

Change Management Frameworks

A Deep Dive into Lewin, Kotter, and ADKAR

Three frameworks dominate the theory and practice of change management — each operating at a different level of analysis. Lewin provides the conceptual foundation, Kotter the organizational playbook, and ADKAR the individual lens. Used together, they offer a comprehensive map for navigating complex change.

1. Lewin's Unfreeze–Change–Refreeze

The oldest of the three models (1940s), Lewin's framework is deceptively simple. He borrowed the metaphor from ice: you cannot reshape a block without melting it first. The model operates at the level of social and psychological equilibrium.

UNFREEZE	CHANGE	REFREEZE
Disrupt the equilibrium. Challenge assumptions, surface dissatisfaction, and create psychological readiness. Most leaders underinvest here.	The transition itself — messy, nonlinear, anxiety-producing. People need guidance and reassurance, not just instruction.	Actively reinforce new behaviors until they become the new normal — through incentives, culture, systems, and practice.

Limitation: The model assumes change has a clear end state, which suits well-defined projects but poorly fits ongoing transformation or fast-moving environments where 'refreeze' is barely achieved before the next change arrives.

2. Kotter's 8-Step Model

Developed in the 1990s from studying why large organizational change efforts fail, Kotter's model is sequential and leader-focused. It emphasizes building organizational momentum before executing change.

1. Create a sense of urgency	Complacency — not resistance — is the most common reason change stalls. Urgency must be real; manufactured crises backfire.
2. Build a guiding coalition	Change needs a diverse group with credibility, authority, and trust across the organization — not just executive sponsors.
3. Form a strategic vision	A clear, compelling vision gives direction and helps people understand what success looks like.

4. Enlist a volunteer army	Engage people broadly. Grassroots energy sustains momentum when executive attention inevitably shifts.
5. Enable action by removing barriers	Structural, cultural, or process obstacles will defeat even motivated people. Systematically clear the path.
6. Generate short-term wins	Visible early successes defuse skeptics and give leadership evidence that the effort is working.
7. Sustain acceleration	Don't declare victory too soon. Use momentum from early wins to push deeper change.
8. Institute change	Embed new behaviors in culture, systems, and hiring so they outlast the initiative itself.

Limitation: Top-down in orientation; assumes a relatively stable, hierarchical organization. Critics note that step 4 can feel like manufactured grassroots support rather than genuine participation.

3. ADKAR

Where Lewin and Kotter operate at the organizational level, ADKAR zooms in on the individual. Developed by Prosci, it argues that organizational change only succeeds when enough individuals successfully make their own personal transitions.

A	Awareness	Of why the change is needed. Can be created through communication — but surface-level messaging rarely achieves genuine understanding.
D	Desire	Personal motivation to support and participate. You cannot mandate desire — it must be earned through trust, honesty, and addressing what people stand to lose.
K	Knowledge	Of how to change: new skills, behaviors, and processes. This is a training and information problem.
A	Ability	To actually implement new skills in practice. Knowing how is not the same as being able to do it consistently under real conditions.
R	Reinforcement	To sustain the change over time. Without reinforcement, people drift back to familiar habits — the old groove is always easier.

Diagnostic value: If a change initiative is failing, ADKAR helps locate where it's failing — awareness gap, desire gap, knowledge gap, ability gap, or reinforcement gap. Each requires a different intervention.

Limitation: Linear by design, which aids diagnosis but can be too tidy. In practice, people move back and forth between stages, and a team may be at completely different points simultaneously.

How They Fit Together

These models are not competing — they work at different levels of analysis and are most powerful in combination.

Framework	Level	Primary Contribution
Lewin	Conceptual	Big-picture logic: why you must actively destabilize before you can rebuild.
Kotter	Organizational	The leadership playbook: what leaders need to do, and in what order.
ADKAR	Individual	The human reality check: change happens one person at a time.

A common mistake is using only one lens. Leaders who think only in Kotter terms build strong coalitions but neglect the individual experience. Those who focus only on ADKAR risk losing the organizational momentum

and political architecture that Kotter emphasizes. Lewin reminds both camps that the unfreezing work is never finished as fast as anyone thinks.