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# Factors contributing to organizational change success or failure: a qualitative meta-analysis of 200 reflective case studies.

JONES, J., FIRTH, J., HANNIBAL, C. and OGUNSEYIN, M.

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# Chapter 71

## Factors Contributing to Organizational Change Success or Failure: A Qualitative Meta-Analysis of 200 Reflective Case Studies

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Change, and changing, exercise the minds of most managers most of the time. In consequence, leadership development and change management tend to be top priorities for many human resource development (HRD) professionals today. Despite this, much academic and practitioner literature suggests that 70% of all change programs fail. Through analyzing 200 organizational change case studies, this chapter examines this high failure rate, investigates leadership styles and their relationship to change, and explores the key factors that either enable or hinder successful change. The key findings of this examination were that the majority of the 200 studied change initiatives were considered successful and that using Kotter's change model, which has been long established, does not necessarily mean success; nor does the use of a democratic/participative leadership style. The most significant hindering factors and the key critical success factors are also acknowledged.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

According to Bawany (2016) “we live in a world where ‘business as usual’ IS change” (p. 32). Change is a normal, natural response to variable, uncertain, internal and/or external conditions (Leifer, 1989). Change is complex, constant, ever-present, increasing in pace, and open-ended and comes in many shapes and sizes. This is true for both change within individuals and change within organizations. Change is something that exists in all individuals, in all organizations, and in all sectors (Todnem By, 2005). We are living and working in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world (Rodriguez & Rodriguez, 2015).

Due to globalisation, the fast pace of technological and digital changes, the developing and differing expectations of the workforce, shifting demographics and increasing competition to survive in the workplace, organizations need to recognise the uncertain and unpredictable environment in which they operate. They need to find ways to successfully navigate through the complexity and ambiguity brought about by ongoing change. In short, the rate of change is accelerating, and so organizations must demonstrate that they are up to the challenge of moving quickly and adapting continuously and successfully to keep up.

Much is written about organizational change, leadership, and the popular frameworks and models to consider in times of change. We are aware through a plethora of change management books and journals that change is constant (Coleman & Thomas, 2017), that change is complex (Senior & Swailes, 2016) and that change is inevitable (Daft, 2018). Furthermore, numerous leadership models and change management models have been offered as ways to best lead and manage change (Senior & Swailes, 2016). However, there are still gaps in understanding how to better ensure successful organizational change in today’s VUCA world, not least because the validity of widely held assumptions about the scale of change programme failure, the best change leadership style to adopt, and the sufficiency of empirical evidence supporting many change management models, have been questioned.

The purpose of the study reported in this chapter was to generate empirical evidence that could contribute to current debates concerning the above assumptions by addressing the following research questions:

1. What is the ‘reality’ of change programme failure compared to the 70% failure rate ‘rhetoric’?
2. What are the most frequently used leadership styles in times of change?
3. What are the key factors that enable or inhibit the effective application of change management models and the achievement of successful change?

The chapter starts with a review of organizational change and development (OCD) related literature which reports why over 70% of change initiatives fail. It then provides a brief discussion of current models of change with a focus on Kotter and a brief overview of leadership in the context of change. This is followed by details of the selected methodology and methods adopted for the current study, the results of the data analysis, and a discussion of the key findings. The chapter closes with consideration of the research limitations and implications for evidence-based OCD practitioners.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Success and Failure of Organizational Change Programmes

It has been reported many times that 70% of all change programmes fail (Balogun & Hailey, 2004; Beer & Nohria, 2000; Bielinska-Kwapisz, 2014; Burnes, 2011; Burnes & Jackson, 2011; Kotter, 2008). According to Carnall and Todnem By (2014), and as discussed in earlier chapters, the key reasons for change failure are time, unplanned uncontrollable factors, inadequate coordination, competing demands on manager's time, insufficient change agency competence, inadequate training and uncontrollable external factors. The inference from this headline grabbing figure of 70% is that there cannot be a valid framework to successfully implement and manage change, otherwise we would be using it and the failure rate would be much reduced.

In this context, there is a lack of clarity as to what is meant by 'failure' i.e. a failure to achieve all the outcomes set? Or a failure to engage all employees with the change? Or a need to make further changes once the initial change has been completed? A definition of failure is not made clear in the literature and so it is difficult to acknowledge whether 70% is a true and/or helpful figure to quote. Hughes (2001) suggests that there is a lack of empirical evidence to support the 70% failure rate rhetoric and suggests that the reality of organizational change may result in different and/or additional outcomes. These may not initially be seen as beneficial as those which were planned but potentially not achieved. Perceived failure may also not take into account the post change successes, nor account for the unique demands of different contexts; i.e. what may work for one organization may not completely work for another or may not produce the same outcomes but may still be considered a success if later embedded/consolidated.

In addition, change does not happen in isolation, so it may be difficult to individually measure change initiatives as separate from other activities that may help or hinder the change process, or indeed separate from the constraints of the context. There is research that suggests that changes in the public sector are more difficult to achieve than those in the private sector due to their political nature and bureaucratic role and rule-based culture (McAdam & Saulters, 2000). Also, perhaps it depends who you are asking to evaluate the change; i.e. if you are asking those who led the change, then perhaps their perceptions are going to be influenced by their own effort or the part they played, and as such this may differ from the expectations and perceptions of those on the receiving end. Stakeholder evaluations of the same initiative may be wholly different. For instance, employees may not feel satisfied with the change, yet from a senior management point of view the change may have met the outcomes and therefore it was considered successful; although we're not suggesting that the successful outcome was geared towards making the employees unhappy!

