

**LEADING THROUGH TURBULENCE: RETHINKING ORGANISATIONAL LEADERSHIP
AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT FOR A VOLATILE, UNCERTAIN WORLD**

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ABSTRACT

Organisational leadership and change management have emerged as the most consequential competencies of the contemporary managerial era. In an environment defined by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), traditional command-and-control leadership paradigms are yielding diminishing returns, while the pace and scale of organisational change have rendered conventional change management methodologies inadequate. This opinion paper argues that organisations must fundamentally reconceptualise both leadership and change management—not as discrete, episodic functions but as continuous, interconnected organisational capabilities. Drawing on evidence from leadership theory, organisational psychology, and practitioner research, the paper advances three arguments: that adaptive, emotionally intelligent leadership is a prerequisite for sustainable change; that resistance to change is better understood as a rational human response than an obstacle to overcome; and that effective change management requires systemic, culturally anchored approaches that transcend methodological checklists. The paper concludes with a call for practitioner-oriented leadership development that privileges reflexivity, sense-making, and relational capacity alongside technical change management competencies.

Keywords: *organisational leadership, change management, adaptive leadership, VUCA, transformational leadership, organisational culture, change resistance, emotional intelligence*

INTRODUCTION

There has never been a more demanding time to lead an organisation. The convergence of digital disruption, geopolitical instability, climate-related business risk, post-pandemic workforce transformation, and shifting stakeholder expectations has created a leadership environment of unprecedented complexity. McKinsey Global Institute (n.d) estimates that 70% of large-scale organisational change initiatives fail to achieve their intended objectives—a figure that has remained stubbornly consistent for over three decades despite the proliferation of change management frameworks, methodologies, and consultancy offerings. This persistent failure rate is not, in this author's view, a function of inadequate methodology. It is a function of inadequate leadership.

This opinion paper, written for an audience of management practitioners and organisational scholars, makes a case that is at once simple and radical: that the dominant paradigms governing both organisational leadership and change management are insufficiently equipped for the demands of the contemporary environment, and that their reformation is not optional but existential. The paper proceeds in four sections. The first examines the limitations of conventional leadership models in VUCA conditions. The second challenges prevailing assumptions about change resistance and their consequences for change practice. The third argues for a cultural-systemic approach to change management that transcends methodological frameworks. The fourth outlines the implications for leadership development and practitioner education. Throughout, the paper privileges practitioner relevance without sacrificing scholarly rigour.

**The Limits of Conventional Leadership in a VUCA World
From Transactional to Transformational and Beyond**

The intellectual architecture of modern leadership theory has been constructed over several decades of productive scholarship. Burns's (1978) seminal distinction between transactional and transformational leadership gave the field a generative conceptual vocabulary. Bass (1985) elaborated the transformational model, identifying idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration as the constituent elements of transformational leadership behaviour. Subsequent decades saw

the field diversify further, with servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), and distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002) each contributing important insights into the conditions under which leaders can mobilise collective effort towards shared goals.

These models have generated genuine insights and their empirical base is substantial. Yet this author contends that even the most sophisticated of them share a limitation: they were largely theorised and validated in environments of relative stability. The VUCA construct—originally developed by the United States Army War College in the late 1990s and subsequently adopted by management scholars (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014)—captures something qualitatively different about the contemporary operating environment. In VUCA conditions, the leader's fundamental task is not to articulate a compelling vision of a knowable future and inspire followers towards it. It is to navigate collective action through conditions of genuine uncertainty—where the future is not merely unclear but structurally unknowable.

The Case for Adaptive Leadership

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) made one of the most practically consequential contributions to leadership theory with their distinction between technical problems—those amenable to known solutions applied by authoritative experts—and adaptive challenges, which require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, and approaches to work. Their adaptive leadership model argues that the most significant organisational challenges are adaptive in nature, and that leaders who respond to adaptive challenges with technical solutions not only fail to solve them but often make them worse by providing false reassurance that the problem is understood and under control.

