The Human Side of Process Change: Managing Organizational Impact

By Bruce Haghighat

A redesigned process looks clean on a flowchart. Steps are removed, handoffs are simplified, and the new version is faster and cheaper on paper. Then it meets the organization. A step that was "removed" was someone's main responsibility. An approval that was "eliminated" was how a manager stayed informed. A new system means retraining people who were experts in the old one. Suddenly, the improvement that looked obvious in a workshop runs into confusion, anxiety, and quiet resistance.

This is the part of process improvement that most often decides whether it succeeds. Every process change is also a people change: it alters what individuals do, what they need to know, who they work with, and sometimes whether their role exists at all. Organizations that plan for that impact as carefully as they plan the process itself get results. Those that treat it as an afterthought often find the new process abandoned within months.

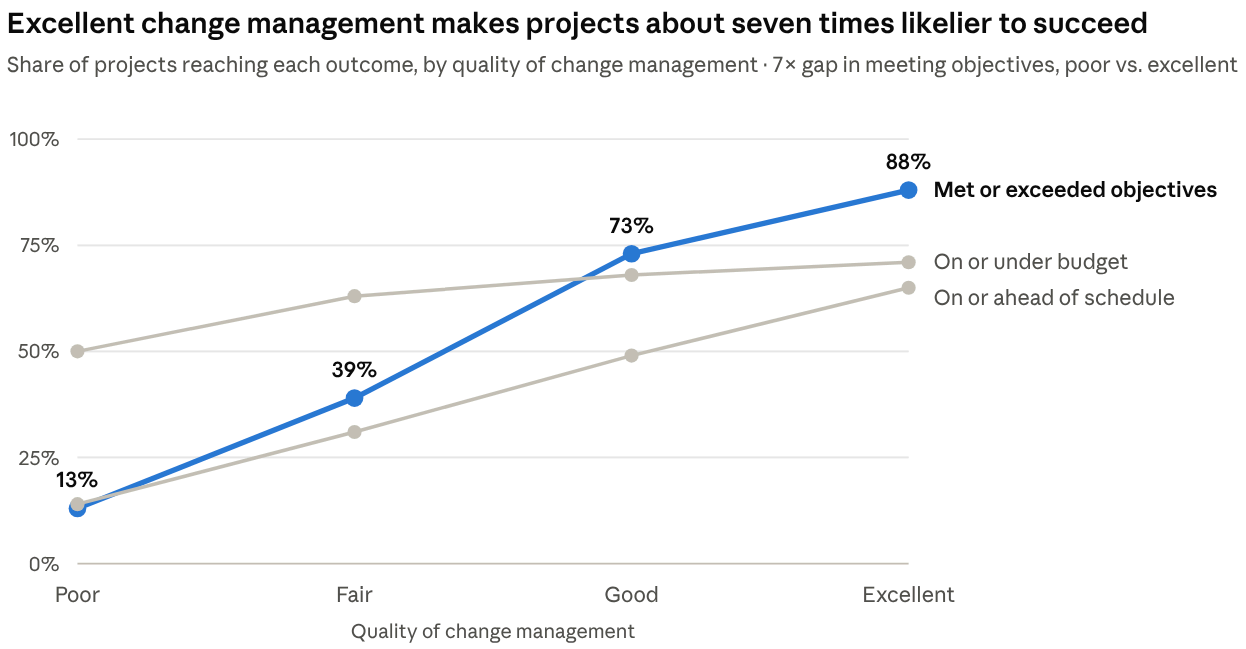
This article looks at how process changes affect an organization, why people resist them, what the leading change management models offer, and the practices that make implementation succeed and last.

Why process changes fail

Research on organizational change has produced one of the most quoted statistics in management: roughly 70 percent of major transformation efforts fail to reach their goals. McKinsey's analysis of these failures found that the leading causes were not technical. They were human: employee resistance to change and management behavior that did not support it (McKinsey).

The flip side is encouraging. Prosci, which has benchmarked change projects across more than 10,800 respondents in 101 countries, found a direct relationship between how well an organization manages the people side of change and whether the project succeeds (Prosci).

