



# Organizational Change, Servant Leadership, and Christian Perspective

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## Abstract

*In today's dynamic business environment, organizational change is inevitable, yet with a failure rate of more than 70%, successfully navigating change remains elusive for the majority of business leaders. Effective change management requires more than just strategy; it demands a leadership approach that fosters trust, engagement, and resilience among employees. Servant leadership, with its focus on humility, empathy, and support, offers a powerful framework for guiding leaders and the organizations they serve through transformative periods and can increase the effectiveness of organizational change efforts. By putting the needs of others first and aligning leadership actions with values such as patience, compassion, and empowerment, servant leaders can overcome common challenges associated with change. This paper utilizes multiple change models to explore how servant leadership informs organizational change, change resistance, change commitment, and innovation. Additionally, this paper explores the under-investigated aspect of workplace spirituality within change management literature by examining how Christian perspectives and scriptural insights can be understood and applied to change efforts through the lens of servant leadership in ways that increase practitioner effectiveness and organizational performance.*

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Christian Leadership, Change Management, Biblical Principles, Organizational Transformation

Spirituality and religious practices are major sources of tension in the U.S. today, from debates over immigration bans on predominantly Muslim nations to concerns about Syrian refugees' social and economic impacts (Williams, 2015; Thrush, 2017). These issues resonate in the post-9/11 landscape (Malos, 2010), and with over 4,341 religious discrimination charges filed in fiscal year 2023—more than 5% of total EEOC charges (Charge Statistics, 2023), work-faith integration issues can have significant impacts on organizations and the people that lead them. However, while much of the public discourse is dominated by faith-related conflicts, work-faith integration also offers significant positive promise as well.

More than two decades ago, researchers were challenged to uncover insights into religiousness and spirituality in the workplace. Zinnbauer et al. (1997) kicked off a crucial inquiry in their article "Religion and spirituality: Unfuzzifying the fuzzy," emphasizing the need for leaders to recognize the full humanity of their employees. This was essential, they argued, if researchers wished to equip practitioners with the empirically supported techniques to honor the full personhood of their people and tap into the deeper motivations of their employees. Given the relationship between individual effort and collective performance, this represents an increasingly critical leadership ability given the pace of change faced by organizations and their leadership.

Indeed, industry titans like Steve Jobs (Apple), Jeff Bezos (Amazon), and Sundar Pichai (Google) are widely known for their sustained track record of positive change, innovations, and growth over time. They seem to be able to consistently balance and smoothly shift their organization between season in which they deliberately plant the seeds of innovation, reliably tend their developmental garden, and victoriously harvest the results of execution at scale in ways that seem to echo King Solomon's wisdom in Ecclesiastes 3:1, (NIV), that there is "a season for every activity under the heavens:"<sup>1</sup> The remarkable ability of these leaders to consistently stay ahead of the curve by bringing new products and services to market, redefine entire service categories, and create new customers, cashflows, and ways of thinking have turned these leaders into household names that are easily recognized even by those with only casual interest in business, leadership, or organizational development. We know who these leaders are, because of their ability to instigate, navigate, and leverage change (Arbogast & Jadav, 2022).

Change is guaranteed. The question is whether that change will be something leaders have chosen and initiated, or whether it is thrust upon them. Internal change is the change that you choose. Win, lose, or draw it is up to internal stakeholders to control it and drive towards desired outcomes. External change is the change that chooses you. It may come in the form of an unexpected opportunity (a White Swan situation) or a dangerous surprise (a Black Swan), but either way, leaders and their organizations have little to no control over the precipitating events of externally driven change (Ale, Hartford, & Slater, 2020). Effective leaders strive to position their organizations to survive the impact of black swan events when they come, leverage white swan opportunities when they appear, and master the art of calling their shots through internal change.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references are taken from the New International Version (2011).

While change can bring great benefits to all of the stakeholders, calling their shots through intentional change is often one of the most challenging endeavors a leader may undertake. The majority of leaders struggle with change; despite careful planning, the majority of organizational change initiatives fail due to poor communication, resistance from employees, and a lack of alignment between leadership and the workforce (Errida & Lotfi, 2021). In this paper, we will explore how servant leadership, with its emphasis on listening, empathy, and building trust, offers a vital framework to help leaders proactively address barriers to change at every level of the organization (Harwiki, 2016). In addition, by connecting these insights and techniques to Christian perspectives through scriptural support, this paper serves to answer Zinbaueer et. al.'s call for researcher to better understand how spiritual alignment can tap into practitioner motivations in ways that improve performance and support meaningful organizational outcomes.

