

Choosing a Change Management Approach and Framework

A practical guide based on planned, emergent, and dialogic change

Scope of this capsule

This capsule uses the concepts covered in the Fundamentals of Leading and Managing Organizational Change course. It focuses on strategic, operational, cultural, and technological change, incremental versus transformational change, planned, emergent, and dialogic approaches, and the Lewin, Kotter, and ADKAR frameworks.

Start with the change, not the framework

A framework becomes useful only after the organization understands what is changing, why it is changing, and where the main difficulty lies. A new system, a process redesign, a cultural shift, and a new business direction create different requirements. Selecting a familiar model without diagnosing the situation often leads to a plan that looks organized but does not address the real problem.

1. Identify the main type of organizational change

Type	Meaning	Example
Strategic change	A change in direction, market, business model, or long-term positioning.	Entering a new market or moving from product sales to a subscription model.
Operational change	A change in processes, procedures, roles, or day-to-day execution.	Redesigning onboarding, billing, or service delivery.
Cultural change	A change in shared values, norms, assumptions, and expected behaviours.	Moving from a blame culture to a learning culture.
Technological change	A change involving tools, platforms, automation, data, or digital capability.	Implementing a CRM, HubSpot workflows, AI, or a customer portal.

These types often overlap. A technological change commonly requires operational and cultural change as well. A system launch may alter workflows, skills, decision rights, customer communication, and performance expectations.

2. Decide whether the change is incremental or transformational

Incremental change improves what already exists. Transformational change changes the operating logic, capabilities, culture, or business model. The distinction matters because transformational change usually requires stronger leadership alignment, broader participation, greater learning, and more sustained reinforcement.

Simple test

If the current model still works and needs improvement, the change is likely incremental. If the current model is no longer sufficient and the organization must operate differently, the change is likely transformational.

3. Choose the change approach

Approach	When it fits	How it works	Framework connection
Planned change	The destination is clear and the path is mostly known.	Structured implementation, milestones, roles, training, controls, and reinforcement.	Lewin and Kotter often fit.
Emergent change	The situation is complex and the solution must evolve through learning.	Pilots, short cycles, feedback, experimentation, and adjustment.	Use a flexible strategy and learning loops.
Dialogic change	The main barrier involves meaning, beliefs, identity, trust, or competing interpretations.	Structured conversations, inquiry, participation, and co-creation.	Use dialogue to shift understanding and commitment.

A hybrid approach is often appropriate. A program may use planned change for governance and rollout, emergent change for pilots and adjustments, and dialogic change for trust, meaning, and cross-functional alignment.

4. Select the framework

Lewin: prepare, move, and stabilize

Lewin's model includes unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. It is useful when the organization needs to loosen the forces maintaining the current state, introduce new behaviours or practices, and stabilize the new way through routines, norms, systems, and reinforcement.

Best fit

A planned change with a reasonably clear future state, especially when old routines must stop and the new practice must become stable.

Kotter: mobilize a broad organizational change

Kotter focuses on urgency, a guiding coalition, a clear vision, repeated communication, removal of obstacles, short-term wins, continued momentum, and anchoring the change in culture. It is useful when the change crosses functions and depends on visible leadership and sustained organizational attention.

Best fit

A strategic, transformational, or cross-functional change that requires leadership alignment, momentum, and cultural reinforcement.

ADKAR: diagnose and support adoption

ADKAR focuses on Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. It helps leaders identify where adoption is breaking down. People may understand the reason for change but lack the desire to participate. They may support the change but lack knowledge, tools, access, practice, or reinforcement.

Best fit

A change where success depends on employees, customers, or partners adopting a new process, system, behaviour, or communication journey.

5. Use the framework to guide action, not to label the project

Selecting a framework is only the beginning. The framework must be translated into specific decisions, actions, owners, measures, and review points. A change plan should also address communication, culture, resistance, resources, technology, governance, sequencing, feedback, and performance.

Leadership style also affects trust, meaning, motivation, and implementation quality during change. This capsule does not cover leadership styles in detail. A related Business Capsule on leadership styles will explain how leaders adapt their approach across different change situations and phases.

A practical selection sequence

1. Define what will change, for whom, and why.
2. Identify whether the main change is strategic, operational, cultural, technological, or a combination.
3. Decide whether the change is incremental or transformational.
4. Determine whether the situation is best approached as planned, emergent, dialogic, or hybrid.
5. Identify the main risk: weak alignment, unclear direction, low adoption, resistance, cultural conflict, lack of capability, or failure to sustain.
6. Select Lewin, Kotter, or ADKAR based on the main risk and level of change.
7. Use the related application guide to turn the framework into an action plan.

Final takeaway

Lewin, Kotter, and ADKAR do not answer the same question. Lewin organizes movement from the current state to a stabilized new state. Kotter mobilizes and sustains broad organizational change. ADKAR diagnoses and supports adoption. The strongest choice begins with the type of change, the level of uncertainty, and the main implementation risk.

Downloads

Use the Change Approach and Framework Selection Guide first. After selecting a framework, use the corresponding Lewin, Kotter, or ADKAR Application Guide.