



Insight Report 2025

Collective Agency in Leading Change:

An Insight Report on Reframing Education on Organizational Change

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Executive Summary

This Insight Report examines how change is experienced in organizations today and what this means for leadership and practice. It draws on recent academic work on collective agency and a digital ethnography of over 150 reflections from executives, consultants and academics on LinkedIn, offering a lens into real-time practitioner sensemaking about organizational change.

The analysis tested the idea of **collective agency** (shared capacity for change) against practitioner experience. From this evidence, the report highlights four insights:

- Older models persist because they are simple, legitimate reference points that reassure decision makers, even if they fail in practice.
- Change is most difficult when it disrupts identity and resistance reflects these concerns rather than defiance.
- Leadership is experienced as enabling participation and ownership rather than enforcing compliance.
- Academic critique must be translated into methods leaders can use, supported by measures reflecting lived practice.

These insights point to **two practical directions**: organizations need to embed collective agency by equipping leaders to engage identity concerns and building structures for participation, while the practice community must translate critique into approaches leaders can apply. In continuous change, adaptability depends on whether these directions are implemented. Without them, organizations risk producing compliance on paper and disengagement in reality.



Insight Context



Change has become a constant condition of organizational life.

Digital transformation, sustainability demands, shifting labor markets and geopolitical pressures require organizations to adapt quickly and persistently. Leaders are asked to deliver results while keeping people engaged and motivated in uncertain environments.

Recent scholarship on leadership has argued that many influential ideas persist even after being discredited, describing them as “**zombie leadership**” because they continue to walk among us despite lacking evidence (Haslam et al., 2024).

Extending this critique to organizational change, Gjerald et al. (2025) show how widely used models such as linear project roadmaps and heroic leadership narratives, built on the assumption that resistance is irrational, remain powerful not because they reflect lived reality but because they are simple to communicate and offer reassurance to decision makers. However, an alternative orientation that sees change as unfolding through relationships is needed.

Central to this is the way people create and attach meaning to events. **Leadership is understood less as the act of a single figure and more as a capacity shared across the organization.** Identity and belonging are recognized as central to how people respond to change. From this perspective, collective agency provides a more accurate understanding of how adaptation and innovation take root.

Practitioner reflections give weight to this shift. As part of a digital ethnography, **around 150 contributors** (approximately 60 percent men and 40 percent women) shared their perspectives on why traditional frameworks remain and what is needed instead.

- Consultants and advisors formed the largest share, about 45 percent, including change consultants, organizational development specialists, and executive coaches. Corporate leaders such as HR Directors, CEOs, COOs, and People & Culture Directors accounted for 30 percent, while academics represented 25 percent.
 - A smaller group of independent authors and cross-sector professionals also contributed. The mix spanned the UK, Europe, North America, and Australasia, bringing together perspectives from HR, organizational development, psychology, leadership coaching, strategy, and communications.
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- Several contributors also reflected on why these models remain entrenched. They explained that such approaches survive because they reinforce positional authority and reassure decision makers in times of uncertainty.
 - Some noted that consultants and leaders benefit from these familiar recipes, even when they do not match lived experience. This perspective highlights how systems of leadership and reward can sustain models long after their limitations are recognized.
 - Some echoed the concerns about outdated models, while others extended them. They explained that change is rarely linear and that coping with disruptions to identity and belonging is the most challenging aspect. They emphasized that communication must foster dialogue rather than broadcasting messages. They asked for models that are accessible and usable, with measures such as adoption and proficiency that demonstrate whether change has taken hold in practice.

Insight Report

This Insight Report brings together these strands. It **examines the perspective of collective agency through the lens of practitioner experience and translates it into practical guidance.**

The following sections present findings and recommendations that support organizations in sustaining innovation and engagement in a world where change is continuous.

Key Findings

Finding 1: The comfort of old recipes

- **Older models of change management remain common reference points.** They are classics that continue to provide legitimacy and a shared vocabulary. Managers often prefer them because they can be presented in a precise sequence, giving the impression that change can be managed orderly.
- **Practitioners acknowledged that these models are frequently used as entry points.** One consultant explained, *“I use Kotter with clients because it is familiar. Then I show them how messy the real work will be.”* Another observed that while ADKAR (awareness, desire, knowledge, ability reinforcement framework) is limited, it *“offers a clear structure that some leaders need before they can engage in dialogue about the realities.”*
- **They continue to be recognized as reference points** and remain simple to convey, especially when decision makers are under pressure to demonstrate order.
- **They also continue to dominate because no newer framework has gained the same recognition or reach.** Yet the qualities that make them attractive also constrain their usefulness when applied literally. They leave little space for the identity concerns and relationship dynamics practitioners described as central to how change unfolds.
- **Additional practitioner reflections noted that these models endure not simply because they are easy to explain, but because they flatter those in authority and preserve existing hierarchies.** They create an impression of order that comforts managers while masking the complexity of organizational life. This helps explain why such frameworks dominate even when practitioners know they fall short in practice.

