

Rethinking Change: Toward Emotionally Intelligent Transformation in the Public Sector

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Abstract: Despite widespread adoption of structured change methodologies, public sector transformation programmes continue to experience delays, cost overruns, and cultural resistance. This paper critiques the limitations of ADKAR, a widely used individual change model, when applied to complex, system-wide initiatives. Drawing on comparative analysis of five established frameworks (ADKAR, Kotter's 8-Step, Bridges Transition, McKinsey 7-S, and Lewin's Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze), the paper argues for a blended, context-sensitive approach that integrates emotional scaffolding, strategic alignment, and behavioural insight. Particular attention is given to the role of adaptive leadership, psychological safety, and Nudge Theory in fostering resilient change. The paper concludes by introducing the FRAME Framework, Flexible, Relational, Adaptive, Modular, Equitable, as a strategic scaffold for emotionally intelligent, governance-aware transformation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Organisational change remains a persistent challenge across the public sector, where transformation programmes often falter despite the adoption of structured methodologies. From digital rollouts to cultural reform, the promise of change is frequently undermined by inertia, fragmentation, and a lack of emotional resonance. While models such as ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006), Kotter's 8-Step (Kotter, 1996), and McKinsey's 7-S (Waterman et al., 1980) offer frameworks for navigating change, their application in complex, system-wide contexts often reveal limitations, particularly when behavioural nuance and psychological safety are overlooked.

This paper argues that prevailing change models, though methodologically sound, are insufficiently equipped to address the emotional, relational, and adaptive dimensions of public sector transformation. Drawing on comparative analysis and behavioural insight, it proposes a blended approach that integrates strategic alignment with emotional scaffolding, reframing change not as a linear process, but as a dynamic interplay of systems, people, and purpose.

By critically examining the assumptions embedded in dominant models and exploring alternative lenses such as Nudge Theory (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) and trauma-informed practice, this paper seeks to advance a more resilient and context-sensitive architecture for change. The focus is on local government and public service environments, where the

stakes of transformation are high and the need for emotionally intelligent governance is urgent.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Organisational change literature offers a wide array of models designed to guide individuals and institutions through transformation. Among the most widely adopted is ADKAR, Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement, developed by Hiatt (2006), which emphasises individual change as the foundation for organisational success. While ADKAR has gained traction in both corporate and public sector settings, critics argue that its linear structure and individual-centric lens may oversimplify the complexity of systemic change (Burnes, 2017).

Alternative models offer varying degrees of strategic and emotional depth. Kotter's 8-Step Model (1996) focuses on urgency, coalition-building, and vision, but has been critiqued for its top-down orientation and limited adaptability in decentralised systems. Bridges' Transition Model (1991) introduces the psychological dimension of change, distinguishing between external shifts and internal transitions, a valuable distinction for trauma-informed and emotionally intelligent approaches. Lewin's Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze (1947) remains foundational but is often seen as too static for today's dynamic environments. The McKinsey 7-S Framework (Waterman et al., 1980) offers a

holistic view of organisational alignment but lacks behavioural nuance.

Recent scholarship confirms a shift in change management discourse, from mechanistic models to emotionally intelligent, system-aware frameworks. Hasana et al. (2025), in a bibliometric analysis of over 300 publications, identify four dominant conceptual pillars, human, organisational, technological, and leadership, and highlight the growing relevance of AI, emotional intelligence, and data science in shaping change outcomes. McKinsey's State of Organizations Report (2023) underscores the importance of self-aware leadership, mental health, and resilience-building as core organisational imperatives. Meanwhile, Prosci's Change Management Trends Outlook (2024–2025) identifies emerging drivers such as AI integration, climate resilience, and talent retention, with emotional and cultural adaptation now seen as central to success.

These developments reinforce the need for integrative approaches that blend strategic architecture with behavioural insight. Nudge Theory (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) and Behavioural Design (Datta & Mullainathan, 2014) introduce cognitive framing, choice architecture, and emotional scaffolding into the change discourse, particularly relevant in public sector contexts where trust, psychological safety, and lived experience shape outcomes. Studies on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) and adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) further underscore the need for emotionally intelligent governance.

Despite this growing body of work, public sector transformation programmes often default to rigid methodologies without sufficient attention to context, culture, or emotional resonance. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by critically examining dominant models and proposing a blended framework that reflects the realities of systemic change, particularly within local government and public service environments.

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative, comparative methodology to examine the limitations and contextual applicability of dominant organisational change models within public sector transformation programmes. The approach integrates conceptual critique, behavioural insight, and systems thinking to assess how well these models address the emotional, relational, and adaptive dimensions of change.

➤ *Model Selection and Comparative Framework*

Five widely recognised change models were selected for comparative analysis based on their prevalence in public sector and consultancy practice:

- ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006)
- Kotter's 8-Step Model (Kotter, 1996)
- Bridges Transition Model (Bridges, 1991)
- McKinsey 7-S Framework (Waterman et al., 1980)
- Lewin's Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze (Lewin, 1947)

➤ *Each Model was Evaluated Across Six Dimensions:*

- Strategic Alignment
- Behavioural Insight
- Systemic Applicability
- Adaptability
- Cultural Sensitivity
- Legacy Potential

This framework was informed by recent literature (Hasana et al., 2025; McKinsey, 2023; Prosci, 2024) and practitioner experience in local government transformation, emergency management, and multilateral programme design.

