, contextual, technological, emotional, relational, and institutional. Employee responses cannot be reduced to resistance or acceptance because individuals may simultaneously experience support, concern, uncertainty, enthusiasm, and fear. Digital transformation and AI have intensified these complexities by altering not only organizational technologies and processes but also jobs, competencies, identities, structures, decision rights, and power relationships. These developments require change management to move beyond technical implementation toward a more integrated understanding of human, technological, cultural, and institutional adaptation.

The continued relevance of classical theories should not be interpreted as a need for increasingly rigid models. Rather, their foundational insights should be integrated with contemporary perspectives on sensemaking, ambivalence, organizational learning, digital transformation, culture, psychological safety, and adaptive capability. The future of change management lies in building organizations capable of continuous adaptation while maintaining strategic coherence and human sustainability. This requires a shift from linear change implementation to adaptive organizational change capability. Under this paradigm, change management is not a temporary project activated only when transformation is required. It becomes an enduring organizational capability through which organizations interpret uncertainty, mobilize people, experiment with alternatives, learn from experience, revise strategies, and continually renew organizational systems.

References

- Acciarini, C., Boccadelli, P., & Peruffo, E. (2024). Strategic change: A systematic review, synthesis, and a future research agenda. *European Management Review*, 21(4), 782–802.
- Cieslak, V., & Valor, C. (2025). Moving beyond conventional resistance and resisters: An integrative review of employee resistance to digital transformation. *Cogent Business & Management*, 12(1), Article 2442550.
- Kamarova, S., Gagné, M., & Holtrop, D. (2025). Integrating behavior and organizational change literatures to uncover crucial psychological mechanisms underlying the adoption and maintenance of organizational change. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 46(2), 263–287.
- Kanitz, R., Gonzalez, K., Fugate, M., & Venkatesh, V. (2026). Making sense of employee responses to organizational change: Integrating the theoretical landscape across research communities. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

-
- Kotter, J. P. (1995). Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 73(2), 59–67.
- Kotter, J. P. (2012). *Leading change*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Lewin, K. (1947). Frontiers in group dynamics: Concept, method and reality in social science; social equilibria and social change. *Human Relations*, 1(1), 5–41.
- Nuraini, S. (2025). Digital leadership and organizational transformation: A literature review. *Jurnal Ilmiah WUNY*, 7(2).
- Oreg, S., & Sverdlik, N. (2026). Responses to organizational change: Evolution of the concept, established findings, and future directions. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 13, 387–413.
- Oyo, C. (2026). The cultural operating system: A systematic review of multilayered resistance to organisational change. *East African Journal of Business and Economics*, 8(3).
- Roy, N. S., & Manimekalai, M. (2025). An integrative analysis of organisational change management: A systematic literature review (2000–2025). *International Journal of Latest Technology in Engineering, Management & Applied Science*, 14(11), 477–486.
- Weick, K. E., & Quinn, R. E. (1999). Organizational change and development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50, 361–386.