These perspectives explain why old recipes persist.



Key Findings

Finding 2: Identity as the hidden terrain of change

- Concerns about identity and belonging were raised more often than any other theme. Contributors explained that the most challenging aspect of change is not learning a new system or following a new process but dealing with what the change implies for who they are at work.

One executive remarked, *“Change is not about systems, it is about how people see themselves, and that is where most programs stumble.”* Another practitioner added, *“People do not resist because they are difficult; they resist because they fear losing recognition and dignity.”*

The academic literature has long acknowledged that resistance is often rooted in fear and concerns about losing competence or status. However, practitioners emphasized that these insights are frequently overlooked in organizational practice. Resistance is still often treated as defiance to be managed away rather than as feedback that reveals identity concerns.

Practitioners observed that engagement improves when leaders acknowledge identity disruption and create spaces where people can openly discuss what the change means for them

Several also noted that when addressed with care, identity concerns can become opportunities to build resilience and connection. This reframes resistance. Rather than a barrier, it can be understood as feedback that calls for attention.

Leaders who listen and respond to these signals are more likely to build commitment than those who dismiss resistance as obstruction.



Key Findings

Finding 3: From managing to enabling

Practitioners expressed doubts about treating change as something that can be managed through a sequence of steps. Many described it as unfolding in ways that are difficult to predict and shaped by everyday interactions. One advisor observed, *“The best changes I have seen came from people finding their own way together, not from being told to follow a plan.”*

Some contributors cautioned against dismissing structure altogether. They argued that project plans and milestones can still support coordination, provided they are applied in ways that leave room for participation and ownership.

One practitioner explained, *“We still need markers to keep track, but they are only part of the story. Real change comes when people feel they own it.”* Another added, *“A timeline can give comfort, but without ownership it is just theatre.”*

This tension points to a broader shift. Practitioners are not calling for an end to structure, but for a different role for leadership. Instead of relying on control, leaders are expected to create conditions where people can adjust to new demands and take responsibility for working out responses together. Even classic frameworks, such as Kotter’s work, acknowledged the importance of informal networks.

Practitioners challenged how these frameworks are often reduced to rigid checklists. Their experience suggests that leaders who focus on enabling participation generate more substantial commitment than those who try to enforce compliance.



Key Findings

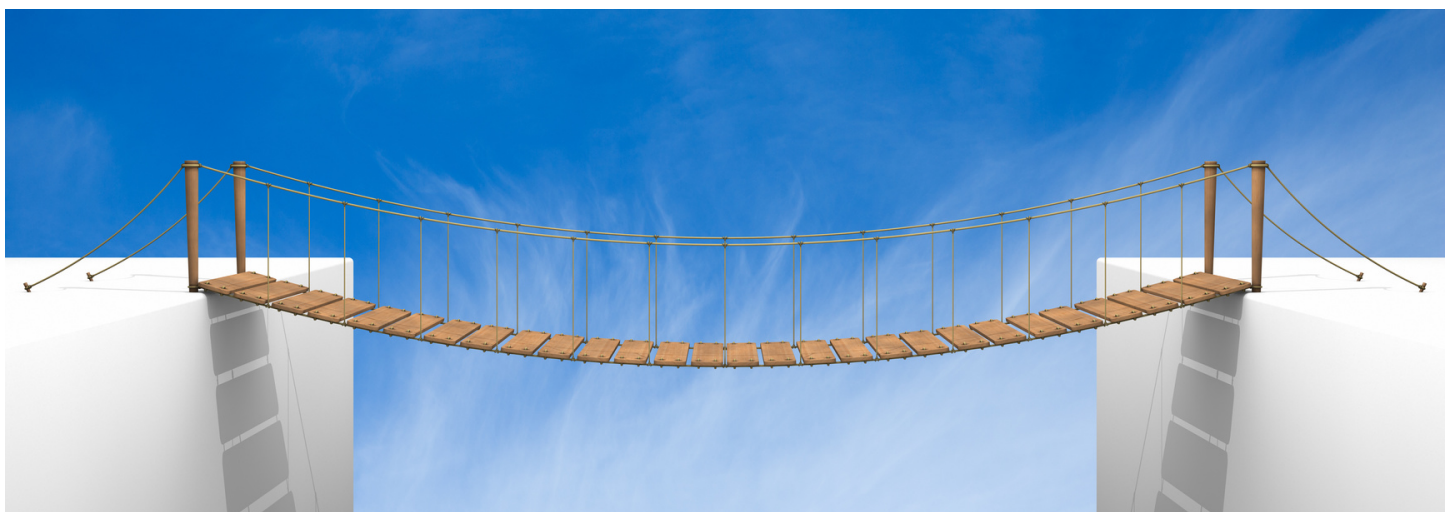
Finding 4: Bridging ideas to practice

Practitioners welcomed critical perspectives from scholars but voiced frustration that these insights often remain abstract. They noted that when new approaches are presented without translation into usable tools, organizations return to familiar models because they are simple to apply. A change advisor remarked, *“If people are not using the new system, nothing else matters.”*