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Prosci, Best Practices in Change Management benchmarking (10,800+ respondents in 101 countries)

The steepest gains come early. Moving from poor to merely fair change management triples the share of projects that meet their objectives. In other words, organizations do not need a perfect program to see results; they need to stop ignoring the people side altogether.

Mapping the organizational impact

Before implementing any process change, it pays to ask a simple question in detail: who and what will this touch? A change impact assessment walks through each group affected and each dimension of their work. The goal is to find the friction points before they find you.

Area of impact	Questions to ask	Common concerns
Roles and responsibilities	Whose tasks are added, removed, or moved? Does anyone's role disappear?	Job security, loss of status, unclear accountability
Skills and knowledge	What must people learn? Whose expertise becomes less relevant?	Fear of failing at new tasks; experts becoming beginners

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Area of impact	Questions to ask	Common concerns
Structure and reporting	Do reporting lines, team boundaries, or decision rights shift?	Turf, loss of control, new relationships to build
Systems and tools	Which systems, forms, or data change?	Learning curves, temporary drops in productivity
Performance measures	Do targets, metrics, or incentives need to change?	Being judged by old measures while doing new work
Workload and timing	Will people run old and new processes in parallel?	Overload during transition, burnout
Culture and habits	Does the change conflict with "how we do things here"?	Quiet resistance, workarounds, reversion
Customers and partners	Will customers, suppliers, or other departments notice?	Service disruption, confusion outside the organization

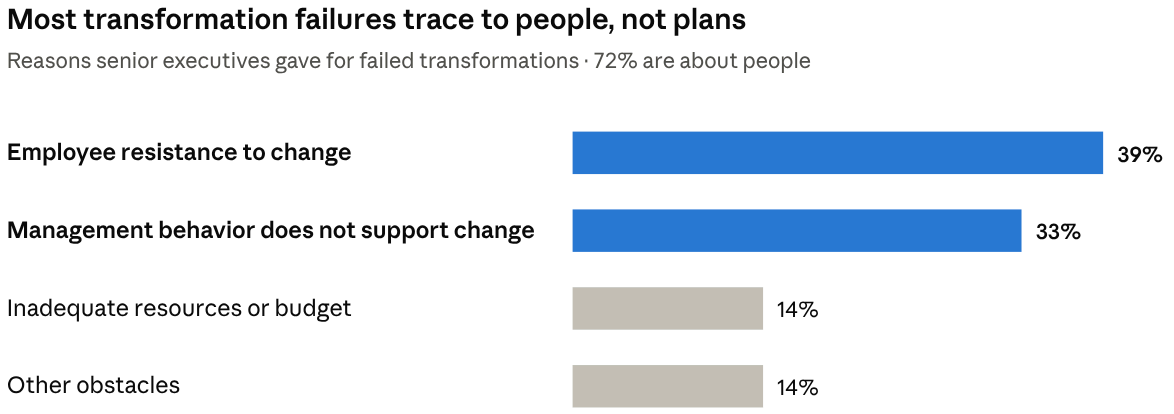
Two groups deserve special attention. **Middle managers** often lose the most visible control in a redesigned process, such as an approval step or a reporting line, yet they are the people employees look to for cues about whether a change is real. **Subject-matter experts** in the old process can feel their hard-won knowledge devalued overnight. Both groups can become powerful allies if they are involved early, or powerful sources of resistance if they are not.

The assessment also sets the scale of the change effort. A small change to one team's workflow may need a briefing and a job aid. A redesign that eliminates roles or crosses several departments needs a full change plan, dedicated resources, and visible executive sponsorship.

Understanding resistance

When McKinsey asked senior executives why their transformations had failed, the answers pointed overwhelmingly at people rather than at strategy or money.