Change is an organizational constant as businesses, non-profits, and human enterprises of all kinds continuously strive for viability, growth, and sustained relevance (Weick & Quinn, 1999). In the intricate dance of transformation, leaders grapple with multifaceted challenges, navigating the ebb and flow of the change curve (Hsu & Lamb, 2020). For some, the ability to gracefully orchestrate change seems to transcend a managerial skill, taking on a profound spiritual aspect when combined with Judeo-Christian/Biblical principles (Minor, 2022). For leaders of faith, the transcendent nature of leadership offers a profound and significant source of meaning, mission, and motivation when it comes to the realm of organizational change. The union of faith-driven leadership with strategic change management not only charts a course for sustainable growth (Whittington, 2015) but also provides a compass that transcends the conventional metrics of success.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Understanding the Dynamics of Change: Change Management**

Every organization must eventually change to stay competitive and grow. Whether it's implementing new technology, restructuring teams, or entering new markets, these transitions profoundly influence the direction and success of the organization (Hubbart, 2023). "Organizational change refers to the actions in which a company or business alters a major component of its organization, such as its culture, the underlying technologies or infrastructure it uses to operate, or its internal processes" (Stobierski, 2020, para.4).

Change management, in its essence, is the deliberate and systematic approach to navigating organizations through transition (By, 2005). In the crucible of the modern business landscape, change management has emerged as both a strategic imperative and a management discipline designed to professionalize change-agent practices and standardize their results (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). As businesses strive for agility and resilience, the ability to comprehend, plan, and execute change has become part of the definition of success (Stobierski, 2020).

While the size and impact of any particular change will vary, Britt Andreatta's book *Wired to Resist* describes five primary organizational domains into which these impacts

can be organized (2017). First are strategic impacts, which describe changes that affect how an organization goes about making decisions, setting priorities, and fulfilling its mission. The second domain is structural. This domain is impacted when emerging circumstances demand a change in the organization's internal functions or their relationships to each other as operationalized through its leadership hierarchy, functional divisions, or physical locations. The third domain describes changes that impose new opportunities and demands on the supply chains, workflows, and processes that organizations utilize to produce their goods and bring their services to market.

Talent is the fourth area impacted, as employers seek to identify and align the knowledge and skill set that their employees need to perform over time through new hiring practices, developmental initiatives, and performance management efforts. The fifth and final domain of change impact is organizational culture. As Andreatta notes, culture and change have a particularly complex relationship given that culture serves as both a predictor variable in the short run when it comes to understanding how a given organization will react to a given change and an outcome variable over time as the organization's values, attitudes, and behaviors shift over time in response to its environment and marketplace demands. Organizational size also plays a role, as the larger the organization, the more likely it is to experience the impact of change in multiple domains at once (Andreatta, 2017).

In addition to the domain of impact, change can also be described based on the relative size of the response it imposes on stakeholders (Stobierski, 2020). Adaptive change typically entails small, incremental changes that cause organizations to evolve slowly over time, often without intentional design, through minor modifications and adjustments. Transformational change, on the other hand, entails a larger amount of change, typically over a relatively short period of time, in order to adapt to a sudden or significant alteration of the status quo.

These periods of punctuated equilibrium (Gould & Eldredge, 1977) are often characterized by confusion, uncertainty, and an immense amount of creativity and effort to navigate the situation to survive or improve until a new state of equilibrium begins to emerge. Transformational change often involves a simultaneous shift in mission and strategy, company or team structure, people and organizational performance, or business processes (Stobierski, 2020). This dependably unpredictable interplay between periods of slow incremental growth punctuated by periods of transformational change has informed multiple models of organizational change that are discussed in this work, such as Lewin's organizational change model (Hussain et al., 2018), Kotter's 8-step model (Laig & Abocejo, 2021), and the ADKAR framework (Angtyan, 2019).

