



NOBODY LIKES CHANGE

So how do governments move forward?

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Introduction

Contrary to the historic perspective that government is entrenched in its ways, change has become a constant. For many, the idea of change triggers a mix of emotions: optimism, anticipation, anxiety, and resistance. However, government is undergoing rapid transformation as a result of various catalysts, including the shifting political landscape, legislative priorities, changing demographics, heightened citizens' expectations, increasing cynicism or disillusionment toward government, and new technologies. There is no end in sight.

Any form of progress requires change. In fact, the age-old belief that "nobody likes change" isn't entirely true. People can develop a healthier, more proactive approach to coping with change. This paper will explore what change is and why it challenges people; provide a change management framework for guiding individuals in moving through change; and discuss the important role that leaders play in effectively sponsoring change and helping others through their own experience of change.



Why is navigating change so important?

Before we can understand how to embrace change, we should understand how humans are wired to deal with change. Enter behavioral science.

Behavioral science is the study of how people think, feel, and act. What behavioral scientists have learned is that the human brain likes “the familiar.” As such, people unconsciously spend every waking moment using their senses to gather information from their environment so that they can predict whether they are facing a threat to their “familiar.” If so, they must then decide to “fight,” “freeze,” or “run (flight).” Each choice requires us to expend more energy to cope with something that doesn’t look or feel like what we already know.

When something new happens, organizations respond in much the same way.

In response to its own perceived situation, leaders in the organization often take action that might introduce some “improvement” goal. People must then translate that improvement goal into specific actions that change how work gets done. Sound familiar?



The “*nobody likes change*” myth can be overcome; **good leadership is the key**

The pace of change is intensifying and impacting government functions that you own, manage, or work within. For those in management, supervisory, and executive roles, the people reporting to you are looking to you for clarity, guidance, encouragement, and support. For those reasons, people who work in government must reframe their relationships with the concept of change.

Where do we start? If we think about it, we all change aspects of our lives every day. For example, we wear different clothes, eat different foods, or experience different events almost daily. Often, we choose to try or experience things that we have never been exposed to before. In doing so, we actively seek out change.

So, why does this myth that “*nobody likes change*” persist?

Contrary to popular belief, people don’t inherently dislike change. What challenges people is change that is done to them vs. with them. As government officials, understanding this nuance is crucial for effective leadership.

What happens when people experience change done to them? Some common reactions may include the following:



Feeling unprepared or left out of the process: Imagine being told your entire workflow will change, effective immediately, without any prior consultation or training.



Losing control over their work or routines: As creatures of habit, people crave work routines that provide a sense of comfort and competence. When these routines are disrupted without explanation or support, people naturally feel uneasy.



Facing uncertainty about the outcome: Will this change make the job harder? Will the employee still be valued? Will this change even work? How will we know?

How do we know if a change is successful?

Technologies, systems, and structures cannot function effectively without people, no matter how sophisticated or modern.

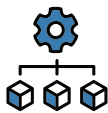
In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen Covey describes Habit #2 as “Begin with the End in Mind.” If an organization introduces a change with the intention of improving the organization’s performance, it is vital that the organization not only think about processes, materials and other resources, technologies, systems, and structures but also the employees that work with those things daily.

So how do we define “success” within the context of the people factor?

Prosci, a globally recognized organization that specializes in change management, identifies three factors that determine whether a public sector change is successful:



Speed of Adoption: How quickly are your team members and citizens starting to use the change? Are they embracing it, or are they finding workarounds to stick with the old way of functioning? If you notice delays, it’s a signal to investigate and address any underlying issues.



Ultimate Utilization: Are people using all the features of the change, or just the bare minimum?



Proficiency: How well are people performing with the new way of working? This is where the rubber meets the road. Success means not just using the new way of working but excelling with it.

Considering conditions: Change readiness, fatigue, and saturation

When we decide to plant a seed in a garden, we also must consider the factors that can work for or against us in helping that seed take root, grow, and produce fruit. Is the soil fertilized and healthy? Will the seed receive enough water? Is it protected from anything that might dig it up? Will it receive enough sunlight?

Similarly, while we might have a clear idea of what the change is and an idea of what successful change looks like, we also need to consider the conditions present in our environment. In today's world, it is simply not realistic to believe that organizations are only experiencing one change at a time. For that reason, we must understand the three common issues that hinder speed of adoption, ultimate utilization, and proficiency:

Change Readiness, Change Fatigue, and Change Saturation. Consideration of these three factors is necessary for every single change underway.



Change Readiness refers to an organization's or individual's ability and willingness to adopt and implement change effectively. It is influenced by factors such as leadership support, employee engagement, clear communication, and the availability of resources. In addition, most people have had some previous experience dealing with organizational change.

As a result, readiness itself can be a result of several factors:

- » **What the change is:** People can have a gut reaction of "I don't like it" based on personal preferences or past experiences.
- » **How well we understand the change:** Lack of clarity breeds uncertainty, which in turn fuels resistance.
- » **Who represents the change:** Sometimes, resistance to change is less about the change itself and more about our relationship with, or perception of, the person serving as the face or messenger of the change (i.e., "I don't like YOU.").