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Scott Keller and Colin Price, Beyond Performance (2011), and McKinsey analysis · share of failed transformations

It is tempting to read "employee resistance" as stubbornness. It is usually something more reasonable. People resist change for understandable reasons:

- **They don't understand why.** If the case for change is not explained, the old way looks perfectly fine, because it is the way they know works.
- **They fear for their jobs or status.** A streamlined process can mean fewer roles, less authority, or a lost specialty.
- **They doubt they can succeed.** Learning a new system or method feels risky, especially for someone who was an expert in the old one.
- **They have seen it before.** In organizations with a history of abandoned initiatives, staff learn to wait out each new program.
- **They are already overloaded.** Change on top of a full workload feels like punishment, not progress.
- **They were not consulted.** People who had no voice in the design rarely feel ownership of the result.

Notice that management behavior ranks nearly as high as employee resistance. When leaders announce a change but keep rewarding the old behaviors, skip the new process themselves, or move on to the next priority, employees draw the obvious conclusion. Resistance is often a rational response to mixed signals from the top.

Treating resistance as information rather than opposition changes how it is handled. Each concern points to something the change plan has not yet addressed: a missing explanation, a skills gap, a workload problem, or a credibility deficit.

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Change management models

A structured approach makes a measurable difference. In Prosci's research, 59 percent of practitioners who used a defined change methodology achieved good or excellent change management, compared with 26 percent of those who did not (Prosci). Three models are especially widely used, and they complement rather than compete with one another.

Model	Core idea	Stages	Best used for
Lewin's three-stage model	An organization must loosen old habits before it can adopt new ones, then lock the new ones in	Unfreeze, Change, Refreeze	A simple framing for leaders and a reminder that "refreezing" is a step, not an afterthought
Kotter's eight steps	Large-scale change needs urgency, a leadership coalition, and momentum built through visible wins	Create urgency; build a guiding coalition; form a vision; communicate it; remove barriers; generate short-term wins; sustain acceleration; anchor the change in culture	Organization-wide changes led from the top
Prosci ADKAR	Organizations change one person at a time, and each person moves through the same five outcomes	Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement	Diagnosing where individuals or teams are stuck, and tailoring support accordingly

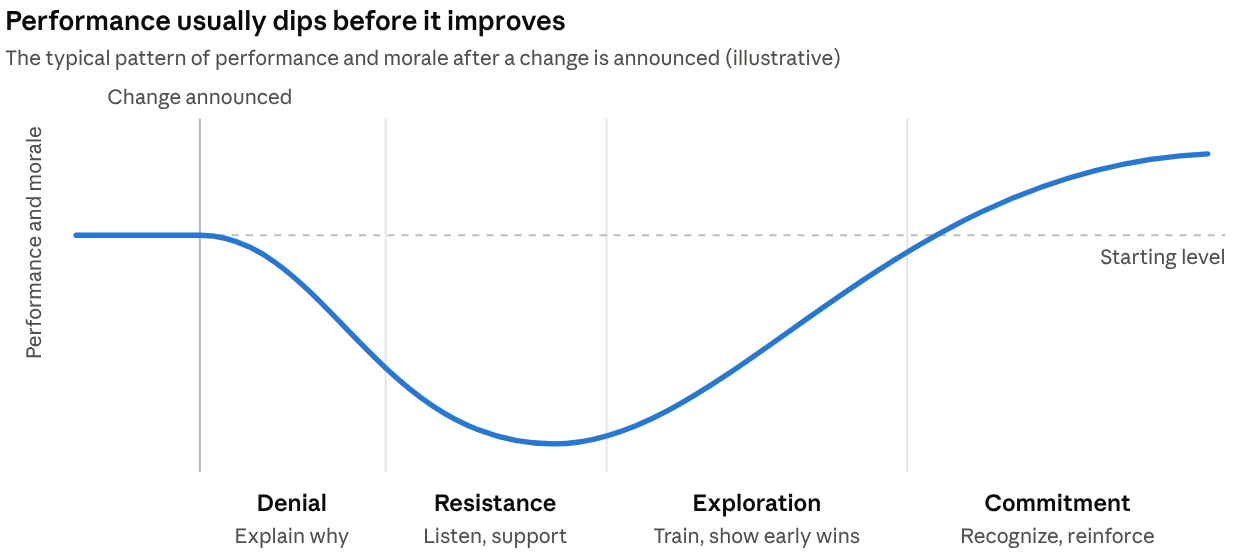
In practice, many organizations combine them: Kotter's steps to organize the leadership effort, and ADKAR to check whether each affected group is actually progressing. ADKAR is particularly useful as a diagnostic. If a team has received thorough training but still is not using the new process, the problem is likely Desire, not Knowledge, and more training will not fix it.