Hence, one part of our study seeks evidence that supports (or otherwise) commonly held assumptions and beliefs about the 70% failure rate of OCD programmes

Although there is limited evidence to suggest that the 70% figure is valid and reliable, or indeed an outcome of any empirical evidence, authors have continued to suggest alternative frameworks and models for managing change to reduce this high failure rate. And there are now available a wide range of somewhat contradictory, confusing and repetitive models to inform, shape and evaluate change management practices. However, it is still argued that we do not have an approach to change that is "theoretically holistic, universally applicable, and which can be practically applied" (Burnes, 2014, p. xiv).

Accepting the criticism that "all models are wrong, some models are useful" (Box as cited in Burnes, 2014, p. xii), it is surprising that change management education relies on models which suggest one best

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approach to achieving successful organizational change (Kanter, Stein & Jick, 1992; Kotter, 1995; Lewin, 1947; Luecke, 2003; Pugh, 1993) and/or adopt a contingency approach to change (Stace & Dunphy, 2001; Storey, 1992). Current thinking suggests that these models do not fully explore or display the multitude of approaches to change (Burnes, 2014) and the multiple factors that influence organizational change.

Lewin (1947) is much quoted in respect of his 3-step planned approach to change involving *unfreezing* from the present state, *moving* towards a new state and *refreezing* at this new level. The suggestion is that once movement has occurred, the change has happened and is fixed and embedded in the organization. This approach to change does not permit influence from other variable factors, nor does it suggest there is an on-going process or flexibility once achieved. This model of planned change has been much criticised by those who support the more emergent approaches to change and who advocate a more practical approach, recognising the relationship between variables and context, for instance: Kanter et al.'s (1992) 10 Commandments; Kotter's (1995; 2014) 8 stages or phases of actions for leaders/managers of change to follow; and Luecke's 7 steps (2003). Kotter's work is much cited and considered to be the 'orthodoxy for change leadership' (Todnem By, Hughes & Ford, 2016, p. 11.) As a reminder, Kotter's model or framework draws attention to 8 phases;

1. Establish a sense of urgency
2. Create a guiding coalition
3. Develop a clear shared vision
4. Communicate the vision
5. Empower people to act on the vision
6. Create short term wins
7. Consolidate and build on the change
8. Institutionalise the change. Kotter (1995; 2014)

However, this and other change management frameworks and models have attracted criticism from those who propose a more contingency approach to change, stating that no one-size-fits-all, and all change situations are unique and so require a different, more flexible approach each time (Stace & Dunphy, 2001). More recently Kotter (2014) revised his thinking, suggesting now that his model is not to be taken as a rigid, linear, sequential model but more as a continuous set of steps that run concurrently.

In conclusion and suffice to say, as with the 70% failure rate figure, change management models too are considered lacking in empirical evidence and based on unchallenged hypotheses (Burnes & Jackson, 2011).

## **Leadership in Times of Change**

Leadership is key to the success of any organization as it has a direct impact on organizational performance, and thus organizational survival (Daft, 2018).

A major factor in the failure of organizations to adapt to internal and external changes is their lack of effective leadership. It is recognised that managing change is not enough, but that leading change is what is required (Bawany, 2016). "The heart of the leadership challenge that confronts today's leaders is learning how to lead in a VUCA world" (Bawany, 2016, p. 31) and as such, leading and managing change is increasingly becoming a necessary leadership/management skill. Effective leaders see change as a way to strengthen the organization and not to disrupt it. A critical factor to understanding how to

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lead change is having an understanding of the positive and negative aspects of change, and the impact of these on others within the organization.

“Leadership deals with change, inspiration, motivation and influence” (DuBrin, 2010, p. 5). In short, leaders set the vision and strategy moving forward, align people towards the vision/strategy and then inspire, motivate and influence them towards making it happen (Kotter, 1996). According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development-CIPD (2017) which is based in the United Kingdom (UK), leadership both creates and addresses challenges and goals at the strategic and cultural level of an organization. It involves influence over, and responsibility for, individuals (both internally and externally to the organization) and so a leader’s ability to understand and enhance human behaviour is key. The CIPD also states that leadership is a continuous process and must be viewed within its context. There are a variety of schools of thought about leadership including trait theories (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991), behaviourist (Adair, 1989; 2007), situational/contingency (Hersey, 1984) and post-heroic (Bass, 1990). The work of Hersey and Blanchard on situational leadership theory (Buchanan, 2013) is considered particularly relevant to change leadership as it relates to the adaptability, willingness, and readiness of those being managed and the ability of the leader to lead change in different and diverse situations. Turnnidge and Cote (2017) identifies this as encompassing the motivational and empowering elements of transformational leadership. Bass and Riggio (2006) argue that transformational leaders set the vision, take an entrepreneurial/innovative approach to all aspects of the organization and are agents of change.

However, when all the debate and theory is stripped away, traditionally there are still considered to be 3 different leadership styles; autocratic, democratic/participative and laissez-faire/delegative (Hopson, 2015; Lewin, Lippit & White, 1939). Furthermore, there are those managers who adopt a more transactional and those who adopt a more transformational approach (Bass, Avolio, Jung & Berson, 2003; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

In addition, there are contemporary emergent leadership theories underpinning the knowledge and development of change leadership; but subtly they focus on the role of the individual in the process of being led: distributed, servant, authentic and relational leadership. These theories put people at the heart of leading change and focus on all the players as moral and ethical contributors to the change process, having self-awareness, openness, transparency, and consistency. They also acknowledge that all people have skills, knowledge and attributes that can be employed in the process of change. This in turn assists with the continuous professional development element of their working lives.