Communication was a recurring concern. Leaders often rely on one-way updates, assuming that clarity and repetition are sufficient. Practitioners rejected this view. They argued that communication should provide opportunities for interpretation, where people can raise concerns and connect the change to their work. One participant explained, *“Dialogue is not a luxury, it is the work of change.”* Another warned, *“Without spaces for honest discussion, even the best framework stays on paper.”*

Measurement was another theme. Practitioners questioned dashboards that track milestones or budgets but fail to show whether change is taking root. They called for progress to be assessed in ways that reflect lived experience, such as how people adopt new practices or demonstrate competence. Some described early experiments where academic critiques were turned into practical workshops and coaching exercises, suggesting that translation is possible when theory is made accessible.

Several contributors linked this frustration to the persistence of older models. They noted that such approaches remain dominant partly because they are easy to deliver in classrooms and boardrooms, even when they fail to reflect how change is experienced in practice. Bridging ideas to practice, therefore, requires more than critique. It depends on translating insights into forms that leaders can apply in daily work, such as frameworks that guide action or indicators that capture how people work. Without this step, the gap between research and practice will continue to allow the older classics to dominate.



Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Lead change through collective agency



Organizations must move away from relying on a single leader and make collective agency the norm. This requires deliberate attention to skills and structures, reinforced by systems that sustain shared responsibility over time.

Skills: Train managers to treat resistance as identity feedback. Equip them to facilitate conversations where employees can speak openly about how change affects their sense of belonging or their standing as competent professionals.

Structures: Institutionalize forums where people interpret what change means for their roles. This could take the form of peer-led workshops and joint reviews that bring different levels of the organization into the story of change.

Systems: Hold leaders accountable for creating participation and ownership during change. Assessment should not stop at milestones. It should also ask whether employees feel they have influenced outcomes and whether teams sustain commitment over time.

Practitioner evidence shows that more substantial commitment emerges when employees have a voice in decisions and are supported in understanding what change means for them.

Collective agency takes shape when leaders engage with identity concerns and embed dialogue into organizational routines. It is reinforced when accountability emphasizes ownership instead of compliance.

Recommendations

Recommendation 2: Train for practice and translation



The community of educators, consultants, and researchers who design change programs carries responsibility for how change is trained and spread. Outdated models remain dominant because they are familiar and easy to deliver. New perspectives must be translated into methods that leaders can apply directly to shift practice.

Practice: Leaders learn most when they experience the dynamics of change. Immersive methods such as VR simulations can expose them to the pressure of leading through resistance and ambiguity. Digital storytelling platforms allow participants to co-create narratives of change. Scenario-based tools like branching games let them test different responses and explore the outcomes.

Training: Classics can serve as entry points but cannot stand alone. Programs must prepare leaders to see change as emergent and collective, and to deal with the uncertainty and resistance

that come with identity concerns. Examples include roleplays where leaders respond to employees expressing fear of losing recognition, workshops where participants co-design elements of a change initiative, and field assignments where they apply tools with their teams and bring back reflections.

Measurement: Dashboards that track milestones or budgets do not reveal how change is lived. Progress should be assessed with surveys that capture whether employees use new processes. It can also be observed through direct observation of leaders facilitating dialogue. In addition, follow-up reviews months later may indicate whether practices introduced during the change remain in place.

A community of practice can enrich the understanding and execution of how change unfolds by applying methods that capture complexity rather than relying on linear models.

Conclusion

The reflections collected here underline a clear shift. **Classic change models still provide orientation but do not capture the realities that practitioners face.** Identity, ownership and dialogue shape how change is lived, yet these dimensions are often overlooked when leaders rely on step-by-step recipes.

The findings point to two priorities.

- Organizations need to embed collective agency by preparing leaders to address identity concerns and by creating structures that give people an active role in shaping change.
- Accountability, then, has to focus on whether leaders generate ownership rather than compliance. The practice community needs to translate critical insights into methods that leaders can apply, with training formats and measures that reflect lived experience.

In an environment where change is continuous, the ability to adapt depends on whether collective agency and practical translation are carried into standard practice instead of remaining rare exceptions.



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