Change Fatigue occurs when employees are overwhelmed and are experiencing mental and emotional exhaustion due to continuous, overlapping, or poorly managed change efforts. It often results from a lack of prioritization (too

many initiatives at once), inconsistent leadership commitment (conflicting messages from leaders), poor communication (employees don't understand the "why" behind changes), and insufficient support (lack of training, resources, or time to adapt). Employees experiencing change fatigue may show resistance, disengagement, frustration, or burnout, ultimately reducing productivity and morale.

Change Saturation happens when too much change is happening. Organizations can simply reach or exceed their capacity to effectively absorb and implement change. This condition is not only about individual fatigue but also about the organization's systems, processes, and culture being overwhelmed by multiple changes at once. Symptoms of change saturation include diminishing returns on change efforts (new initiatives don't gain traction), increased resistance across teams (employees become skeptical or non-responsive to change), operational inefficiencies (change efforts disrupt business-as-usual activities), and leadership frustration (leaders struggle to align and prioritize initiatives).

Balancing the volume of change with the organization's change capacity requires alignment on initiatives, proper support from leaders, and integration of change management principles across all efforts.

Change resistance

The presence of these factors can result in what is referred to as change resistance. This phenomenon is usually emotionally driven. Leaders in particular often fear resistance from employees. However, resistance is a completely normal reaction.

Effectively addressing resistance is an important part of managing change: People must first work to understand the nature and cause of the resistance before jumping to action. A good first step is simply to expect that resistance will happen. Organizations often seek to deny it, ignore it, explain it away, or push back on it. None of these approaches are particularly effective, especially in the long term as organizations continue to face rapid and frequent change.

A more effective approach to resistance is to proactively seek it out and engage with it. Working to understand its source and then addressing both the logical and emotional components of it is vital, but how does one begin to understand resistance?



The ADKAR model: A roadmap for individual change

To better understand resistance, it is important to understand the step-by-step process that every individual must move through to experience change success. Prosci's ADKAR model is one approach to managing the change process.

The ADKAR model consists of five steps: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. Let's break down each component of ADKAR:



Awareness: Build understanding about why the change is necessary by creating and communicating a clear and compelling case for change. The case must speak to the logical and emotional reasons for why the change is necessary, why now, and what the consequences of not changing are.



Desire: Once people are aware of the need for change, they have an opportunity to make a choice to support or resist the change. The goal is to build motivation for people to participate in and support the change. Typically, people either pledge support or adopt a "wait and see" attitude. Occasionally, people might work to actively sabotage a change.



Knowledge: Once people choose to support the change, they must learn what they need to know to bring the change to life. That is, people begin the process of acquiring new information or building a knowledge base to support the new ways of working or behaving that the change will require.



Ability: Knowledge isn't enough. People need the opportunity to apply what they have learned. Creating safe spaces for individuals and teams to practice new skills and fail safely enables them to build competency and become proficient in new ways of working.



Reinforcement: The final stage, sustaining the change, is perhaps the most difficult. When pressures come or workloads increase, the tendency is to slide back into the old ways of working or behaving. Anchoring into the new way of working enables an individual to fully realize the benefits of the change. Consider updating performance metrics to align with the new ways of working, creating peer support networks, or implementing regular check-ins to address ongoing challenges.

Following this model to implement a change creates a structured approach that addresses both the logical and emotional needs of any individual. The model is not about forcing change upon people, but rather guiding them through a process of understanding, acceptance, and ultimately embracing the new way of doing things.



The rules governing ADKAR

While having the model itself is helpful, understanding how individuals move through this process is just as important. What rules govern how the model works?

1 The sequence matters.
Individuals follow the steps in sequence.

2 Individuals cannot skip any steps.

3 Individuals can get stuck in a step or slide backwards.

4 When faced with a change, individuals might begin moving through the process at different times.

5 Individuals may move through each step of the process at different rates.

Understanding the rules governing the model is important. For example, if leaders assume people begin moving through the change process at the same time, they might cease efforts and activities to build awareness about the change too early. As a result, people impacted by the change might never even realize a change is happening. Since that first step is necessary before advancing to the Desire step, leaders will fail to gain the support needed to bring the change to life.



Sponsorship: Change leadership is the most important factor in success

According to more than two decades of research compiled by Prosci, effective sponsorship is consistently the most powerful factor in determining whether a change will be successfully realized.

Sponsorship is about ensuring senior leaders and other key influencers that are involved in making a change consistently show up, stay engaged, and actively drive the change from start to finish. Often leaders make the mistake of just approving the change, providing the funding (or not), and assuming change will just happen. However, employees take their cues from leaders, so if leaders check out or appear to check out, so does everyone else.