The literature suggests that ‘distributed leadership’ is a comparatively new concept and one used initially in academic environments to describe change leadership though latterly it has become more widely used and discussed. According to Bolden (2007) distributed leadership has become popular as an alternative to traditional models of leadership that concern themselves primarily with the behaviours and attributes of individual ‘leaders’ (e.g. trait, situational, style and transformational theories). The suggestion is that organizational change requires a different type of leadership at different times within a change intervention. Spillane (2006) asserts that distributed leadership is dissociated from specified organizational roles, and the action and influence of people at all levels is more important to the overall functioning of the organization. Spillane also suggests that a distributed perspective ‘puts leadership practice centre stage’, thereby encouraging a shift in focus from the traits and characteristics of ‘leaders’ to the shared activities and functions of ‘leadership’ in times of change.

In addition, there is still extensive discussion about the impact of distributed leadership and argument regarding its effectiveness, but both Cannatelli, Smith, Giudici, Jones and Conger (2017) and Harris and DeFlaminis (2016) argue that in spite of this, it can be a successful approach to leadership in a range of

environments. Feng, Hao, Iles and Brown (2017) argue that distributed leadership requires a robust approach since it is applied in environments which are subject to frequent and significant change and are increasingly complex. In contrast, Lumby (2013) argues that it can be seen as a fad, that it is 'nebulous and difficult to define' and that the lack of adequate definition means it can neither be endorsed nor can its impact be measured.

Akin to distributed leadership theory and growing in popularity 'servant leadership' puts people at the heart of change management interventions in organizations. Servant leadership is based on the philosophy of service (Akdol & Arikboga, 2017). Therefore, it is a conduit for generating creativity among the people within organizations. Servant leadership is considered as the approach that transcends command and control leadership (Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). It is a response to the generic practice of leadership that tends in many cases to inappropriately emphasise performance and results over process and morality. However, the extant literature of servant leadership is paradoxical. Originally the theory developed the 'dual being' concept of servant leadership as an elusive subject (Stoten, 2013). In literal terms, 'dual being' refers to the context that everyone in an organization is both servant and leader. This is, however, emphasised by Davis, (2017) and Yigit and Bozkurt, (2017). They have indicated that dual being is not only possible but also imperative for effective leadership practice. This is in line with the opinion of Moll and Kretzschmar (2017), who suggest that servant leadership requires leaders to serve the followers and meet their needs more; the challenges of organizational change that organizations face can be dealt with by servant leadership. This connects to the thinking of Brown and Treviño (2006) in examining the concept of 'authentic leadership'. The principal dimensions of authentic leadership are self-awareness, openness, transparency, and consistency. Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans and May (2004) describe authentic leaders as those who are deeply aware of how they think, feel and behave and are seen by others as doing so. Others also see them as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspective; aware of the context in which they are operating; and who are confident, optimistic and resilient.

The concept of 'relational leadership', which was first introduced by Uhl-Bien (2006) and is considered new and original, goes even further with the idea that the individual's capacity to influence is the result of a social dynamic. According to Uhl-Bien (2006) "we need to move beyond a focus on the manager-subordinate dyad or a measure of relationship quality to address the question of, what are the relational dynamics by which leadership is developed throughout the workplace" (p. 672). At first sight, in the perspective of a relational analysis of leadership, the answer seems to be in the question. Essentially, Uhl-Bien (2006) defines relational leadership as a "social influence process" through which social order and change are constructed and produced (p. 655). In other words, the social aspect is at the heart of relational leadership; because changes are constructed and produced, and everybody participates in the process. Thus, as Uhl-Bien (2006) adds, relational leadership, especially in times of change, would not be dependent on role or hierarchical position.

Whilst it is recognised that "leadership and organizational change are inextricably intertwined" (Parry, 2011, p. 57), there is little empirical evidence to underpin our knowledge of change leadership; much is being said but little is being rigorously academically or empirically underpinned. Todnem By et al. (2016) suggest that there are three well established myths in relation to leadership of change; 1) that it is the individual that counts and not the multiple others who may well be taking on a leadership role as well; 2) that leadership is enough and is independent of other management activity; and 3) that one-size-fits-all rather than different types of leadership being needed at different times within the change process. Conversely, Grint (2000) suggests that leadership is an art and not a science, so it is not

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possible to create a leadership formula that works and applies to every change situation because it very much depends on a number of factors. As stated in chapter 2, the Jones and Gross (1996) study showed that 2 quite different leadership styles (top down and bottom up) can still lead to organizational change success. Some time ago, Pettigrew and Whipp (1991) also concluded that there are no universal rules which guide the leadership of change, there are no universally good leaders, and leadership is sensitive to context. However, House and Aditya (1997) believe that several leadership functions generic to the exercise of leadership are likely to be effective across organizations, industries and cultures, but that this belief is theoretical speculation which needs to be developed theoretically and demonstrated empirically. More recently, Caldwell (2006) has argued that leading change is rarely a single, unified intervention by one transformational leader but more likely a series of disparate and fragmented activities at various levels, within an organization. As can be seen, there are considerable divergences of opinion in terms of the received wisdom about the relationship between leadership and organizational change.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

To address the research questions the study adopted a critical realist position and an interpretivist theoretical perspective; the central purpose being to understand the lived human experience and subjective world of those involved in change whether as recipients or as facilitators/agents of change (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

Recognising the lack of literature providing real-life organizational case studies that inform thinking about change (Coleman & Thomas, 2017) the focus of our study was scholar-practitioner perceptions of their personal experience of effective and/or ineffective organizational change, as expressed in the form of case study reflections.

Notwithstanding the risk of ‘participant error’ (Robson, 2011), we still considered it most important that scholar practitioners should include in their case study reflections perceptions of their personal reality of change.

