

Systematic Approaches to Change Management and Their Limitations: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

In the current era of globalisation, organisations are compelled to continually improve their products and processes, leading to heightened competition within their respective industries. Continuous improvement has emerged as a key driver of efficiency. A systematic approach is essential for translating continuous improvement into effective change management. There is limited literature that highlights an understanding of how organisations can effectively navigate unplanned changes. This article explores the factors that impede successful change management implementation through a qualitative research approach. Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were conducted to gain in-depth insights from participants at Company X regarding the impact of organisational change. The findings from the SSIs confirm existing literature. Ineffective communication, poor leadership, and resistance to change are emerging as common factors that impede the successful adoption of change within organisations. Participants offered valuable solutions for overcoming challenges related to change management.

Keywords

Change management, change management models, organisational change, implementation strategies.

1. Introduction

The current era of globalisation contributes to how organisations are required to develop and update their products and processes, which will instigate superior competition amongst competitors within the same industry (Barak and Bedianashvili, 2021, Balogun and Hailey, 2008, Kitchen and Daly, 2002, Elsan Mansaray, 2019). Continuous improvement is becoming the driver of efficiency within organisations, and a systematic approach translates the transition of continuous improvement into change management.

Change can be planned or unplanned and still result in a potential for growth or demise. Change can occur due to uncontrolled and unforeseen circumstances, which can either be good or bad for organisations and people within. Existing literature on Change Management reveals that there is a limitation on how organisations can navigate unplanned changes (Patterson et al., 2017, Kast and Rosenzweig, 1981).

1.1 Objectives

This article aims to explore how effective change management can be implemented using systematic approaches, based on the subjective experiences of Company X's research participants. This will be achieved through these research questions:

1. "What are the factors influencing the success or failure of change management within organisations?"

2. “Can the methodologies of change management be followed and still result in negative results in organisations?”

Change is inevitable, and within organisations, it is bound to happen because organisations are the interface of multiple environments and inputs through processes (Dibella, 2007). This article investigates the implementation of change management through systematic approaches to organisational processes. It examines how organisations can react and adapt to change by addressing the factors that contribute to resistance. The study further proposes methodologies that support a sustainable and systematic approach to planned change management within organisations.

2. Literature Review

Change management (CM) is a systematic and structured approach that aims to ensure that changes are implemented thoroughly without causing distress and panic. CM is a continuous process that focuses primarily on the renewal of the organisational structure, direction, and capabilities to fulfil the requirements of internal and external stakeholders of the organisation (Tang, 2019). Organisations must continuously adapt to evolving standards to remain relevant and competitive in dynamic environments (Pryor et al., 2008, Hussain et al., 2018, Bashar and Eyad. alabed, 2013). CM is increasingly recognised as an essential skill, as the rate of change within organisations has reached unprecedented levels in history. (Moran and Brightman, 2000). CM consists of frameworks and models which define and support change at various stages as it unfolds.

2.1 Change Management Models

2.1.1 Kotter’s model

Kotter’s model was developed from a study of over one hundred organisations and is recommended for use in the strategic and planning phases of change management (Mento et al., 2002). The model comprises eight sequential steps: creating a sense of urgency, forming a guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the vision, empowering employees for action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains, and anchoring innovative approaches within the organisational culture. These steps ensure that change is not only implemented but also sustained over time. Further research evaluating the reliability and validity of Kotter’s model indicates that it is primarily grounded in practical experience and qualitative observations, with limited empirical data supporting its original development (Appelbaum et al., 2012).

2.1.1.1 Application of Kotter’s model

Kotter’s model was applied by a mid-sized university in the United States to improve its student evaluation system. The existing system was identified as inefficient and unable to process large volumes of data effectively. By following the eight-step framework, the university successfully implemented the required changes and achieved the intended outcomes (Wentworth et al., 2018).

A survey conducted by McKinsey Global indicated that Kotter’s model significantly influenced transformational efforts within organisations. The findings further revealed that the model was not applied in a strictly sequential manner; rather, specific steps were selectively used to guide leadership practices and manage employee involvement effectively (Paper et al., 2001).

A global oil organisation conducted a simulation in which trainee managers were assigned to evaluate how the organisation could adapt to future developments in the oil industry. The findings indicated that anticipating and preparing for change is more effective than reactive approaches. Consequently, Kotter’s model was proposed as a suitable framework for enhancing change anticipation and addressing resistance from both management and employees (Hurn, 2012).