What if a person is not only affected by change but also holds a role in which they lead others who are also affected by a change? In that case, the individual must move through the change themselves AND function as an effective sponsor. Much like a flight attendant always instructs passengers who might experience an in-flight emergency to secure their oxygen mask before assisting others, a person in the position described must first move through the change themselves before helping others. At the very least, such a person must be farther along in the ADKAR process than those they lead.



What does effective sponsorship look like? Simply put, one must perform the ABCs of sponsorship:

A

Active and Visible: As a leader, one cannot just delegate change management to others. Leaders must be in the trenches, actively participating in the process. For example, this might mean attending training sessions alongside the team, being present at town halls to answer questions about the change, or regularly using the new ways of working yourself to demonstrate its value.

B

Build Coalitions: Because change can be complex or require rapid action, recognize that managing change is not a solo endeavor. Identifying influential members of the team and community who can help champion the change is vital. These individuals could be respected senior staff members, community leaders, or even enthusiastic younger employees, for example, who can help others navigate new systems.

C

Communicate the Why: When it comes to change, there's no such thing as over-communication. Sponsors should keep the message clear, simple, consistent, and frequent. In addition, addressing concerns promptly, transparently, and honestly and sharing progress updates regularly helps those affected to stay engaged. Even if a sponsor does not have answers, staying silent is not helpful. Remember, in the absence of any information, people affected by a change will make up their own stories.

Conclusion: You go first

Perhaps the most crucial truth to remember is that change starts with you. As a clerk, official, or leader in your local government, you are the catalyst for change in your community.

Because of challenges, resistance, and moments of doubt, the journey through change is not always easy. However, by embracing the principles and strategies discussed, you can navigate these changes successfully.

Remember the following:

- » **Approach change proactively**
as an opportunity for growth, innovation, and improved service to your community.
- » **Your leadership sets the tone.**
How you communicate about and react to change will greatly influence how your team and community perceive and adapt to it.
- » **Be patient but persistent.**
Change takes time, but with consistent effort and clear communication, you can achieve lasting transformation.

As you embark on your next change initiative, remember you're not just changing processes or systems. You're shaping the future of your local government and the communities you serve. Communicate your vision clearly. Involve your team and community in the process. Celebrate small wins along the way. Most importantly, you must lead by example. Show your commitment to the change through your actions, your openness to feedback, and your willingness to adapt.

Change in local government is all about creating more responsive, efficient, and citizen-centered governance. It also helps build communities that are resilient, adaptable, and prepared for the challenges of the future. You have the power to make a difference. Using the tools presented, you can lead change more effectively. Your community is waiting for your lead.

Ready to get started?

[Get in Touch](#)

Appendix

Empowering government transformation: Change management succession planning

In today's rapidly evolving public sector landscape, effective change management is more than a strategic advantage — it's a necessity. As governments face increasing demands for agility, continuity, and leadership development, the need for structured, inclusive, and forward-thinking planning has never been greater.

To support this transformation, we're spotlighting two powerful resources from the Washington State Office of Financial Management <https://ofm.wa.gov/state-human-resources/workforce-strategies/succession-planning>, developed to help them face the change management related to the impending retirement of more than 19,000 employees — more than 25% of their staff. Their Succession Planning Toolkit and Knowledge Transfer Template offer practical, scalable solutions for building resilient teams, preserving institutional knowledge, and preparing future leaders.

The comprehensive **Succession Planning Toolkit** walks agencies through a five-step process to identify critical roles, assess internal talent, and develop future-ready leaders. It includes:



Strategic Alignment: Connecting workforce planning to agency goals.



Bias-Aware Planning: Encouraging inclusive, equitable talent development.



Actionable Templates: Environmental scanning, position impact assessments, and career development planning.



Support Materials: Competency frameworks, checklists, and planning dos and don'ts.

Whether you're starting from scratch or refining an existing strategy, this toolkit provides a roadmap for sustainable leadership development.

See the Succession Planning Toolkit here:

<https://ofm.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/shr/WorkforceDataSuccessionplanning/>

The **Knowledge Transfer Template** complements succession planning by helping agencies capture and share critical institutional knowledge. It includes:

- ✓ **Role-Specific Insights:** Identifies key responsibilities, relationships, and risks.
- ✓ **Documentation Mapping:** Highlights essential resources and processes.
- ✓ **Experience-Based Wisdom:** Encourages reflection on lessons learned and common pitfalls.
- ✓ **Development Planning:** Suggests training and experiences to prepare successors.

This template ensures transitions are smooth, informed, and aligned with organizational priorities.

By adopting these tools, government agencies can:

- ✓ **Reduce disruption** from unexpected vacancies.
- ✓ **Build inclusive leadership pipelines.** Preserve institutional knowledge.
- ✓ **Align workforce development** with strategic goals.

We invite you to view and adapt these resources to fit your agency's needs.

See the Knowledge Transfer Template here:

https://ofm.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/shr/WorkforceDataSuccessionplanning/Knowledge_Transfer_Template.docx