### **Sample of Research Participants**

The research participants were all mature students attending management related postgraduate degree (PG) programmes in a UK business school. Creswell (2007) recommends a range of 20 to 40 participants within a sample for qualitative studies. The sample size for this study was determined by the number of PG students who had studied and submitted a reflective case study assessment for a core 20 credit module entitled ‘Leading Transformation and Change’ or ‘Organizational Change and Development’ as part of a UK Business School MBA programme, a Master in Public Health programme, or a CIPD/ Diploma in Human Resource Management programme. All these PG students were working managers or HR professionals, and their reflective case studies were 6000-word essays analysing a change programme in a workplace that they had experienced, either through leading it, supporting it, or being on the receiving end of it. Each case study had a common purpose in that it allowed its author to reflect on the success or failure of an organizational change project with which they were familiar. Only those case studies on programmes running during the 5-year academic period from 2012 to 2017 that had achieved a pass grade of 50% or above were included in the empirical data set.



The scholar practitioners were encouraged to adopt a retrospective perspective to locate the story of each change programme and the factors influencing it (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989). In the reflective case studies the unit of analysis was the change process. Case reflections were thus developed to investigate the phenomenon of change in its real-world context (Creswell, 2007; Farquhar, 2012; Yin, 2014).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Collecting an empirical data set comprised of 200 reflective case studies was consistent with Hughes's (2011, p. 462) call for "valid and reliable empirical evidence to support evidence-based change practices". A sample of this size permits comparisons to be drawn and to assess whether transferability between cases can be reached (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). With 200 cases there was sufficient data to triangulate and explore the findings further, and to strengthen the assumptions being made which in turn helped to ensure validity, reliability and credibility of the results (Farquhar, 2012).

The research team was comprised of four Faculty members at the UK University in which the modules were delivered; one teaching and research professor, two senior teaching and research staff, and one research assistant. The first stage of analysis commenced with the reading of a 10% sample of the same cases by each member of the research team who then came together to discuss and establish *a priori* codes to begin to sort the data. These codes comprised:

- Basic organization data; size of organization, industry, location
- Was the change considered successful – YES/NO
- Type of change e.g. planned, emergent, post-emergent
- Scale of change e.g. large scale change
- Triggers/drivers for change including internal (SWOT) and external (STEEPLE) factors
- Aims/objectives of the change programme/outcomes expected
- External Consultants used – YES/NO
- Key change models used e.g. Kotter, Lewin, Kanter et al., Luecke
- Leadership styles at both top/senior leadership level and lower leadership/manager levels
- Reflections on the biggest issues that hindered the change process
- Reflections on the lessons learnt from the change process/critical success factors

The second stage was the development of a database to capture coded data. The third stage involved the reading and coding of the case studies against the *a priori* codes by the research team. Members of the team coded independently, with coding corroborated at frequent intervals. This stage resulted in the capture and coding of raw data from the 200 case studies that could be sorted and further analysed. For the final stage of analysis, the codes were collapsed into key themes and comparisons were drawn between the success or otherwise of the change, the key leadership styles and the factors that helped or hindered successful change.

## More About the Reflective Case Histories

### Type and Sector

Of the 200 reflective case studies, 117 were written by students from the United Kingdom (UK) and various European Union (EU) countries and 83 by international students from other countries. Of the 200 organizations where they were employed 119 were in the private sector, 81 in the public sector and none in the not-for-profit/third sector. Additionally, 157 were considered large (over 250 employees), 35 medium (between 50-249 employees), and 8 small (less than 50 employees).

*Table 1. Breakdown of the number of case studies by industry type and sector*

Industry Type	Number of Cases Studies	Private Sector	Public Sector
Aeronautics and Defence	4	2	2
Agriculture and Mining	1	0	1
Banking/ Finance/ Investment	8	5	3
Building and Construction	10	8	2
Chemical/Energy/ Oil and Gas	9	6	3
Education/ University/ College	26	2	24
Electricity	7	7	0
Engineering/Automotive	13	13	0
Health	39	12	27
Hotel/Leisure	11	11	0
Housing/Property	13	6	7
IT/ Telecommunication	7	6	1
Legal Services	2	1	1
Manufacturing	31	30	1
Media	1	1	0
Religious Activities	1	1	0
Retail	8	8	0
Security	3	1	2
Transport	6	4	2
Total Companies	200	124	76

As can be seen in Table 1, 76 (38%) of the case studies were from public-sector organizations and 124 (62%) from private companies respectively; and almost half of these cases were from just three sectors: health, education and manufacturing.

The reason for the high number from the health sector including hospitals, care homes and social/community care was because one of the 3 PG programmes used for this study was the Masters in Public

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Health programme, and the high number from manufacturing organizations was because the Business School is based in the West Midlands Region; a major manufacturing area in the UK.

### Type of Organizational Change

The case study writers were asked to note whether the change programmes they were reflecting upon were planned, emergent or post-emergent. As can be seen in Table 2, almost half of the change programmes (48%) were planned; additionally, 19 (9.5%) involved external change consultants.

Table 2. Type of organizational change discussed in the reflective case studies

The Types of Change	Number of Cases
Planned	96 (48%)
Emergent	63 (31.5%)
Post-Emergent	13 (6.5%)
Planned & Emergent	28 (14%)
Total	200

### Organizational Wide Change Initiatives

Of the 200 case studies, 113 related to organization wide change initiatives of which 80 were in private sector organizations and 33 in public sector organizations. Of these, 49 were international and 64 UK based organizations; and in terms of size 92 were classed as 'large-scale', 15 as 'medium scale' and 6 as 'small scale' organizations.

### Triggers/Drivers of the Change Initiatives

The cases studies showed that 113 (57%) of the change initiatives were perceived to be driven by internal forces only, 13 (6%) by external factors only, and 74 (37%) by both internal and external factors.