The implications of this framework for contemporary organisational leadership are profound. Digital transformation, for example, is routinely framed as a technical challenge—a matter of implementing the right technology stack, upskilling the workforce, and redesigning processes. But the evidence suggests that the primary barriers to successful digital transformation are adaptive: cultural resistance, leadership mindset rigidity, power dynamics that technology deployment disrupts, and the psychological challenge of operating in genuinely new ways (Westerman et al., 2014). Leaders who mobilise substantial technical resources towards what is fundamentally an adaptive challenge should not be surprised when their initiatives underperform.

This author argues that adaptive leadership—characterised by tolerance for ambiguity, the ability to hold multiple competing perspectives simultaneously, a willingness to experiment and learn from failure, and the capacity to sustain productive disequilibrium in organisations—is the most urgent leadership development priority of the current era. This is not to dismiss the value of visionary, inspirational, or servant-oriented leadership; these remain valuable. But without adaptive capacity, they are insufficient.

Emotional Intelligence as a Non-Negotiable Leadership Competency

A substantial body of research supports the proposition that emotional intelligence (EI) the capacity to perceive, understand, manage, and use emotions in oneself and others is a significant predictor of leadership effectiveness, particularly in high-stakes, high-ambiguity environments (Goleman et al., 2002). Bar-On's (2006) comprehensive review of the EI literature identified consistent associations between EI and leadership performance across diverse organisational contexts. More recently, Harms and Credé (2010) conducted a meta-analysis demonstrating that EI accounts for meaningful variance in leadership effectiveness beyond what is explained by cognitive ability and personality traits.

For practitioners, the significance of this evidence base lies not in the abstract concept of EI but in its specific behavioural manifestations during periods of organisational change. Leaders with high EI are better equipped to read the emotional climate of their organisations, to communicate in ways that address both the rational and emotional dimensions of change, and to regulate their own anxiety in ways that prevent it from being transmitted to their teams. In contrast, leaders who lack EI tend to respond to resistance and setback with increased pressure and control—precisely the responses most likely to deepen resistance and undermine

trust (Goleman, 1998). The development of EI in leaders is not a soft-skills luxury; it is a hard strategic necessity.

Reconceptualising Change Resistance: From Obstacle to Signal The Dominant Narrative and Its Consequences

The dominant narrative in mainstream change management treats resistance as a problem—an irrational, self-interested obstruction to rational, organisation-serving change that must be diagnosed, managed, and ultimately overcome. Kotter's (1996) widely adopted eight-step change model, despite its many contributions, exemplifies this orientation: resistance is framed as one of several obstacles to be cleared on the path to a predetermined destination. Prosci's ADKAR model (Hiatt, 2006), similarly influential in practitioner circles, treats resistance as a gap in awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, or reinforcement a deficiency to be remedied through targeted interventions.

This framing has profound practical consequences. When resistance is construed as irrational obstruction, the natural managerial response is to invest in communication campaigns designed to persuade, training programmes designed to upskill, and performance management mechanisms designed to compel. The focus shifts from understanding what resistance might be signalling to extinguishing it as efficiently as possible. The result, as Ford et al. (2008) argued in one of the most important contributions to the change management literature of the past two decades, is that legitimate feedback is suppressed, critical organisational intelligence is lost, and the change itself is often degraded in ways that only become apparent after implementation.

Resistance as Rational Response and Organisational Resource

This author argues, with Ford et al. (2008) and others, that resistance to change is better understood as a rational response to a perceived threat than as irrational obstruction. When employees resist change, they are typically responding often with considerable insight to real concerns about job security, workload, relational disruption, value conflict, or the perceived inadequacy of the proposed change itself. Oreg et al. (2011), in a cross-cultural study of change recipients, found that dispositional resistance to change was a relatively minor predictor of actual resistance behaviour compared to contextual factors such as trust in management, perceived fairness of the change process, and quality of communication.

These findings carry direct implications for practitioners. If resistance is primarily a function of contextual factors rather than individual disposition, then strategies focused on identifying and managing resistant individuals are fundamentally misdirected. The more productive orientation is to treat resistance as a form of organisational feedback that carries diagnostic information about the quality of the change itself, the adequacy of the change process, and the health of the trust relationship between leaders and those they lead. Jost et al. (2004) suggested that employees who resist change often have a clearer view of the operational realities at stake than the senior leaders initiating the change a perspective that, if engaged rather than suppressed, can significantly improve change outcomes.