Honeywell achieved its desired state by applying Kotter’s model in conjunction with other supporting frameworks during a business re-engineering project, which resulted in the development of a more effective process mapping system for the organisation (Paper et al., 2001).

The United Kingdom’s Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) successfully evaluated and applied Kotter’s model. The findings indicated that strong coalitions among employees are essential for effective service delivery. The result was a successful transition of the PHLS laboratories to the National Health Services (NHS) (Gammelgaard and Britta Gammelgaard, 2015).

The cases and examples of Kotter's model demonstrate its applicability across multidisciplinary sectors. The model is particularly useful in the planning phase of organisational change, which represents the initial stage of the change process. Its application, whether through all eight steps or selective use of specific steps, has been associated with positive outcomes in achieving the intended organisational change (Wentworth et al., 2018).

2.1.1.2 Limitations of Kotter's model

Further research has evaluated the effectiveness and validity of Kotter's model as a guide for implementing organisational change, revealing that it is largely grounded in personal experience and qualitative research, with limited empirical evidence underpinning its development. (Appelbaum et al., 2012). While Kotter's model serves as an excellent starting point, it provides limited guidance on implementation. Nevertheless, applying the model enhances the likelihood of achieving successful change.

While organisational change is often a complex process, the eight-step model provides a structured framework that supports a sustainable transition within organisations. (Kotter and Cohen, 2008). Before applying and following the eight steps outlined in Kotter's model, the communication around why change is required must be understood clearly by both the leadership and subordinates.

2.1.2 ADKAR Model

The ADKAR model was developed by Jeff Hiatt in 2003 as a practical change management framework and was introduced by a leading change management consultancy in the United States (Hiatt, 2006). The model was developed to guide employees involved in operational tasks within organisations. ADKAR is an acronym that represents change at an individual level and consists of five elements: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement (Jaaron et al., 2021) (Tang, 2019). In contrast to the ADKAR's model being an effective tool that can be used by the subordinates, there can be weaknesses and threats that can cause subordinates to resist change if not clearly understood.

2.1.2.1 Application of ADKAR's model

An online survey was conducted in a wood production organisation in British Columbia to assess its readiness for change. The objective was to achieve Chain of Custody (CoC) certification in alignment with compliance requirements and to improve production efficiency, thereby enhancing competitiveness. The ADKAR model was applied as a checklist to evaluate change readiness and adaptation, leading to the identification of key recommendations (Gilani et al., 2017).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders at a hospital in Texas applied the ADKAR model as a guiding framework to prepare for an anticipated influx of infected patients, with a particular focus on nursing staff. The application of the model resulted in the development of a structured template to enhance staff readiness, incorporating key questions, recommended actions, and the benefits of implementing the model (Balluck et al., 2020).

2.1.2.2 Limitation of ADKAR's model

A key limitation of this model is its lack of emphasis on the role of leadership in ensuring that it is effectively communicated and understood by employees (Tang, 2019).

2.1.3 Lewin's Model

The Lewin model contains three phases, and it can be classified as the operational phase of the change process. The model follows elements of unfreezing, movement, and refreezing. Lewin's model for change suggests that to avoid a situation where change is short-lived, the three phases should be followed, and these phases are about unfreezing the current methods of working whilst transitioning to freeze to the desired state (Pryor et al., 2008). The model outlines the understanding of change management within organisations and is popular for understanding the change process (Chia, 2014). Lewin's model has been applied in situations where change is anticipated, such as in response to natural disasters like hurricanes.

2.1.3.1 Application of Lewin's model

In one case, U.S. agencies provided mobile homes for displaced victims; however, many of the units remained unoccupied for several months. This outcome suggests a failure to systematically manage the change process, as the existing state was not sufficiently unfrozen to enable a sustainable transition to the desired state (Pryor et al., 2008).

Its relevance lies in providing guidance on how to manage change when it occurs or is planned, particularly as the speed of organisational transition has increased significantly in modern environments (Pryor et al., 2008).

2.1.3.2 Limitation of Lewin's model

Lewin's model is highly recommended for planned change rather than unplanned change. Its relevance lies in guiding organisations on how to manage planned transitions, particularly as the speed of organisational change has increased significantly in modern environments (Pryor et al., 2008).