The key internal triggers were based around; making improvements to increase efficiency and profit; for instance, simplifying work processes, realigning the business structure, reducing error rates/wastage/costs, and addressing staffing issues. The key external triggers included: addressing what the competition were doing, keeping up with the change in customer needs, addressing fall-out from fraud and public scandal (in a small number of cases), public pressure, reduction in funding, embracing new technology and growth/decline in sales.

A SWOT (strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats) analysis and STEEPLE (social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal and ethical) analysis were used consistently by the scholar practitioners to share their views on the organization's position before the change happened. A synthesis of the key common aspects and factors revealed by the respective SWOT analyses are shown in Table 3.

The first 2 aspects of the SWOT (SW) show the internal aspects and the second part (OT) summarises the key external factors mentioned previously and highlighted through the STEEPLE analysis. It is interesting to note that change in the law and (Government) funding was both an opportunity for

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Table 3. Synthesis of the key common themes resulting from the SWOT analyses

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee training/employee support</li> <li>• Government support</li> <li>• Employee skills</li> <li>• Strong market position</li> <li>• Strong brand</li> <li>• Growing business/profitability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of staff/loss of skills</li> <li>• Outdated systems</li> <li>• Outdated technology</li> <li>• Low morale</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Falling sales</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible employees</li> <li>• Restructuring</li> <li>• Change in laws</li> <li>• Change in (Government) funding</li> <li>• Change in customers</li> <li>• New markets</li> <li>• New technology</li> <li>• Save wastage/save money</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New competitors</li> <li>• Exchange rates</li> <li>• Funding cuts</li> <li>• Government/legal pressure</li> <li>• Rising costs</li> <li>• Declining sales</li> <li>• Union pressure</li> <li>• Weak leadership</li> </ul>

some organizations and a threat for others; and that leadership was not mentioned as a strength in any of the 200 case studies but as a weakness and a threat.

## FINDINGS

The results of addressing the three research questions are as follows:

**Results Addressing RQ 1:** What is the ‘reality’ of change programme failure compared to the 70% failure rate ‘rhetoric’?

At the end of the case study essay, each case study writer was asked to declare whether they thought the change programme that they had reflected on was successful or not. It was not made clear how success should be decided; it was left to their own personal perceptions. The results of their decisions are below;

- **Successful Change:** 145 (72.5%)
- **Unsuccessful Change:** 55 (27.5%)

This table shows that there was no significant difference between success or failure between the two sectors, suggesting that change in either sector is likely to be as successful or as unsuccessful as each

Table 4. Breakdown of the number of successful and unsuccessful case studies by sector

Sector	Successful Cases	Unsuccessful Cases	Total
Private	89 (72%)	35 (28%)	124
Public	56 (73.5%)	20 (26.5%)	76
Total	145	55	200

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other. This is counter to the suggestion earlier that successful change is more difficult to achieve in the public sector. However, the most interesting statistic here is that the 72.5% success rate is completely counter to the notion that 70% of all change programmes fail.

A variety of key models were used by the scholar practitioners to describe, reflect on and critique the change programmes to decide if the change programme was successful or not, including Kanter et al., (1992), Kotter (1995; 2014), Kubler-Ross (1973), Lewin (1947) and Luecke (2003). All lecturers presented all these models. Therefore, it was not surprising that they were chosen regularly to be used within the case study reflections, but by far the most used was Kotter's model.

It has already been established that Kotter's work is much cited (Todnem By et al., 2016) and is one of the most popular change management frameworks. This model was discussed in 100% of all the case studies, but this is not a surprise as there was an expectation, written into the assessment briefs, to help secure that this happened. This finding was not of interest in itself; but rather it was how the various stages/phases of the model were applied or not that gave insights. Interestingly, only 12.5% (n=25) of the case studies mentioned all 8 phases of Kotter's model having been applied. If this statistic was the way to measure the success of change programmes, then it would suggest an 87.5% failure rate but this contrasts sharply against the reported 72.5% success rate.

Here are several quotes taken directly from some of the successful organizational change case studies which refer to the importance of using the Kotter framework.

With these case study writers suggesting that applying Kotter ensured success;

*Kotter's stages were well applied by the company. Overall implementation of change was relatively effective with minimal collateral damage. Due to the size and investment of the transfer, there was little opportunity for reversal and it was clearly re-frozen once implemented. The change agents were well selected and key to the project's success. (MBA/international student/private sector/successful change)*

*Kotter eight step model of successful change within the organization has significantly helped in avoiding the mistake that may likely frustrate the change and make it unrealistic. Also, transformational leaders in the organization that has contributed to the vision of moving the organization forward has help make the change successful. (MBA/international student/public sector/successful change)*

Another recognising that among others, Kotter's model was most applicable;

*There is no single model useful to the change process. Amongst the models of change, Kotter's 8 stages model has been more applicable to the organizational change. (HR/home student/public sector/successful change).*

Another case study writer reflected they will use Kotter now to consolidate current changes;

*It is evident that the initial stages of the merger failed to consider and address Kotter's eight stage process. There is an opportunity now to ensure that each stage is fully considered and appropriately addressed before beginning the next round of changes. The few short-term wins and gains that have been generated but remain hidden, critically need to be shared or communicated. (HR/home student/public sector/successful change.)*

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Here is a quote taken directly from one of the unsuccessful organizational change case studies which refers to the importance of using the Kotter framework;

*The change would have been successful if the applied stages of Kotter's model were followed step by step. (HR/home student/private sector/unsuccessful change).*

And another unsuccessful case study which suggests even Kotter was not useful;

*None of the change models were applicable in describing the change process that the organization undertook. (HR/international student/private sector/unsuccessful change).*

### Results Addressing RQ 2: What are the most frequently used leadership styles in times of change?

Leadership of the change was recorded both at the higher, senior levels and at the lower, junior manager levels. Some different terms were used to describe the types of leadership and management involved in the change process, but these were categorised as either autocratic, democratic/participative or laissez-faire/delegative as indicated in Table 5.