### **Change Management Challenges and Failures**

McKinsey & Company research found that "70 percent of change programs fail to achieve their goals, largely due to employee resistance and lack of management support" (Ewenstein et al., 2015, para. 1). Additional research has shown that less than 40 percent of change efforts produced positive change, and one-third of major change efforts result in making situations worse for the companies that undertake them (Gilley, 2005). "This poor success rate indicates a fundamental lack of a valid framework of how to implement and manage organizational change, as what is currently available to academics and

practitioners is a wide range of contradictory and confusing theories and approaches” (By, 2005, p. 370).

Martin E. Smith found that change efforts are typically categorized as failures because they did not meet the expectations of key stakeholders (Smith, 2002). Smith also concluded that “75% of major organizational change efforts failed to make any dramatic improvement in the organization’s performance” because multiple types of change were undertaken at the same time, resulting in inadequate time, attention, or resources to be allocated to one or more of them (Smith, 2002, p. 69).

He also identified that “the most frequently identified types of change” are “process improvement or re-engineering (36%), culture change (28%), and the “re-structur[ing] of organizational units (23%).” However, he went on to point out that these frequency counts are subject to recall bias, saying that “[it] is not clear if these types of change are [objectively] the most common types of major organizational change” or if they are simply perceived to be that way because “these initiatives have more visibility in the organization” and “impact more people than other types of change” (Smith, 2002, p. 69).

One clear finding from Smith’s research, however, was that the success or failure of organizational change efforts was directly affected by the level of involvement and support by organizational leaders. While conventional wisdom may suggest that involving top executives will increase the odds of success, Smith found the opposite to be true. Top-down change efforts championed by C-suite executives, such as CEOs or COOs, demonstrated a 60% failure rate, while bottom-up initiatives sponsored by officers and departmental executives outside of the C-suite fared much better, failing only 28% of the time. These outcomes suggest that organizational leadership has a significant role to play in successful change efforts. They also indicate that positional authority and simply garnering the support of leaders with larger spans of control do not increase the odds of success (Smith, 2002).

Smith also found that “project failure correlated most strongly with ineffective, missing, or conflicting leadership” (Smith, 2002, p. 77). Respondents were given a list of 20 negative factors and asked which items affected the project, regardless of the degree of success. The highest correlations were the sponsor left, the sponsor was uninvolved or ambivalent about the change effort, there was no leadership follow-through, key executives or other departments did not support the change effort, the goals of the change effort seemed vague, there didn’t seem to be a plan, and no one seemed to be in charge (Smith, 2002). Uncommitted leadership and a lack of direction may result in an increase in employee resistance and a lack of commitment. When project-level leadership is absent, it signals a lack of commitment on the part of the organization, which undermines employee trust and motivation to buy-in to the change effort and see it through.

For change efforts to be successful, leadership at all levels in the organization must be cohesive. Starting with those closest to the project and moving up the organizational structure, leaders must be involved and demonstrate that the change is a priority. When this alignment fails, it leads to disengagement and resistance among the employees. When leadership fails to follow through on commitments and actions, it feeds employee skepticism and sets expectations that the leadership is not really serious about the change. This results in a reduction of trust and commitment. Since top-down change directives are

the most likely to fail, leaders who are closest to a given change must be its most vocal sponsors and communicators (Kezar, 2012).

### **Change Management and Servant Leadership**

Our current understanding of servant leadership traces much of its modern roots back to Robert K. Greenleaf's seminal work, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (1977). In it, he posits that the sole reason for a leader's existence is to serve his or her followers (Greenleaf, 1977). From a servant leadership perspective, it is therefore unsurprising that those closest to the change effort are in the best position to ensure its success.

Since Greenleaf's initial introduction, scholars developed Servant Leadership into a multi-faceted construct, yet it is largely operationalized along two primary behavioral dimensions: helping others (often subordinates) to succeed/grow and an emphasis on moral/ethical behavior (Ghasemy, Akbarzadeh, & Gaskin, 2022; Lee, Lyubovnikova, Tian, & Knight, 2020; Locke, 2019; Kiker, Callahan, & Kiker, 2019). Authors have also regularly noted conceptual parallels between Greenleaf's secular model of servant leadership and the implications that Christian thought leaders take from biblical descriptions of Jesus Christ leading his disciples (Beadles II, 2000; Blanchard, & Hodges, 2016; Burkhart, 2015; Cedar, 1987; Keith, 2008; Russell, 2003; Sendjaya, & Sarros, 2002).

