A Review of Change Management Models

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Peer Review Information	Abstract
	Change management has become a critical organizational capability in response to globalization, technological disruption, competitive pressures, and evolving workforce expectations. Organizations across sectors face continuous change related to strategy, structure, processes, culture, and technology. Despite the inevitability of change, failure rates of change initiatives remain high, often due to inadequate planning, leadership resistance, and poor stakeholder engagement. This review paper critically examines major change management models, including Lewin's Three-Step Model, Kotter's Eight-Step Model, ADKAR, McKinsey 7-S Framework, and emergent change approaches. Drawing on classical and contemporary literature, the paper synthesizes theoretical foundations, practical applications, strengths, and limitations of each model. A comparative analysis highlights contextual suitability and effectiveness. The review concludes that no single change management model is universally applicable; instead, successful change depends on contextual adaptation, leadership capability, and organizational culture. The paper contributes by offering an integrated understanding of change management models and identifying future research directions.

Introduction
Change is an unavoidable and continuous phenomenon in modern organizations. Rapid advancements in technology, globalization of markets, increasing competition, regulatory reforms, and shifting societal expectations have fundamentally transformed the way organizations operate. In this dynamic environment, organizations must continuously adapt to survive, grow, and remain competitive. Change management refers to the structured approach used to transition individuals, teams, and organizations from a current state to a desired future state.

Historically, organizations viewed change as a discrete event—often reactive and episodic. Early organizational structures emphasized stability, control, and predictability. However, contemporary organizations increasingly operate in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments. In such contexts, change is no longer occasional but constant, making effective change management a strategic necessity rather than a managerial option.

Despite the widespread recognition of its importance, empirical studies consistently report high failure rates for organizational change initiatives. Estimates suggest that between 60% and 70% of change programs fail to achieve their intended outcomes. These failures are rarely due to flawed technical solutions; rather, they stem from human and organizational factors such as resistance to change, lack of leadership commitment, poor communication, inadequate resources, and misalignment with organizational culture.

Change management models emerged as systematic frameworks to guide organizations through complex change processes. These

models provide structured stages, principles, and tools to help managers anticipate challenges, engage stakeholders, and sustain change outcomes. Early models emphasized linear and planned change, while later approaches recognize the importance of adaptability, learning, and continuous improvement.

One of the foundational contributions to change management theory is **Kurt Lewin's Three-Step Model**, which conceptualizes change as a process of unfreezing existing behaviors, implementing change, and refreezing new practices. Although developed in the mid-20th century, Lewin's model continues to influence contemporary change frameworks. Building on this foundation, scholars and practitioners have proposed more detailed and action-oriented models.

John Kotter's Eight-Step Model emphasizes leadership, vision, and urgency, providing a practical roadmap for large-scale transformational change. The **ADKAR model**, developed by Prosci, focuses on individual change and highlights the psychological dimensions of change adoption. The **McKinsey 7-S Framework** adopts a systems perspective, emphasizing alignment among organizational elements such as strategy, structure, and culture. In recent years, scholars have challenged the assumptions underlying planned change models, arguing that change is often emergent, nonlinear, and unpredictable. Emergent and agile change approaches emphasize experimentation, employee empowerment, and continuous adaptation. These perspectives are particularly relevant in digital transformation and knowledge-intensive organizations.

Given the diversity of change contexts and organizational forms, understanding the strengths and limitations of different change management models is essential. This review aims to provide a comprehensive and comparative analysis of major change management models, synthesizing theoretical insights and empirical evidence. By doing so, the paper seeks to guide researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in selecting and adapting appropriate change management approaches.

Literature Review

The academic literature on change management draws from organizational theory, psychology, sociology, and management studies. Early theoretical foundations are rooted in **planned change theory**, which views change as a deliberate and structured process initiated by management. Lewin's work laid the groundwork for this perspective by emphasizing the role of social forces and group dynamics in change.