Table 5. Different leadership styles mentioned in the case studies

Leadership Style	Higher/Senior Levels of Leadership	Lower/Junior Levels of Leadership/Management
Autocratic	55	37
Democratic/participative	111	112
Laissez-faire/delegative	33	45
Unclear	1	6
Total	200	200

As can be seen, democratic/participative leadership is the predominant style of leadership mentioned and is twice as prevalent as the autocratic style or a laissez-faire/delegative style of leadership. Interestingly, in 111 of the case studies a transformational leadership style (Bass & Riggio, 2006) was mentioned, with 87% (n=98) of these organizations manifesting transformational leadership at the top management level, and the same leadership style dominant further down into the lower levels of leadership/management. As the majority of change initiatives discussed in these case studies were considered to be successful, the findings suggest that a transformational leadership approach is more likely to lead to a successful change. This is not a new insight, but it helps to reaffirm what we already know.

However, higher level managers in 27.5% (n=55) of the case study organizations were using the autocratic/top down style and 16.5% (n=33) using the laissez-faire/delegative type approach too, thus accounting for 44% (n=88) of all the case studies. This suggests that change can be successful whilst using these different leadership styles too.

Interestingly, reviewing the leadership in unsuccessful cases reveals that in approximately half of these cases (26 out of 55) the higher levels of management involved in managing the change were using

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a transformational leadership style, and over half (30 out of 55) at the lower levels of management were also using a transformational style of leadership. Again this shows a connection between the transformational approach being mirrored between the higher and lower levels of management.

It is interesting to note that the findings of this study do not support the widely held assumption that a more autocratic style of leadership in times of change is partly responsible for the lack of success of change programmes.

**Results Addressing RQ 3:** What are the key factors that enable or inhibit the effective application of change management models and the achievement of successful change?

Each scholar-practitioner was asked to reflect at the end of their case study write up about the key issues affecting their change programmes and the lessons they had learnt in relation to what should be done more of/less of for future change programmes.

*Table 6. Issues mentioned in the case studies and the related lessons learnt*

Hindering Factors Mentioned (With the Most Mentioned at the Top, Highlighted in Bold)	Lessons Learnt (With the Most Mentioned at the Top, Highlighted in Bold)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Lack of communication</b></li> <li>● <b>Ineffective leadership</b></li> <li>● <b>Employee resistance</b></li> <li>● Customer satisfaction</li> <li>● Loss of skilled staff</li> <li>● IT</li> <li>● Legislation</li> <li>● Unions</li> <li>● Budget</li> <li>● Bad publicity</li> <li>● Pace of change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Need for effective communication 4)</b></li> <li>● <b>Need for effective leadership 5)</b></li> <li>● <b>Importance of team work 2)</b></li> <li>● <b>Need to involve employees and managers 3)</b></li> <li>● Importance of culture</li> <li>● Involve other stakeholders more</li> <li>● Need resources</li> <li>● Stick to a systematic approach/model</li> </ul>

**Note:** The numbers in brackets relate to Kotter’s 8 phases of change

Those highlighted in bold were the most mentioned throughout the 200 case studies. The lack of communication was overwhelmingly the biggest hindering factor and the biggest learning referred to at the end within both successful and unsuccessful cases. This finding again is not new but reiterates the importance of communicating change. The need for a more effective leadership style was also considered to be one of the biggest hindering factors, and is also reflected in lessons learnt. Employee resistance was also mentioned as a big issue together with recognition in the lessons learnt, that employees and other key stakeholders needed to be involved and working together for future change programme success. Interestingly it was also mentioned that managers needed to be involved more too; in the decision making and towards encouraging the employees to be more engaged too. Perhaps this helps to advocate the need for a more distributed or relational leadership approach (Cannatelli et al., 2017; Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016) whereby a more shared, team working type approach would better encourage the involvement and engagement of others (Spillane, 2006).

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The following are a selection of quotes taken from some of the successful and unsuccessful organizational change case studies which refer to the top 3 themes in respect of leadership, communication and employee involvement;

### **Need for Effective Communication**

These quotes demonstrate the importance of communication and the issues that occur if it is not done or not handled effectively.

This quote suggests progress will be hampered;

*Communication is important, and without it, there will be obstacles which will cause disruption and either stop the transition, or severely hamper progress. Change required careful planning, support, and cooperation from all stakeholders. (MBA/home student/private sector/successful change)*

That mistrust can develop;

*Although the change process was successful through the application of the step by step stages of Kotter's model, communication in the process was very poor. This led to trust issues amongst employee, leading to a dissatisfaction of the change program. (HR/home student/public sector/successful change)*

And a lack of confidence ensues;

*Communication induces confidence in the team. (Health/international student/public sector/successful change)*

### **Need for Effective Leadership**

These quotes show the need for an effective leadership style that considers and includes all stakeholders, particularly employees, so they can all get involved and work together, and not against each other; again perhaps advocating the need for a more distributed leadership type approach.