Servant leaders prioritize employee needs and foster collaboration by ensuring that employees are supported, heard, and engaged throughout the process (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Servant leaders, whether at the executive or departmental level, focus on building trust, communicating clearly, and aligning the goals of the organization with the well-being of their teams. "It seems reasonable to assume that [leaders and followers] should be aligned and working toward the same goals if the organizational change effort is to have any chance of success" (Smith, 2002, p. 72), and with servant leadership, this alignment is strengthened through empathy, mutual respect, and shared purpose (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, Van Dierendonck & Liden, 2019). For servant leaders, the highest and best use of a senior leader's knowledge, resources, and positional power is to support those in their charge through the allocation of resources, manpower, and decision-making authority for those closest to the work. For Christian leaders in particular, this echoes the admonition from Proverbs 27:23 to "Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds."

Successful projects typically employ an array of quantitative performance measures, while unsuccessful projects tend to rely more heavily on subjective data, especially the opinions of people inside the organization (Smith, 2002; Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015). For Christian practitioners, this need for objective data and performance indicators is consistent with Luke 14:28 when it says, "[f]or which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" and Galatians 6:4, when it advises each believer to "test his own work."

When examining the antecedents to change success, it is also clear that change efforts address more than just objective behavior, workflows, and their associated metrics. Change outcomes are also determined by leaders' ability to address the intangible needs of the people involved and their cultural context (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015). For Christian practitioners, this is consistent with Jesus' words in Matthew 4:4, quoting Deuteronomy

8:3 that “Man does not live by bread alone.” Successful projects tend to include visible and sustained sponsorship and leadership, with the needs of employees addressed along the way, and sufficient resources dedicated to the project (Smith, 2002; Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015). For Christian practitioners familiar with Matthew 20:26-28’s admonition that “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,” these findings in the servant leadership literature resonate deeply.

Change is hard. It involves people, and people, when engaged in a common enterprise, demonstrate a remarkable capacity to gravitate to familiar and comfortable patterns of behavior (Andreatta, 2017; Dent & Goldberg, 1999). John Kotter, Professor of Leadership, Emeritus, at the Harvard Business School, puts people in the center of organizational change in his book, *The Heart of Change*. “The single most important message in this book is very simple. People change what they do less because they are given analysis that shifts their thinking than because they are shown a truth that influences their feelings” (Kotter & Cohen, 2012).

An unfortunate, but common, response to change is fear. A pervasive and nuanced emotion, fear weaves itself into the fabric of organizational dynamics in ways that can undermine change efforts (Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). Researchers examining the psychosocial risks and mental health of employees undergoing organizational change have also shown that work-related stress increases and mental health decreases during times of organizational change. “Change may come with uncertainty, which can trigger feelings of stress, especially when it threatens the existence of one’s job and loss of income” (Backhaus, et. al, 2024, p. 8). These findings connect psychosocial risks, mental health, and leadership through the mechanism of organizational change. For Christian practitioners, 2 Timothy 1:7 offers a powerful encouragement to continue leading in the face of fear: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

While fear and stress are normal responses to change, servant leadership’s focus on the needs of individuals and groups makes it uniquely suited to combat them as a leadership discipline (Eva et al., 2019). This is especially true for Christian practitioners who have a wealth of scriptures to draw on that speak to empowerment in the face of fear. Passages such as Isaiah 41:10, “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand,” reassure Christian leaders that God is with them during times of change, offering emotional and spiritual support to push through periods of uncertainty. Likewise, Joshua 1:9 encourages courage and strength, reminding believers that God’s presence goes with them into new and uncertain situations, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Personal preservation, a natural instinct deeply embedded in human nature, can become a formidable adversary to change (Ginor, 2017). Drawing a parallel with biblical narratives, the story of Moses leading the Israelites through the desert highlights the tension between the comfort of the familiar (Egypt) and the discomfort of the unknown (the desert) (Lewis, 2008). In the biblical narrative, this tension between the fear of the unknown and

the comfort of the familiar was so great that the Israelites considered replacing Moses as their leader and returning to servitude in Egypt (Numbers 11:4-6, 14:1-4). For Christian practitioners of servant leadership, this story serves as a poignant reminder that the emotional needs of their people can undermine their confidence in their leaders and the forward progress they are working for when steering their organization through uncertainty.

