

# The Death of Templates

## *Adaptive Change Execution in Complex Environments*



### ABSTRACT

Standard change management frameworks are struggling to keep pace with the increasing complexity and volatility of modern business environments. Organizations are under increasing pressure to respond to emerging technologies, shifting market dynamics, and evolving regulatory demands. While conventional change models were once effective in guiding transitions, they now struggle to address the fluid, interconnected nature of modern change. These legacy approaches often lack the flexibility, scalability, and cultural sensitivity required in complex environments. **This whitepaper explores why static change frameworks are failing and introduces adaptive change execution as a more responsive, resilient, and embedded approach to leading transformation.** It examines critical challenges such as organizational rigidity, stakeholder misalignment, and ineffective measurement, while offering a forward-looking strategy.

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# Endless Change, Outdated Models

Change has become the default state of modern organizations rather than an occasional disruption to manage. Digital acceleration, instability in the economy, and shifts in culture mean that businesses are pushed to change without end. Traditional management approaches rely on predictability and control, but this perspective is fundamentally strained by increasingly complex, volatile, and interconnected systems. Solutions that worked well in the past are no longer viable.

In a world where the ability to manage change and continually be adaptable is a required competency, many traditional change models have been an important component for completing change because they help to align stakeholders and help organizations minimize disturbances. Nevertheless, the arguments in support of many of these models are becoming quickly outdated and were initially developed during a period of relative stability, whereas the transformation today is characterized by overlapping changes, frequently in an environment of uncertainty and insufficient information.

**70%** of all change management efforts fail to achieve their intended outcomes, according to the McKinsey Consulting Group.

Change initiatives are omnipresent in organizations, and the lack of success is staggering. The reality of these failures is significant: organizations are trying to use systems for managing change that are becoming outdated, and as a result, they have stalled efforts, disengaged employees, and weakened competitive advantage.<sup>1</sup>



# 3 Traditional Models & its Limitations

In today's VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous), the ground is constantly shifting. Business units differ vastly in culture, pace, maturity, and operational realities. Imposing a uniform solution ignores this contextual diversity and erodes the effectiveness of change efforts.

These traditional models assume linearity, predictability, and centralized control, which are no longer valid assumptions. In practice, they often manifest in a big-bang approach: starting with a predefined solution, led by executives, rolled out at scale, and governed by static plans. Late consultation leaves little room for organic emergence or contextual variation.

Although modern versions try to be more inclusive through pilots or representative focus groups, they still struggle to shake the view that one single solution can work for everyone. This has not changed despite a more experimental approach. The idea that one size fits all exists in a flawed conception of the multifaceted complexity of human systems. Having a standard format can confer a competitive advantage; however, it now limits an organization's capacity to sense, respond, and adapt. Ultimately, **traditional change models are designed for a stable, more or less certain world, and today, there is a need for change frameworks that are more innovative, context-sensitive, adaptive, and iterative.**

## Types of Traditional Change Models and limitations

### Lewin's Change Management Model

01

Based on three steps, Unfreeze, Change, and Refreeze, this model emphasizes preparation and stabilization. However, in a dynamic environment where change is constant, the **notion of "refreezing" becomes unrealistic.**

### ADKAR Model

02

Focused on individual transformation through Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement, this model highlights the human side of change. Yet, it often **lacks the systemic agility** to address emergent complexity.

### Kotter's 8-Step Change Model

03

A linear, top-down approach that includes creating urgency, building coalitions, and embedding change into culture. It works best in planned, stable environments but **struggles with iterative and decentralized transformation.**

### McKinsey 7-S Model

04

This holistic framework addresses strategy, structure, systems, shared values, style, staff, and skills. However, it is more diagnostic than dynamic and **offers little guidance for real-time adaptation.**

# 4 Blind Spots of Template Change

Despite being widespread and well-intentioned, conventional change management approaches are riddled with blind spots. They not only underestimate the complexity of today's environment but also fail to grasp the deep human dynamics that drive or derail transformation. This **exposes the structural weaknesses of legacy change methods and why they often lead to disengagement, resistance, and failure.**



## The Blame Game – A Deficit Based Trap

Traditional change models are inherently problem-focused: they diagnose dysfunction, isolate root causes, and prescribe top-down fixes.

**While logical on paper, this creates narratives of blame.**

Teams are told what they've done wrong, what needs to be corrected, and how they must now comply with new directions. This deficit-based framing may win executive approval, but it alienates those on the ground. It fuels fatigue, lowers morale, and often triggers passive resistance.

## Misreading Human Reactions to Disruption

Change, no matter how small, disrupts the status quo. It threatens comfort zones, learned routines, and familiar power dynamics. Often, this is misunderstood as resistance. But people don't resist change; they resist being changed. **Effective change leaders understand this paradox.** They build environments where disruption is acknowledged, emotional responses are normalized, and people are helped to find their footing in the face of volatility.

## Treating Change Like a Project

Traditional models view change as a project with a defined start date, milestones, and a final delivery date. This perspective is not only outdated but also dangerous.