*Successful change management requires a large commitment from executives and senior managers, whether the change is occurring in a department or in a complete organization. (MBA/home student/public sector/successful change)*

*Factors such as effective management, strong leadership, structure in the organization, and closely considering the demands of stakeholders are important to the process of change. (MBA/international student/public sector/unsuccessful change)*

It is interesting to note that in the next 2 quotes, leaders did not actively involve the employees, by taking a more autocratic leadership approach, but the change was still considered to have been successful;

*While final consumers or end users were considered when executing change, the role of other stakeholders such as the employees was not considered. The change leadership process was autocratic and*



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*employees would have worked better towards the change if it was more democratic. (MBA/home student/private sector/successful change).*

*Resistance to change from employees, lack of employees involvement in the change process (i.e. participative leadership was not applied). (Health/international student/private sector/successful change)*

### **Importance of Team Work/Employee Involvement**

Following on from comments made about leaders not involving or communicating well enough to the employees, there were some specific comments made about the lack of involvement of employees. Lack of consideration of the impact;

*There was an overemphasis on achieving change and success with little consideration of the impact on employees. (HR/home student/private sector/unsuccessful change)*

And the (differing) perspectives of employees;

*The main lesson learnt from this particular restructure was that proper and thorough consideration was not given to the cultural and social perspective of the employees. (HR/home student/private sector/successful change)*

This case study writer suggested a culture of togetherness was needed;

*Importance of team work...It is important for managers to create a safe environment for honest, straight-forward dialogue. We needed a culture of togetherness and well-being, together with a captivating vision. (MBA/international student/private sector/successful change)*

These quotes help to confirm that even in successful change, the needs of the employees were not always recognised or met, and that a more 'distributed' or shared approach would create a more productive change environment.

Here is a helpful case study quote which sums up all of the 3 essential critical success factors discussed;

*The organization has learned many valuable lessons from the change efforts that clear communication is vital, a hierarchical leadership is not suitable in the process, and employee engagement is vital into the success of the change. (Health/home student/private sector/successful change)*

It is interesting to note that other factors, for instance; employee resistance, loss of skilled staff, unions and bad publicity were also mentioned as hindering factors; perhaps if the leaders and managers had involved employees more and the communication had been effective too, some of these secondary issues may well have been reduced.

Also, the importance of culture has been mentioned as a lesson learnt. There was little mentioned in the majority of the organizational case studies about organizational culture, so it has not been possible to make any generalisations about more or less effective organizational cultures within these change programmes, but this is certainly an area for further research.

## **DISCUSSION**

A most surprising finding from our meta-analysis of the 200 reflective case studies was that the majority (72.5%) of the change initiatives was considered to be successful, which is counter to the widely held assumption and belief that 70% of all change programmes fail (Balogun & Hailey, 2004; Beer & Nohria, 2000; Bielinska-Kwapisz, 2014; Burnes & Jackson, 2011; Kotter, 2008). This finding supports Hughes (2001) who suggests reality may be somewhat different from the rhetoric and that there is a lack of empirical evidence to support the 70% failure rate. Our large empirical study suggests that the reality of organizational change programme success, as perceived by scholar-practitioners, is different to the common discourse on this issue.

The key criticism from Hughes (2011) is that there is a lack of clarity about what is meant by failure and certainly (unhelpfully) for this study, no clarity was given about what would constitute failure or success. The scholar practitioners made up their own minds based on their own experiences and the information they had discussed and debated in their reflective case studies. As instructed by the lecturers, all 200 case studies referred to Kotter's 8 phase framework, as well as to other models, but not to the extent to which Kotter's framework had been applied. The 100% mention of Kotter is not surprising as reference to Kotter was an expectation in the assessment. But what was a surprise was that, even though for many the full Kotter model had not been followed, the change was still considered to have been successful. This suggests that using or not (fully) using the models does not necessarily determine change success.

It is possible that individual perceptions of how successful or not the change programme may have been skewed by their involvement in the change and as such, the impact of the outcomes to them personally. Perhaps as managers and HR practitioners they are more likely to have been heavily involved in the change, maybe even led the change, so perhaps they are more likely to have perceived the change positively, due to the effort they put into managing or leading it towards a successful end (Doyle, 2001; Hughes, 2011.) Or perhaps as this was part of an assessment, did these scholar practitioners feel pressure to make out the change was more successful than it was, in the hope of a more favourable mark? This may have been their initial perception, but there was a strong steer from all the lecturers for both modules and with all cohorts that the change programme which they chose to discuss was not expected to be wholly successful. The consistent steer from within the classroom was to be as critical as possible.

The application of Kotter's 8 phases was mentioned within all the case studies but not necessarily in the order it has been prescribed, nor it seems does it predict success. Some successful case studies did not apply any of Kotter's model, and others that did were not always successful. It is also interesting to note that of the 146 organizations that did apply Kotter's 8 phases, they did not always do this in the order that Kotter prescribes. Yet, typically Kotter's model and other change models prescribe various stages or phases that are to be carried out in sequential order. This finding suggests that using Kotter's model or other established change models may not necessarily lead to success. Hughes (2016) suggests that rarely is leadership and change 'rational, linear and unambiguous' (p.9).

One of the case study writers sums this up well;

*Whilst change models can provide useful frameworks for understanding and approaching change, no model, regardless of its standing and reputation, will be fully effective and is likely to fail (to be effective) if it does not meet an organization's needs. (HR/home student/Public sector/successful change)*

This perhaps reflects the need for models to be seen as tools to be used in a fluid and flexible way, which is consistent with Kotter's (2014) updated thinking towards a more continuous model of concurrent steps. In reality, change programmes may well be planned in a particular way from the outset, but very often do not play out in the order they may have hoped. Perhaps this fits with the notion of a more blended or holistic approach that works better (Burnes, 2014)? Clearly, some organizations did not follow the steps within the models at all, or when they did they did not follow them step by step, but the scholar practitioners still considered their change programmes to be successful.