2.2 Change resistors

Resistance has been defined as opposition to a proposed new state that is not yet familiar or established within organisational practice (Raby, 2006). Resistance To Change (RTC) is also regarded as a behavioural response to unfamiliar or undesired change, often arising from a perceived loss of control over a familiar or comfortable environment (Ford et al., 2002). This is also regarded as a behavioural response to unfamiliar or undesired change, which often arises from a perceived loss of control over familiar or comfortable environments. Within Lewin's unfreezing stage, this resistance is anticipated, as individuals and organisations are required to move away from established routines in preparation for change (Elias, 2009).

A key reason for the unsuccessful implementation of change within organisations is a lack of change readiness, which is influenced by factors that contribute to resistance to change (Chawla and Kevin Kelloway, 2004). A significant body of literature on employee behaviour towards change suggests that change readiness and resistance to change are key factors contributing to the ineffective implementation of change within organisations (Bouckennooghe, 2010).

2.2.1 Leadership

Leadership is a critical prerequisite for the successful implementation of organisational change; therefore, organisations should recognise leaders as change agents, as this fosters trust and credibility among employees (Nadler and Nadler, 1998).

2.2.2 Communication

Communication is a fundamental subject to the successful implementation of change within organisations because it eradicates uncertainty and advocates the readiness to adopt change (Matos Marques Simoes and Esposito, 2014, Ruck and Welch, 2012). However, when communication regarding change is transparent, employees within the organisation are more likely to respond positively and demonstrate a willingness to adopt the proposed change (Bordia et al., 2004a).

Research indicates that, although established change management models provide valuable frameworks for planning and monitoring organisational change, adherence to these models does not guarantee successful or sustainable outcomes. In addition, their application may generate discomfort among employees, resulting in resistance that can undermine the effectiveness of change initiatives.

3. Methods

Factors that cause hindrances to the successful implementation of CM were explored using a qualitative research approach, which allowed for flexibility in the research design. The semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to adjust questions as needed, providing clarity to participants and allowing for more in-depth information to be gathered (Kothari, 2004, Alamri, 2019, Patton, 2002).

3.1 Sampling Strategy

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth insights into employee perceptions of change management practices. This approach enabled participants to share their experiences while ensuring alignment with the study objectives. The interviews explored key themes such as change readiness, resistance to change, and factors influencing the successful implementation of organisational change (Patton, 2002, Palinkas et al., 2015).

4. Data Collection

The data collection method aligns with an interpretivist epistemological approach. Thematic analysis was used to systematically organise and interpret the data. A general inductive approach was applied to analyse the data, with

themes derived and informed by the literature review (Thomas, 2003). Figure 1 illustrates the analysis process which was followed for this study.

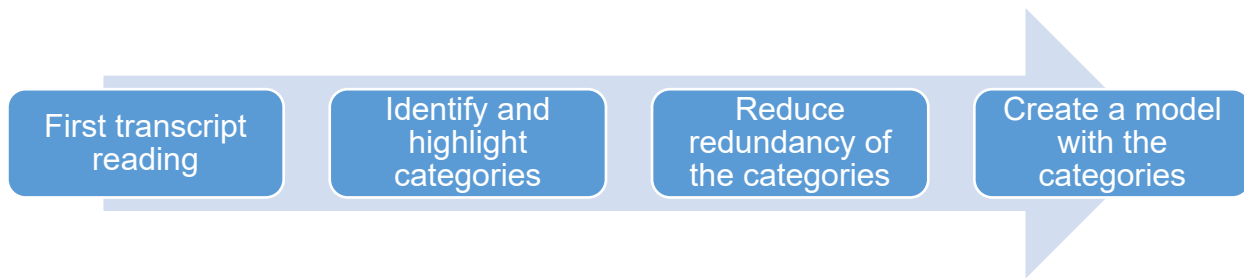


Figure 1. General inductive analysis coding process (Thomas, 2003)

The coding process facilitated the analysis and categorisation of the collected data. The themes derived from the semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were used to address the study's research questions.

5. Results

Participants at Company X shared a mix of experiences with change. The different professional backgrounds included in the study are illustrated in Figure 2. Participants who were in senior positions demonstrated in-depth scenarios of how change within company X impacted them.