➤ *Behavioural Insight Integration*

To deepen the analysis, the paper incorporates behavioural science concepts including:

- Nudge Theory (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008)
- Behavioural Design (Datta & Mullainathan, 2014)
- Psychological Safety (Edmondson, 1999)
- Adaptive Leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009)

These lenses were used to assess whether each model adequately supports emotionally intelligent governance and trauma-informed practice, particularly in contexts involving safeguarding, crisis response, and cultural reform.

➤ *Application Context*

The methodology is grounded in real-world application, drawing on case insights from:

- Borough-wide transformation under Level Up Funding
- Multi-agency programmes in Papua New Guinea and Nauru
- Strategic critique of resilience frameworks informed by Grenfell and COVID-19 inquiries

These examples serve as touchpoints to test the practical relevance and limitations of each model, and to inform the development of a blended framework for public sector change.

IV. FINDINGS

The comparative analysis revealed significant limitations in the application of dominant change models within complex public sector environments. While each framework offers distinct strengths, none fully addresses the emotional, relational, and systemic dimensions required for resilient transformation.

- ADKAR provides clarity and scalability but lacks emotional depth and cultural sensitivity.
- Kotter supports mobilisation but is limited by its top-down orientation.
- Bridges offers psychological insight but lacks operational rigour.
- McKinsey 7-S excels in strategic alignment but omits behavioural nuance.

- Lewin remains foundational but assumes a static progression ill-suited to iterative reform.
- Behavioural Insight emerged as a critical missing layer across all models.
- Contextual Fit is essential; no model is universally applicable.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings underscore a critical gap in prevailing change models: their limited capacity to address the emotional, relational, and systemic complexities inherent in public sector transformation. While frameworks like ADKAR and Kotter offer structured pathways and strategic momentum, they often fall short in contexts where psychological safety, cultural sensitivity, and adaptive leadership are paramount.

Recent literature reinforces this view. Hasana et al. (2025) highlight the growing relevance of emotional intelligence and AI in shaping organisational outcomes, while

McKinsey (2023) identifies resilience and mental health as core imperatives. Prosci's own trend analysis (2024–2025) acknowledges the rising importance of cultural adaptation and emotional engagement, suggesting that even legacy models must evolve to remain relevant.

This paper therefore advocates for a blended framework that combines strategic alignment with emotional scaffolding, behavioural insight, and cultural responsiveness. Such an approach is not only more resilient, it is more just (reflecting a move towards eudaimonia), more inclusive, and more likely to endure.

➤ *Introducing the FRAME Framework*

The FRAME Framework; Flexible, Relational, Adaptive, Modular, Equitable, offers a modular, emotionally intelligent architecture for public sector transformation. It is designed to overcome the limitations of legacy change models by integrating behavioural insight, strategic alignment, and cultural responsiveness.

➤ *Core Dimensions of FRAME*

Table 1 Core Dimensions of FRAME

Dimension	Description
Flexible	Enables contextual calibration across diverse organisational environments
Relational	Centres psychological safety, trust-building, and emotional scaffolding
Adaptive	Supports iterative learning, feedback loops, and crisis-responsive leadership
Modular	Allows selective integration of existing change models based on strategic fit
Equitable	Embeds inclusion, trauma-informed practice, and legacy-focused reform

FRAME is not a prescriptive model but a strategic scaffold, adaptable to context, co-designed with stakeholders, and grounded in lived experience. It encourages leaders to move beyond compliance-driven change toward emotionally intelligent governance that endures. By combining the analytical rigour of traditional frameworks with the emotional depth of behavioural science, FRAME offers a pathway for transformation that is both resilient and relational.

The framework is particularly suited to public sector contexts where transformation intersects with safeguarding, cultural reform, and systemic resilience. It supports leaders in designing change programmes that are not only operationally sound but emotionally coherent, embedding trust, inclusion, and adaptability into the fabric of reform.

VI. CONCLUSION

Organisational change in the public sector demands more than procedural rigour, it requires emotional intelligence, behavioural insight, and strategic agility. This paper has shown that while dominant models such as ADKAR, Kotter, and McKinsey offer valuable structure, they often fall short in contexts marked by complexity, trauma, and cultural nuance. The absence of psychological safety, adaptive leadership, and lived experience within these frameworks limits their capacity to deliver resilient, inclusive transformation.

Recent scholarship and practitioner insight underscore the urgency of rethinking change architecture. As public institutions face rising expectations, systemic inequities, and emotionally charged mandates, the need for a blended, context-sensitive framework becomes clear. The FRAME Framework responds to this need by offering a flexible, relational, adaptive, modular, and equitable approach, one that calibrates methodology to context, centres human experience, and embeds sustainability from the outset. In doing so, FRAME enables public sector leaders to architect transformation that is not only effective but enduring.

DECLARATIONS

➤ *Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate*

- Not applicable. This manuscript presents a conceptual and theoretical analysis that did not involve human participants, personal data, or biological specimens.

➤ *Consent for Publication*

- Not applicable.

➤ *Availability of Data and Materials*

- No primary datasets were generated or analysed during this study. All referenced materials are publicly accessible and appropriately cited within the manuscript.

➤ *Competing Interests*

- The author declares no competing interests.

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➤ *Authors' Contributions*

- Sean Somersall-Weekes conceptualised the hypothesis, synthesised the literature, and authored the manuscript. The author reviewed and approved the final version for submission.

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