The practical implication is a reorientation of the change leader's role: from managing resistance to creating the conditions in which productive dissent can surface and be heard. This requires not only structural mechanisms—open forums, anonymous feedback channels, genuine participation in change design—but also the leadership qualities discussed in the previous section: emotional intelligence, adaptive capacity, and the willingness to hold the tension between direction and dialogue.

Beyond Frameworks: Towards a Cultural-Systemic Approach to Change The Framework Fetish and Its Limitations

The change management profession has generated an impressive portfolio of frameworks, models, and methodologies—Kotter's eight steps, Lewin's unfreeze-change-refreeze model, ADKAR, McKinsey's 7-S framework, and many others. These frameworks have undoubted pedagogical value: they provide practitioners with cognitive maps that bring order to the inherently messy process of organisational change. But this author contends that the profession's reliance on frameworks has become excessive a form of what might be called framework fetishism that mistakes the map for the territory and the methodology for the change itself.

The evidence for this critique is not merely theoretical. A KPMG global survey (2018) found that 96% of organisations used at least one formal change management methodology, yet the same survey reported that fewer than a third rated their change initiatives as successful. The coexistence of high methodology adoption and low success rates suggests that frameworks are necessary but far from sufficient conditions for effective change. What is missing, this author argues, is a deeper engagement with the cultural and systemic dimensions of organisational change that no methodology, however sophisticated, can fully capture.

Organisational Culture as the Master Variable

Schein (2017) argued compellingly that organisational culture the pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group has learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration is the master variable in organisational change. Culture operates at multiple levels: the visible artefacts and enacted behaviours that are observable, the espoused values that members articulate, and the deep tacit assumptions that operate largely outside conscious awareness. Change initiatives that successfully shift surface-level behaviours without addressing deeper cultural assumptions typically revert over time, as the underlying cultural logic reasserts itself.

This insight has been empirically reinforced by research on post-merger integration, where cultural incompatibility is consistently identified as a primary driver of merger failure. KPMG's (2018) analysis of major acquisitions found that cultural issues were a significant factor in value destruction in the majority of cases examined. More broadly, Cameron and Quinn's (2011) competing values framework has been used extensively in empirical research to demonstrate the role of cultural fit and cultural change in organisational performance outcomes.

The practical implication is that change leaders must invest as seriously in cultural diagnosis and cultural change as they do in process redesign and system implementation. This means developing genuine cultural literacy—the capacity to read the implicit rules, narratives, symbols, and rituals through which organisational meaning is produced and reproduced—and designing change processes that engage with culture at all three of Schein's levels, not merely the surface. It means accepting that cultural change is inherently slow, contested, and non-linear, and building change timelines and leadership expectations accordingly.

Systems Thinking and the Unintended Consequences of Change

A systems perspective on organisational change directs attention to the interconnected, dynamic nature of organisations as complex adaptive systems entities in which interventions in one part of the system inevitably produce effects, often unintended, in other parts (Senge, 1990). The systems thinking literature has consistently demonstrated that many of the most damaging consequences of organisational change initiatives arise not from poor implementation of specific changes but from failure to anticipate the systemic ripple effects of those changes on interdependent organisational elements.

Stacey (2011) has argued that complexity theory offers a more accurate and useful lens for understanding organisational change than the mechanistic, input-output models that underpin most change management frameworks. In complex adaptive systems, change is not a process of moving from one stable equilibrium to another—Lewin's (1951) classic model notwithstanding—but of navigating continuous, emergent transformation in which outcomes cannot be fully predicted or controlled. For practitioners, this framing suggests that the goal of change management should not be to execute a predetermined plan with maximum fidelity but to develop the organisational capacity to sense, respond to, and learn from an environment in continuous flux.

Implications for Leadership Development and Practitioner Education

The arguments advanced in this paper converge on a set of clear implications for how organisations develop their leadership capability and how management educators prepare practitioners for the realities of leading change. Three implications are particularly significant. First, leadership development programmes must prioritise adaptive capacity and emotional intelligence alongside and in some contexts ahead of technical change management competencies. The current market for leadership development is heavily weighted towards methodology training: practitioners learn to apply frameworks, construct change plans, and manage stakeholder matrices. This is valuable but insufficient. What is equally essential, and significantly harder to

develop, is the capacity for sense-making in conditions of genuine ambiguity, the ability to hold and work with complexity without premature cognitive closure, and the emotional maturity to sustain productive relationships under pressure. Heifetz et al. (2009) coined the evocative phrase "getting on the balcony" the capacity to maintain a broader systemic perspective even while engaged in the heat of organisational action as a core adaptive leadership competency. Developing this capacity requires experiential, reflective learning approaches that conventional training programmes rarely provide.