As can be seen in Table 5, the most discussed leadership style was a democratic/participative approach (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Hopen, 2015) at both senior and lower management/leadership levels, which suggests this style could be a predictor of success.

This is an interesting finding; but because leadership was perceived to be a weakness, a threat, and a hindering factor (see Table 3 & 6), it suggests a transformational leadership style is not always effective in times of change. As revealed by this study, other change programmes have been successful where an autocratic and a laissez-faire style was used. These findings potentially show that there is not one leadership style that always has a positive effect on the outcomes of the change programme, and that perhaps a more mixed approach is needed. These findings indicate that different types of leadership style are required at different stages of the change programme. This fits with Grint's (2000) suggestion that it is not possible to create a leadership formula that works and applies to every change situation, it very much depends on a number of factors.

The biggest factors which were perceived to hinder change were: lack of communication, lack of effective leadership and employee resistance. The key critical success factors were: effective communication, effective leadership and team working, and employee involvement.

### **Comparison of Findings Against Common Insights and Lessons Identified by Hamlin (2001)**

Hamlin (2001) created 10 common insights and lessons (CILs) learnt from a multiple cross-case comparative analysis of 18 OCD reflective case histories published in Hamlin, Keep and Ash (2001). These 10 CILs have been used by the co-editors of this handbook for conducting a *multiple cross-case comparative analysis* (MCCCA) of all the reflective case histories contributed to Volume II (see chapter "53")

Using the same CILs, it was decided to explore the extent to which the 200 case studies examined in this chapter contain the same 'key factors that enable successful change.'

The results of the comparison identified in the 200 reflective case studies that lend empirical support for Hamlin's (2001) 10 CILs are shown in Table 7. As can be seen, all 10 CILs are supported to a greater or lesser extent. This provides additional validation to that resulting from the MCCCA of Section III reflective case histories reported in Chapter 53 in Volume II.

### **Limitations**

We acknowledge six limitations to this study. First, all the scholar practitioner (case study) writers involved were taught by different lecturers on different postgraduate programmes. This may have meant that certain lectures may have put certain emphasis on certain models or the application of certain models which could have created different emphasis in the write up.

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Table 7. Showing the 10 factors most discussed when reflecting on change

Common Insights and Lessons (CILs) Identified by Hamlin (2001)	No. of Organizations Lending Support
1. Communicating with all stakeholders the purpose of securing common ownership, commitment and involvement.	85 (42.5%)
2. Securing the active commitment, involvement, and participation of senior to middle managers is pivotal	39 (14.5%)
3. Securing top management support.	29 (14.5%)
4. Being clear, consistent and open with regard to what you are seeking to achieve, setting clear strategic objectives and sharing the vision.	28 (14%)
5. Recognising and addressing the real problems or root causes of change agency problems, including the cultural dimensions	26 (13%)
6. Giving enough time for the OCD program to take root and succeed	13 (6.5%)
7. Recognising the relevant contributions that the HR function can make and the strategic role it can play in bringing about transformational change.	28 (14%)
8. The role of learning in the change management process and the need for a no-blame culture	23 (11.5%)
9. The importance of being reflective as a change agent	6 (3%)
10. The value of conducting internal research as part of the change agency	15 (7.5%)

Second, the teaching materials, supporting documentation and assessment brief were the same to ensure as much as possible consistency in delivery. Although this encouraged case study writers to understand the theory/models in the same way, it tended not to allow for additional models to be introduced or a more innovative approach to be taken for the write up. Hence, what may have been gained with having the consistency that allowed clearer comparison may not have encouraged a more creative reflective analysis.

Third, there may have been some misunderstanding of the models, frameworks and terms used (e.g. transformational is not just about transforming/changing something) or indeed the success or otherwise of the change programmes by the student case study writers, even though this may have been minimised by using only those case studies that achieved a 50% pass rate or higher.

Fourth, there is the potential for participant error or bias (Robson, 2011) as these case study writers were discussing the organizations in which they worked; and because of organizational loyalty they may not have wanted to highlight too many 'failure' issues to avoid any incriminations later. Furthermore, if they had been heavily involved with the change (e.g. as a designated change agent), they could have perceived the initiative to be more successful than others in their organization.

Fifth, there were no reflective case studies on the management of change within not-for-profit/third sector organizations which means the findings have yet to be generalised to that organizational sector.

Sixth, from a methodological point of view, it would have been helpful to have had some universally agreed upon criteria to determine success or failure so that direct comparisons could be made.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to highlight and share insights and learning from real world reflective case studies from the single viewpoint of HR, Health and Management scholar-practitioners and to look for experiences held in common across these differing organizational change programmes.

As a result of our study we have found clear commonalities and key differences in their perceptions and experiences of change.

Of greatest surprise is the absence of identified empirical evidence to lend support for the widely held belief that over 70% of all organizational change programmes fail. The most significant finding is that change models and leadership styles differ depending on context and that effective leadership, effective communication, and effective team working as well as employee engagement are key factors that enable successful change.

We conclude with some thoughts for evidence-based OCD practitioners:

1. Don't believe everything you read in popular change management books! Our findings suggest that 'organizational failure' depends on who you ask, and that change models are meant to be fluid and not followed rigidly step by step.
2. A flexible organizational change approach is needed: The study findings suggest prescriptive change models are not always fit for purpose as change certainly does not always fit linear, rational, unambiguous models. Indeed, they tend to support the 'one size does not fit all' approach to change as discussed by Burnes (2014).
3. Communication, leadership and team working will enable change: Our findings suggest that those organizations with ongoing communication and a more open and flexible leadership style, which readily involves others, are more likely to achieve successful change.

Our sense is that we knew this already as evidence-based OCD practitioners, we just needed the evidence to prove it...

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