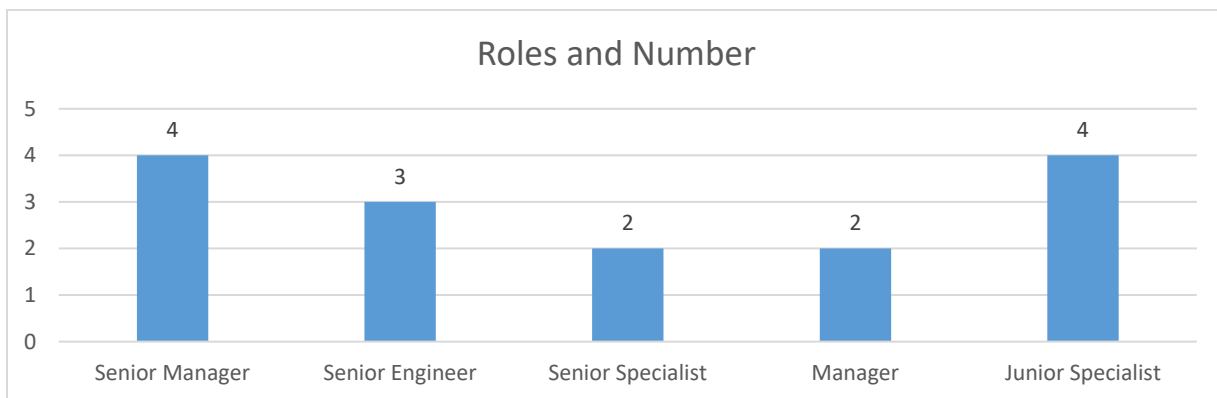


Figure 2. Roles of participants interviewed at Company X

From observation, Company X follows Kotter's eight-step model, which is primarily focused on organisational goals and outcomes. However, this approach appears to place less emphasis on consistent and effective communication, particularly in ensuring that all departments understand their role within the broader organisational context. In contrast, the literature suggests that the ADKAR model, which focuses on individual readiness and engagement, may help address this gap by enhancing understanding of roles at both departmental and individual levels (Caldwell, 1993).

5.1 Grounded theory

Grounded theory was developed as a research paradigm for qualitative studies by inductively deriving theories which are "grounded" within the data (Mento et al., 2002). Inductive analysis resulted in the identification of five themes, which reflect patterns derived from the participants' data.

5.2 Sectional themes discussion

The inductive coding process allowed the researcher to create a model that contained the themes identified from the data and how they linked to the interview questions. The model is illustrated in Table 1. The model was also used to categorise five themes within which the interview questions were examined.

Table 1. Themes and Sections from the SSIs

Sections	Themes	Interview Questions
A	Understanding and Knowledge of CM	What is your understanding of change management?
		What is your understanding of adopting change?
		How can change management be beneficial to your organisation?
B	Communication and Engagement	What is your perception of internal communication about organisational change management?
		How effectively does your organisation communicate changes to employees during change implementation?
		To what extent does your organisation support employees regarding change management?
		What is your opinion about involvement and employee participation within the organisation?
C	Leadership and Organisational Impact	How do you think leadership can affect change management?
		How effectively does your organisation handle transitions during organisational changes?
		What are the results of change management in your organisation?
D	Challenges and Solutions	What do you think are the main challenges organisations encounter during change management implementation?
		What do you believe are the potential key factors that can address the challenges of successful change management?
E	Personal Experience and Perspective	Have you encountered either planned or unplanned changes in your role or department?
		How important do you think it is for organisations to adopt a sustainable approach to change management?

5.2.1 Section A: Understanding and Knowledge of CM

The theme suggests that, while the complexities of change management may not be entirely clear, participants at Company X recognise its fundamental aspects. Some participants view CM as an organisational strategy focused on achieving goals through process changes and structural adjustments. Others see CM as more of an individual adaptation, emphasising subjective experiences and cultural shifts within the organisation. Participants also differed on the best approach for implementing CM, with some advocating a top-down strategy while others supporting a more inclusive, bottom-up approach.

5.2.2 Section B: Communication and Engagement

This theme highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of communication and engagement within Company X. Participants noted that change within the organisation is communicated internally, but not always in a clear or simplified manner. The lack of effective communication often leaves lower-level staff unaware or confused about continuous changes. Some participants felt that this created assumptions and misunderstandings among employees, leading to a general lack of comfort with change.

