

Overview of Some Common Models for Organizational Change

What is An Organizational Change Model?

The purposes of an organizational change model are to 1) provide guidance to leaders of the change effort and 2) give a common perspective and frame of reference for participants when communicating about their change effort. The following paragraphs provide a general overview of some of the more prominent change models. The purpose of the overviews is to increase your general knowledge about approaches to change and help you grasp the diversity of approaches. The overviews are not intended to provide you detailed guidelines about implementing any of the models.

Note that there are many other change models, many of them formed by modifying the well-known models, such as Lewin's action research. Also note that, because there is no standard definition for a change model, some readers might consider some or all of the following as ways to effect change, rather than as change models. Models described in this document include:

1. Unfreeze, Move, Refreeze
2. Action Research
3. Business Process Re-Engineering
4. Future Search Conference
5. McKinsey 7-S
6. Kotter's Model of Organizational Change

Unfreeze, Move, Refreeze

Lewin's model is probably the most well known. Its simple, but powerful, premise is that to change a system, you first have to "unfreeze," or loosen up those structures and influences that currently hold the system together. Without attention to these structures, actions to accomplish desired changes will not likely be successful because those actions will encounter strong resistance from members of the organization. Structures can be loosened in a variety of ways, for example, by enlightening members of the organization about the gap between where they are now and where they could be. The next general phase is moving the change along, primarily by cultivating new knowledge, skills and perspectives among members. The final phase is developing and implementing new structures, such as new plans, policies and procedures, which freeze, or hold, the current state of change in place.

Action Research

Lewin's action research process is based on an overall cycle of researching a situation to establish actions to take, taking those actions, and then learning from the actions. The cycle has been embellished to include more specific steps in the general sequence: 1) clarifying the current problem in the system, 2) involving a specialist or consultant, 3) gathering data and diagnosing the situation, 4) providing feedback to people in the system, 5) incorporating members' feedback to further clarify the problem and its causes, 6) establishing action plans to address the problem, 7) taking actions, and 8) gathering data to assess the effects on the problem.

There have been various, recent modifications to the action research model. Modifications include more involvement of members of the organization in the process, less focus on "diagnosis" (as done in a medicinal model) and more focus on joint discovery, more focus on strengths and opportunities and less on weaknesses and problems, and more focus on learning.

Business Process Reengineering (BPR)

This method aims to increase organizational performance by radically re-designing the organization's structures and processes, by starting over from the ground up. BPR can be demanding on employees, who are often already overloaded with other work. There are many proponents – and increasingly, it seems – opponents of BPR. Still, the process might be one of few that really forces leaders to take a complete, fresh look at systems in their organization and how to re-develop those systems anew.

Future Search Conference

Future Search Conference is an example of a recent category of change models, called large-group interventions. An overall goal of large-group interventions is to quickly engage all key stakeholders to align the organization with its external environment and, thus, more effectively achieve the organization's goals. The interventions involve a large group of participants, often lasting from one to three days. Involvement of all key stakeholders is an example of a “whole systems” approach to change. Large-group change is an example of transformational, organization-wide change.

Weisbord developed the future search approach, which involves 30-100 people who work together, usually over three days, to find a preferred future and to develop action steps to accomplish that future. The consultant works with a small planning group to design the event. All key internal and external stakeholders are encouraged to attend. Participants examine the past, present and future of the organization from the perspective of the participants themselves, the organization and its industry. Participants discover their shared values and assumptions to clarify a preferred future or vision. The vision emerges from various scenarios, built from considering what has worked and what has not worked in the past, but especially what has worked. Short-term and long-term action plans are established. Emphasis is on building to the desired future, rather than on solving problems.

McKinsey 7S Model

The model was developed by Watermann and Peters and depicts 7 dimensions of organizations that must be considered when accomplishing organizational change. Imagine a circle of six circles with one circle in the middle. The middle circle is labeled “shared values.” Shared values represent the overall priorities in how the organization chooses to operate. The six outer circles include “strategy,” “structure,” “systems,” “skills,” “staff” and “style.”

Strategy is the overall direction of the organization and how it is going to follow that direction. Structure is the organization of the company, defining its roles and lines of authority. Systems include the processes and procedures that guide day-to-day activities in the organization. These three are the hard S's.

Skills are the capabilities of the organization. Staff includes the organization's people and how their expertise is utilized. Style is how the organization is led. These three are the soft S's.

The point of the model is that an effective organization has to accomplish a fit between all 7 S's, and to realize that a change in any one of the seven dimensions will effect a change in all others.

Kotter's Model of Organizational Change

John Kotter specifies an eight-step approach to managing change in organizations, including: 1) Conveying a sense of urgency for the change, 2) establishing a project team to guide the change, 3) articulating a vision and strategy to achieve the vision, 4) clearly communicate the vision and strategy, 5) empower participants by removing obstacles and soliciting ongoing feedback among participants, 6) building in short-term successes, 7) lead for consistent achievement of milestones, and 8) ensure structures as a firm foundation to support the change. These steps are fully explained in his book “Leading Change”.

Kotter's research was among the first to assert that most efforts for significant change in organizations fail, although there seems to be increasing opinions that his research was not as conclusive as many believe.