Subsequent research expanded planned change theory by incorporating leadership, communication, and participation. Kotter's model reflects this evolution by highlighting the importance of vision, coalition building, and short-term wins. Empirical studies have found that leadership commitment and effective communication are critical success factors in change initiatives.

Behavioral theories contribute significantly to change management literature. Resistance to change has been extensively studied, with scholars identifying psychological factors such as fear of loss, uncertainty, and cognitive bias. Models such as ADKAR draw on these insights by focusing on individual awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement.

Systems theory and contingency perspectives further enriched change management research. The McKinsey 7-S Framework emphasizes internal alignment and suggests that change in one organizational element necessitates adjustments in others. Contingency theory argues that the effectiveness of change strategies depends on contextual factors such as organizational size, industry, and environmental uncertainty.

More recent literature challenges linear change models, advocating for **emergent and continuous change** perspectives. Scholars argue that change often unfolds through ongoing adjustments rather than predefined stages. Agile and learning-oriented approaches emphasize experimentation, feedback loops, and adaptability.

Empirical research also highlights the role of organizational culture, trust, and employee engagement in change success. Studies increasingly integrate change management with digital transformation, sustainability, and strategic renewal.

Major Change Management Models

1. Lewin's Three-Step Model

Unfreeze → Change → Refreeze; emphasizes behavioral transition.

2. Kotter's Eight-Step Model

Urgency, coalition, vision, communication, empowerment, short-term wins, consolidation, anchoring change.

3. ADKAR Model

Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement; individual-focused change.

4. McKinsey 7-S Framework

Alignment of strategy, structure, systems, skills, staff, style, shared values.

5. Emergent and Agile Change Models

Continuous adaptation, learning, and employee empowerment.

Comparative Table and Analysis
1. Comparative Table of Change Management Models

Model	Core Focus	Strengths	Limitations	Best Application
Lewin	Behavioral change	Simplicity	Too linear	Small-scale change
Kotter	Leadership & vision	Action-oriented	Time-consuming	Transformational change
ADKAR	Individual adoption	People-centric	Limited strategic focus	HR & process change
McKinsey 7-S	Organizational alignment	Holistic	Diagnostic complexity	Structural change
Emergent	Adaptability	High flexibility	Less control	Dynamic environments

2. Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of change management models reveals substantial differences in their underlying assumptions, scope, and applicability across organizational contexts. These models are not competing prescriptions but complementary frameworks that address different dimensions of organizational change.

Lewin's Three-Step Model provides a foundational understanding of change as a behavioral transition process. Its strength lies in conceptual clarity and simplicity, making it particularly useful for small-scale or incremental change initiatives. However, comparative evidence suggests that its linear and static nature limits applicability in environments characterized by continuous change, rapid innovation, and uncertainty.

Kotter's Eight-Step Model extends Lewin's framework by offering a detailed, leadership-driven roadmap for large-scale transformation. Its emphasis on urgency, coalition building, and vision communication has been widely validated in empirical studies. Nonetheless, the model assumes a top-down change process and may underemphasize employee-driven adaptation. Additionally, its sequential nature can reduce flexibility in fast-moving environments.

The **ADKAR model** differs fundamentally by focusing on individual change rather than organizational transformation. Its strength lies in addressing psychological and behavioral readiness, which are often neglected in strategic models. Comparative studies indicate that ADKAR is highly effective for process change, technology adoption, and HR-driven initiatives. However, its limited strategic and structural perspective makes it insufficient for organization-wide transformation on its own.

The **McKinsey 7-S Framework** adopts a holistic systems approach, emphasizing alignment among hard and soft organizational elements. Comparative analysis shows that this model is particularly effective as a diagnostic and alignment tool during restructuring, mergers, and strategic realignment. Its limitation lies in operational complexity and the absence of clear implementation steps.