**It assumes static conditions, linear progress, and controllable variables.** In reality, change is organic, ongoing, and evolutionary. By the time a conventional change plan is fully executed, the conditions it was based on have often shifted. Businesses move on to find that behaviors revert to the old norm.

# 5 The Shift to Adaptive Execution

As the limitations of traditional models of change become apparent, a new approach to change execution emerges: adaptive design. Adaptive change is not based on the execution of a fixed plan from the top but instead utilizes scenario-based, ongoing, and real-time feedback approaches.

**Adaptive change execution is best suited to contexts that are complex, ambiguous, and**

**rapidly changing.** Adaptive change execution is an emergent, ongoing, and contextual approach that facilitates change by responding to emergent scenarios, empowers local decision-making, and enables embedded change within organizations' ongoing systems and behaviors. It does not commence from a static plan but instead evolves through experimentation, feedback, and distributed leadership.

## Four Core Elements of Implementing Adaptive Change Execution

### 1 Assessing the Situation

Leaders should start by assessing their context (the specific challenges, risks, resources, and opportunities) as a basis for contextualized change, not pre-scripted approaches to adaptive change.

### 2 Engaging Stakeholders

Real adaptive change means engaging your stakeholders. It is not about informing them when you have a plan but rather engaging them with you early in the process through ongoing dialogue, designed empathy, and participatory decision-making.

### 3 Developing and Executing a Plan

Plans under adaptive models are not blueprints. They're flexible scaffolds. Leaders collaboratively define goals, assign ownership, and stay close to the implementation through real-time monitoring and agile corrections.

### 4 Creating a Transformative Change

Adaptive processes are not linear. Adaptive change must include ongoing feedback loops, meaningful wins, and building the capability for resilience. Achieving success is shaped by the embedding of the capacity to adapt as an integral part.

# 6 Embedding Resilience by Change

Adaptive change execution goes beyond just managing change effectively. It focuses on creating a resilient organization that can thrive amidst complexity, ambiguity, and ongoing disruption.

**Resilience, in this context, means more than recovery. It means bouncing forward, emerging**

**stronger, smarter, and more aligned after each wave of change.** Undergoing digital transformation, resilience is not a side effect. It's the goal, and it must be built into the change management approach from day one.

## Thought Leadership as the Catalyst

Thought leadership is the single most decisive factor in successful transformation. Embed leadership support mechanisms into all phases of project delivery, from executive coaching to mid-level empowerment, ensuring the organizations build leadership resilience as it transforms. **Leaders must:**

- Communicate a compelling vision.
- Adjust styles based on team feedback and operational realities.
- Act as facilitators of innovation, not controllers of process.

## Training as a Continuous Investment

Digital transformation often introduces unfamiliar systems and workflows. In a recent study with a mid-sized logistics company, **pre-implementation upskilling of the workforce reduced post-launch disruptions by over 60%**. The businesses should :

- Conduct capability audits to identify skill gaps.
- Implement continuous learning programs that run parallel to project milestones.
- Create learning pathways that foster not just compliance but confidence.

## Evaluating, Adapting, and Scaling

Change is not linear, and neither is impact. According to benchmark research, strategies such as adaptive leadership (**with a 90% success rate**), employee engagement (**with an 85% success rate**), and periodic evaluation (**with an 85% success rate**) are the most effective levers for lasting change<sup>2</sup>. Project model should include structured checkpoints to:

- Measure employee sentiment and adoption.
- Track the effectiveness of new processes.
- Adjust the delivery roadmap based on real-world insights. By making evaluation and adaptation as a core part of delivery.



# 7 Driving Outcomes, Not Just Plans

The death of templates in change implementation indicates not the end but a new beginning. In summary, it highlights the transition from a top-down, prescriptive model of change management to a responsive, human-centered, and context-sensitive model. **It is true that traditional models have provided foundational contributions, but they have fallen behind the unpredictable and emergent nature of organizational realities as we see today.** As illustrated earlier, traditional models depend on both upfront design and static plans and a linear rollout, which continually underestimates the messiness, fluidity, and complexity of lived experiences and the dynamics within organizations.

What we now have to develop is a living, learning model of change that engages people from the very start, allows continuous feedback, and allows for a departure from the prescribed path based on local conditions. The execution of adaptive change is not simply a method but a new mindset. It requires organizations to make a mind shift, not by trying to control change but by enabling change by creating capabilities within teams, processes, and technology.

**Scenario-based, embedded change models provide a way forward. They leverage co-creation, experimentation, and distributed decision-making, empowering the businesses most affected to take ownership of the transformation.** These models transform change from something done to people into something built with people, bridging the motivation gap, improving performance, and fostering genuine resilience.



The shift to adaptive frameworks does not mean abandoning structure but rethinking it. In a world where change is no longer an event but constant, successful organizations will be those that abandon outdated playbooks in favor of responsive systems that evolve with their environment. **The future of change is no longer templated. It is situational, social, and systemic.** And those organizations who embrace this shift won't just survive the next wave of change, but lead it.

# 8 References

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1. <https://www.aimbusinessschool.edu.au/why-abs/blog/why-70-of-change-management-initiatives-fail>
2. <https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism/article/download/4534/4045/12786>