Second, organisations must invest in building what Ancona et al. (2007) termed "incomplete leaders"—leadership cultures that value the distribution of complementary leadership capabilities across teams rather than expecting individual leaders to embody all necessary qualities. In an environment of genuine complexity, no individual leader, however talented, can possess all the cognitive, relational, and technical capacities that effective organisational navigation requires. The heroic individual leader model, still implicitly dominant in many organisational cultures and leadership development programmes, is not only empirically inaccurate but actively harmful in VUCA environments, where it creates dangerous dependencies and suppresses the distributed intelligence that organisations need.

Third, practitioners must develop what Argyris and Schön (1978) described as double-loop learning capacity the ability to interrogate and revise the underlying assumptions and mental models that govern their behaviour, rather than merely adjusting their actions within an unchanged framework. Single-loop learning detecting and correcting errors within existing norms is adequate for managing technical problems in stable environments. Double-loop learning questioning the norms themselves is essential for leading adaptive change. Developing this capacity requires sustained personal reflection, access to honest developmental feedback, and organisational cultures that normalise learning from failure rather than concealing it.

CONCLUSION

The challenges facing organisational leaders in the contemporary environment are qualitatively different from those addressed by the leadership and change management paradigms that dominate professional education and practice. The persistent failure of large-scale change initiatives is not primarily a methodology problem; it is a leadership problem and a conceptual problem. As long as leaders are trained to treat adaptive challenges as technical problems, to manage resistance rather than listen to it, and to implement frameworks rather than engage with culture and complexity, the failure rate of organisational change will remain unacceptably high.

This paper has argued for a reorientation of both leadership theory and change management practice around three core principles: that adaptive, emotionally intelligent leadership is the foundational prerequisite for sustainable change; that resistance deserves to be heard rather than managed; and that genuine change capability resides not in the mastery of frameworks but in the cultivation of cultural literacy, systems thinking, and double-loop learning. These are not comfortable or convenient arguments. They demand more of leaders more self-awareness, more relational skill, more intellectual humility than the dominant paradigms require. But they are, in this author's assessment, the arguments that the evidence and the urgency of the moment demand. The organisations that will navigate the turbulence ahead most effectively will not be those with the best change management frameworks. They will be those with the best leaders and the organisational wisdom to develop them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Organisations should encourage leaders to adopt adaptive and agile leadership approaches that enable quick decision-making and flexible responses to uncertainty. In volatile environments, rigid hierarchical leadership often delays action. Agile leaders empower teams, encourage experimentation, and adjust strategies based on emerging realities. This improves organisational resilience and responsiveness during crises.
- 2) Effective communication is essential during periods of turbulence. Leaders should communicate clearly, honestly, and consistently about organisational challenges, changes, and future directions. Transparent communication reduces employee anxiety, builds trust, and minimizes resistance to

change. Regular updates through meetings, digital platforms, and feedback channels help sustain confidence and engagement.

- 3) Rather than treating change as an occasional event, organisations should develop cultures where continuous learning, innovation, and adaptability are normal practices. Employees should be trained to embrace new technologies, evolving roles, and changing market conditions. A workforce that is psychologically prepared for change responds more positively during turbulent periods.
- 4) Turbulent times often increase stress, uncertainty, and burnout among employees. Leaders should prioritize employee wellbeing through mental health support, flexible work arrangements, counselling services, and empathetic management. Emotional intelligence enables leaders to understand employee concerns, manage conflict, and maintain morale during difficult transitions.
- 5) Leaders should rely on data analytics, forecasting tools, and scenario planning to make informed decisions under uncertainty. By analyzing market trends, employee performance data, customer behaviour, and risk indicators, organisations can anticipate disruptions and prepare strategic responses. Scenario planning helps organisations evaluate multiple possible futures and remain proactive rather than reactive.

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