Whatever model is chosen, its real value is discipline. It forces a team to plan the people side as deliberately as the process side, rather than hoping adoption will follow automatically.

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The emotional journey of change

Even a well-designed change usually makes things worse before it makes them better. People slow down while they learn new steps, errors rise temporarily, and morale dips as familiar routines disappear. This pattern, often called the change curve, is normal. The danger lies in mistaking the dip for failure and abandoning the new process just before it starts to pay off.



change curve · 4 phases and what helps in each (illustrative pattern)

Each phase calls for a different kind of support:

- **Denial.** People assume the change will not really happen, or will not affect them. Clear, repeated explanations of why the change is necessary, and what it means for each group, move them forward.
- **Resistance.** Concerns surface and productivity falls. This is the time for leaders to listen, answer questions honestly, and fix real problems people raise.
- **Exploration.** People begin experimenting with the new way. Hands-on training, coaching, and quick, visible wins build confidence.
- **Commitment.** The new process becomes routine. Recognizing people who adopted it and updating measures and rewards keeps it there.

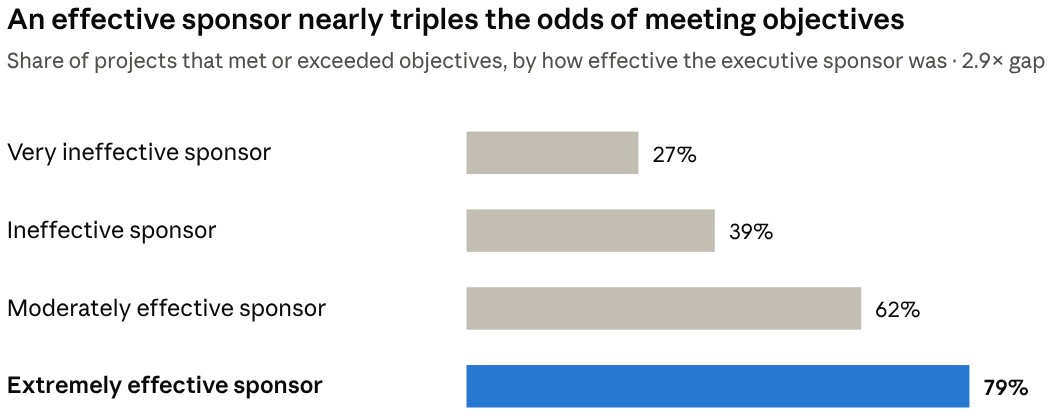
Two practical lessons follow. First, plan for the dip: build extra capacity, temporary support, or lower targets into the first weeks after go-live. Second, set expectations openly. Telling teams in advance that a temporary slowdown is expected removes much of its sting.

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Best practices for implementation

The practices that most reliably separate successful process changes from failed ones are well established.

1. Secure an active, visible sponsor. No single factor matters more. A sponsor is not simply the executive who approved the project; it is the leader who explains why the change matters, commits resources, removes obstacles, and keeps showing up. Prosci's research shows how strongly this correlates with results (Prosci).



Prosci Research Hub, Correlation of Sponsor Effectiveness With Meeting Objectives

2. Model the behavior you are asking for. When Alan Mulally became CEO of Ford in 2006, he introduced a weekly Business Plan Review in which every senior executive color-coded the status of their work green, yellow, or red. At first every chart came back green, even though the company was losing billions, because Ford's culture had long punished people who admitted problems. When Mark Fields, then head of the Americas, finally showed a red status for a production problem, Mulally applauded and asked the room how they could help (Chief Executive). Within weeks, executives were reporting problems openly. A single visible act by the leader did more than any memo on transparency.

3. Involve the people who do the work. Those closest to the process understand its exceptions and workarounds. Involving them in the redesign produces a better process and turns potential resisters into co-owners.