5.2.3 Section C: Leadership and Organisational Impact

This theme explored how leadership has an impact on organisational change regarding the results of CM within Company X. Participants agreed that leadership plays a vital role in the success of change management. Many participants noted that leaders initiate change, but its effectiveness relies entirely on the involvement of those implementing it. Leadership influences how employees perceive and respond to change. Supportive and communicative leaders foster positive attitudes, while autocratic styles may lead to resistance.

5.2.4 Section D: Challenges and Solutions

This theme is intended to determine challenges which could be experienced while implementing CM.

Participants identified key challenges in change management at Company X, primarily due to a lack of clear communication and resistance to change. Employees often have challenges with understanding the long-term vision, especially if the preceding communication is unclear. This can lead to feelings of insecurity and lack of motivation, sometimes resulting in "quiet quitting." To address the challenges, participants emphasised the importance of effective communication, ensuring that employees understand the purpose and benefits of change management.

5.2.5 Section E: Personal experiences and perspectives

The theme highlights the background and provides context to what participants reflect on when answering the CM SSIs, also exploring the rate at which change occurs at Company X. Participants at Company X reported experiencing both planned and unplanned changes, with many noting that unplanned changes are more frequent. The handling of the changes significantly affected employee responses. Some participants felt that planned changes were communicated well by providing adequate notice and clear reasoning for any new responsibilities. On the contrary, others reported instances of unplanned changes occurring without prior notice, leading to confusion and informal communication.

5.3 Areas of Opportunities from SSIs

Participants highlighted certain areas of opportunity which Company X can use as low-hanging fruit to improve the adoption of change management as an organisational culture.

- Employee engagement: Engagement is limited due to a lack of trust and fear among employees.
- Leadership and communicating responsibility: Communication about the reasons for change can be elaborated to avoid misinterpretations.
- Adoption of a sustainable CM approach: Based on historical events regarding the approach to change, employees have lost trust and were hesitant to propose innovative ideas for adapting to change.
- Resistance and culture: Employees at Company X appear to resist adapting to change due to a lack of effective consultation and feedback processes.

According to the participants at Company X, key areas to improve in building a stronger change management culture can be adopted. By focusing on the above areas of concern, companies can create a more open and adaptable environment for change.

6. Discussion

6.1 Findings of Research Question 1 (RQ1)

RQ1 was to check for an understanding of the various elements that can affect the effectiveness of change management in the organisation.

The respondents mentioned ineffective communication and lack of transparency as obstacles, leading to resistance and disengagement. Leadership was also mentioned as vital, with supportive and inclusive leadership styles aiding change adoption, while a lack of resources and support created apprehension.

1. Ineffective Communication: Participants encountered difficulties in understanding and committing to organisational changes when communication lacked clarity (Matos Marques Simoes and Esposito, 2014, Ruck and Welch, 2012, Caldwell, 1993, Bordia et al., 2004b).
2. Resistance to Change (RTC): Resistance arose when participants were uncertain about the rationale for change or perceived it as an additional workload without appropriate support or compensation. This resistance also manifested as "quiet quitting," where participants disengaged and contributed minimally (Kotter and Cohen, 2008, Cornescu and Adam, 2016).
3. Lack of Long-Term Vision and Engagement: Participants found it challenging to align with the organisation's long-term vision when it was not effectively communicated, particularly during the initial implementation phases (Hiatt, 2006).

4. **Leadership:** Participants felt that leadership played a critical role in the success of change initiatives, yet many perceived gaps in support and resources from leadership. Some participants noted that when leaders focused primarily on operational tasks rather than fostering a culture of growth and adaptability, it left employees feeling unprepared and under-resourced. This perceived lack of support contributed to reluctance and apprehension about new responsibilities, as participants felt they lacked the necessary guidance or clarity on navigating the changes (Oreg et al., 2011, Kalyal and Saha, 2008, Gill, 2002).

6.2 Findings of Research Question 2 (RQ2)

RQ2 was aimed at investigating and providing recommendations that can support effective transition and implementation of change management within organisations.