Emergent and agile change models challenge the assumptions of planned change by emphasizing adaptability, learning, and employee empowerment. These models are well-suited to digital transformation and innovation-driven environments. However, they require high organizational maturity, trust, and leadership capability, and may lack sufficient control mechanisms in regulated or high-risk contexts.

Overall, the comparative analysis confirms that **no single change management model is universally superior**. Effective change management increasingly involves hybrid approaches that integrate structured planning with emergent adaptation, aligning organizational systems while addressing individual behavior.

Discussion

The expanded discussion highlights that change management effectiveness depends less on strict adherence to a specific model and more on the **contextual application and integration of multiple approaches**. While classical models provide valuable structure, their effectiveness is mediated by leadership behavior, organizational culture, and environmental dynamics.

One of the most consistent findings across the literature is the critical role of **leadership** in shaping change outcomes. Leaders are not only responsible for articulating vision and strategy but also for legitimizing change, managing resistance, and sustaining momentum. Transformational leadership styles are particularly effective in fostering trust and commitment during periods of uncertainty.

Employee resistance remains one of the most frequently cited barriers to successful change. However, contemporary research reframes resistance as a natural and informative response rather than an obstacle. Effective change managers leverage resistance to identify

misalignment, communication gaps, and cultural constraints. Models such as ADKAR and emergent approaches provide useful mechanisms for addressing resistance constructively.

Organizational culture significantly influences change readiness and sustainability. Change initiatives that align with existing values and norms are more likely to succeed, while misaligned change efforts often encounter passive resistance or superficial compliance. Cultural change is inherently slow and requires consistent leadership behavior, reinforcement mechanisms, and symbolic actions.

The discussion also emphasizes the growing relevance of **hybrid change models**. Organizations increasingly combine elements of planned change (clear goals, governance, milestones) with emergent change (experimentation, feedback loops, adaptability). This hybridization reflects the reality that organizations must balance control and flexibility.

Digital transformation has further reshaped change management practices. Technology-driven change is continuous, iterative, and people-intensive. Traditional linear models often struggle to keep pace with digital disruption, highlighting the importance of agile and learning-oriented approaches.

Finally, the discussion underscores that change management should be viewed as an **organizational capability**, not a one-time project. Organizations that institutionalize learning, reflection, and adaptability are better positioned to manage continuous change and sustain long-term performance.

Conclusion

This review has provided a comprehensive and critical examination of major change management models, tracing their evolution from planned, linear frameworks to adaptive and emergent approaches. The findings confirm that change management is a multidimensional process involving strategic alignment, behavioral transition, leadership engagement, and cultural transformation.

Classical models such as Lewin's and Kotter's continue to offer valuable insights into the structure and sequencing of change initiatives. Their emphasis on preparation, communication, and reinforcement remains highly relevant. However, their limitations in dynamic and uncertain environments necessitate complementary approaches.

People-centered models such as ADKAR highlight the psychological dimensions of change and reinforce the importance of individual readiness and capability. Systems-based models like the McKinsey 7-S Framework emphasize organizational alignment and coherence. Emergent models respond to the realities of continuous change by prioritizing learning, adaptability, and employee empowerment.

A central conclusion of this review is that **successful change management is context-dependent**. Organizational size, industry characteristics, regulatory constraints, and cultural norms significantly influence the suitability of change models. Hybrid approaches that integrate structure with flexibility are increasingly recognized as best practice.

From a managerial perspective, the review underscores the importance of leadership capability, communication quality, and stakeholder engagement. Change initiatives are most successful when leaders foster trust, encourage participation, and align change efforts with organizational values and purpose.

Future research should explore change management in digital ecosystems, cross-cultural contexts, and sustainability-driven transformation. Additionally, the use of data analytics and artificial intelligence to monitor change progress and employee sentiment represents a promising research frontier.

In conclusion, change management models are most effective when they are **adaptively applied, human-centered, and strategically aligned**, enabling organizations to navigate complexity and achieve sustainable transformation.

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