4. Pilot before scaling. Test the new process with one team, site, or product line. A pilot exposes problems while they are cheap to fix, and a successful pilot provides proof and internal champions for the wider rollout.

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5. Build a network of change champions. Respected peers in each affected team can answer questions, relay concerns, and demonstrate the new process. People trust a colleague's experience more than a corporate announcement.

6. Train for the real work. Train people close to go-live, using their actual cases, and provide job aids and floor support for the first weeks. Training delivered months in advance is mostly forgotten.

7. Plan for the transition workload. Running old and new processes in parallel, or learning while keeping up with daily work, strains teams. Temporary help, adjusted targets, or a phased rollout keep the dip in performance from becoming a crisis.

8. Create and celebrate early wins. Visible early successes, such as a faster turnaround or a happier customer, give skeptics evidence that the change is worth the effort.

Communicating the change

Communication is where most change efforts are weakest, usually because leaders underestimate how many times a message must be heard before it sinks in. A useful rule is that by the time leaders are tired of repeating the message, employees are just beginning to absorb it.

Good change communication answers the questions people actually have, in roughly this order: Why is this changing? What exactly is changing? What does it mean for me? What support will I get? When does it happen? It also respects a pattern change practitioners consistently report: employees prefer to hear about the business reasons for change from senior leaders, but about how it affects them personally from their own manager.

Audience	What they need to hear	Best messenger	When
Whole organization	Why the change is happening and what success looks like	Executive sponsor	At announcement, then at key milestones
Directly affected teams	What changes in their daily work, what training and support they will get	Their own manager	Before design is final, and repeatedly through go-live

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Audience	What they need to hear	Best messenger	When
Middle managers	Their role in leading the change, answers to the hard questions	Sponsor and project lead	Before anyone else is told
Change champions	Details, early access, feedback channels	Project team	Throughout, with regular check-ins
Customers and partners	Any change in how they interact with the organization	Account owners	Ahead of go-live

Three habits make communication far more effective. **Tell managers first**, so they are not caught unprepared when their teams ask questions. **Make it two-way**, with forums, surveys, and open question sessions, because unanswered questions turn into rumors. And **be honest about what is not yet known**; saying "we haven't decided that yet, and here is when we will" builds more trust than silence or false certainty.

Making change stick

Go-live is not the finish line. Many process changes look successful in the first month and then quietly erode as people drift back to old habits, especially under pressure. Lewin called the final stage "refreezing"; ADKAR calls it "reinforcement." Either way, it needs a plan.

Measure adoption, not just completion. Track whether people are actually using the new process: the share of transactions handled the new way, the number of workarounds still in use, error rates, and help-desk questions. A project that is "complete" but unused has not succeeded.

Align the system around the new process. Update job descriptions, performance goals, incentives, and reports so that they reward the new way of working. If people are still measured on the old metrics, they will keep optimizing for them.

Retire the old way. Remove legacy forms, close old system access, and stop accepting work through outdated channels once the transition period ends. As long as the old path exists, some people will use it.

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Keep listening. Hold short check-ins at 30, 60, and 90 days after go-live to gather feedback, fix friction points, and show employees that their experience matters. Small adjustments made quickly prevent frustration from hardening into resistance.

Recognize and celebrate. Publicly credit teams and individuals who adopted the change and helped others do so. Recognition signals what the organization values far more clearly than a policy statement.

Fold it into the review cycle. Finally, treat the new process like any other: schedule its next review. Today's improvement will eventually become tomorrow's outdated process, and an organization that has learned to change well once will find the next change far easier.

Conclusion

Process review identifies what should change. Change management determines whether it actually does. The research is consistent: most failed transformations fail because of people, not plans, and organizations that manage the people side well are several times more likely to achieve their goals.

The essentials are not mysterious. Map who and what the change affects. Treat resistance as information. Choose a structured approach and use it. Put an active sponsor in front, involve the people who do the work, communicate more than seems necessary, and plan for the temporary dip in performance. Then reinforce the change until it becomes simply "the way we work here."

A well-designed process deserves an equally well-designed transition. Investing in both is what turns a promising redesign into a lasting improvement.

Sources

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