Participants offered several solutions to address challenges related to change management in organisations. They stressed the importance of reassuring employees and explaining the reasons behind changes, as this helps them feel supported and more willing to embrace those changes. With all the efforts being put in place to foster positive change results, the literature reviewed suggests that a sustainable change method has gained high prominence in the body of knowledge (Thomas and Hardy, 2011). Thus, change can be planned and still be ineffective if not sustainable.

1. **Clear Communication Plan:** A clear communication plan was highlighted as a critical factor for successful change management. Participants emphasised that organisations need to not only set clear goals but also create a detailed communication strategy that outlines each phase of the change process. The plan should guide employees' step by step, ensuring that everyone understands their roles and responsibilities and how they fit into the larger change framework.

The third and fourth step of Kotter's model suggests that organisations are required to document a vision and strategy which should be effectively communicated with the stakeholders and employees through iteration to get everyone affected by the change to be on the same page (Kotter and Cohen, 2008, Thomas and Hardy, 2011).

2. **Explaining the need for change:** One of the most repeated points by participants was the need for employees to understand why the change is necessary. Employees may struggle to see the value of the change. Participants believed that communication should go beyond just the details of the change itself. It should also explain why the old way of working was no longer effective or sustainable, and how the change will improve processes and efficiency.

The ADKAR model advocates understanding of what the change is about and why it is necessary. Participants believed that the desire to want to change should be an organisational culture which should be kept and the ADKAR through the guidance of Kotter's model can be used to effectively communicate what, why and how the change will be rolled out (Thomas and Hardy, 2011, Schryen, 2017, Hiatt, 2006).

3. **Continuous Reinforcement of Change:** The concept of reinforcement was seen as pivotal to ensuring the sustainability of change within the organisation. Employees at Company X suggested that for change to be ingrained as the organisational culture, it should not just be introduced as a one-time event. Change should be reinforced regularly through follow-up communication, training, and ongoing support.

Change is an ongoing process, and it is important to plan how the process of implementing change will be sustained and kept relevant within organisations.

6.3 Proposed Improvements

Based on the outcome of the results, it is recommended that organisations enhance the effectiveness of change management by prioritising active employee engagement through transparent communication, the rationale for change, which fosters trust and collaboration. Strengthening communication strategies and providing tailored training programmes are crucial in supporting employees as they adapt to new processes.

The broader context involving employees in the planning and implementation phases can mitigate resistance and promote greater buy-in. Establishing clear objectives and metrics for monitoring progress ensures that change initiatives remain focused and accountable.

Finally, organisations should prioritise sustainability by embedding new behaviours into their organisational culture and conducting regular assessments to address any negative outcomes. Implementing these measures can significantly enhance the likelihood of successful and enduring change within organisations.

Lastly, organisations should prioritise sustainability by embedding new behaviours into their organisational culture and conducting regular assessments to address any negative outcomes. Implementing these measures can significantly enhance the likelihood of successful and enduring change within organisations.

7. Validation

Reliability and validity of the research method have been associated with quantitative methods; recently, they have been applied to the qualitative methods with the intention to addressing the issue of trustworthiness (Dikko, 2016). The research instruments of a clear research design should satisfy the test of validity and reliability to be deemed good (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

Validity is achieved when the measuring instrument accurately captures the concepts it is intended to measure by adequately presenting the items needed to represent the content (Van Wijk and Harrison, 2013). For any research to attain validity, a pilot study of the research instrument is required (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). The reliability of a study is deemed sufficient when the measurement instrument consistently measures what it is supposed to measure without bias (Van Wijk and Harrison, 2013).

8. Conclusion

This article explored factors influencing the success or failure of change management (RQ1), as well as established methods that can potentially lead to positive outcomes (RQ2), with a specific focus on Company X and its sampled participants. The findings indicate that strong leadership, effective communication, and structured planning are essential for successful change management. Participants at Company X emphasised that a clear, well-documented plan and effective communication are critical for guiding employees through the various phases of change. This supports Kotter's emphasis on clear vision and strategy communication. In addition, the need for employees to understand why change is necessary aligns with the ADKAR model's focus on building awareness and desire for change.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that continuous reinforcement through regular updates, training, and support is essential for embedding change within an organisation's culture, as outlined in Lewin's model of change. By unfreezing existing practices and reinforcing new behaviours, change can be effectively integrated and sustained, as supported by the insights of participants at Company X.

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