In her book, *The Manager as a Change Leader*, Ann Gilley, Ph.D., lists eight Rules of Change (2005, p. 37):

1. Change is not easy, cheap, or fast. Too often, leaders will move too quickly for what people are able to process, underscoring the need for leaders to prioritize the well-being of their team.
2. Change is personal, as it is people who change and then transform the organization. A servant leader recognizes this personal impact and supports individuals through the transition.
3. People need to understand what is in it for them and gain their agreement before they willingly change. A servant leader achieves this by actively listening, involving employees in decision-making, and showing how the change benefits them.
4. People inherently resist change, and a servant leader addresses this resistance by providing care, understanding, and encouragement, ensuring employees feel supported throughout the process.
5. Communication is critical. Too often, leaders confuse speaking to the organization with communication, but true servant leadership requires fostering two-way dialogue that includes active listening and feedback.
6. People change at different rates. A servant leader would best serve the organization by understanding where each individual is in the change process and offering personalized support.
7. Change produces conflict, and it is inevitable and unavoidable. Servant leaders manage conflict with empathy and by encouraging collaboration and understanding.
8. Not all change is good or even necessary, and a servant leader carefully discerns which changes are truly in the best interest of the people and the organization, ensuring that change is thoughtful, purposeful, and aligned with shared values.

As people navigate the contours of fear and personal preservation, leaders must demonstrate strategic business acumen, a profound understanding of human emotions, and the ability to keep their people together and coordinated in the face of difficult times. Servant leadership, with its emphasis on ethical behavior and the well-being and growth of individuals during times of uncertainty, offers a powerful perspective for those charged with the task of achieving organizational outcomes. For Christian practitioners, this perspective may be enriched through a connection to their faith in ways that provide comfort in the face of uncertainty and encourage sustained effort over time.



## Change Models

“The most widely recognized change management models used in practice include Kotter’s eight-step model and Lewin’s three-step model. These models are widely applied in a variety of organizational contexts, especially in complex environments” (Picado & González-Prida, 2024, p. 3). Kotter’s eight-step change management model addresses both human and organizational elements. “Kotter’s eight-step model focuses on creating a sense of urgency, building a powerful coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the vision for change, empowering employees for action, generating short-term wins, consolidating achievements, and anchoring new approaches in the organizational culture” (Picado & González-Prida, 2024, p. 3).

## Kotter & Lewin’s Change Management Models

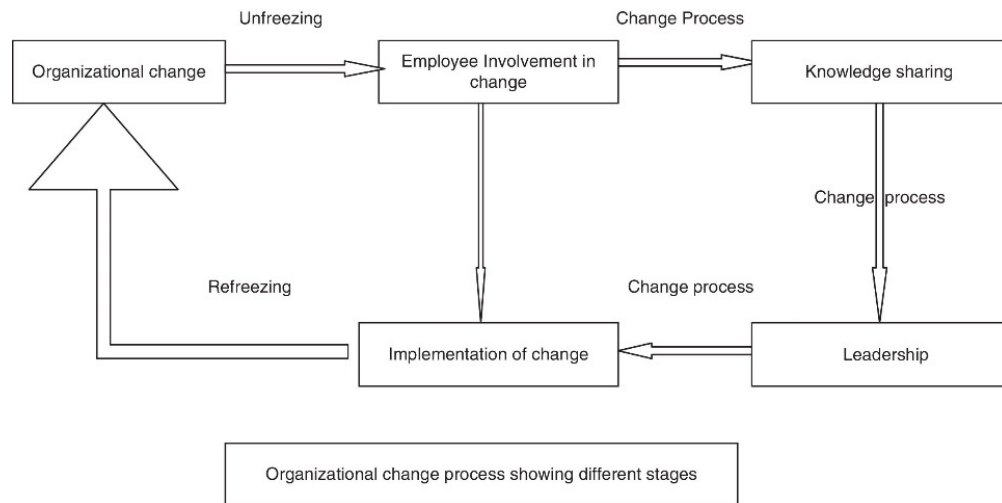
Despite the dismal statistics for successful change, every organization will eventually encounter change, and Kotter’s model for organizational change is among the most frequently utilized by change management practitioners. Kotter’s model focuses on leaders directing and driving organizational change results, with the leadership owning the change and the employees following their lead. In Kotter’s eight-step model, the focus is on mobilizing and motivating people through a sense of urgency and building a guiding coalition to push for change. For Kotter, employees must be mobilized by top leaders around a clear vision that inspires them to act and empowers them to assist. Kotter’s model is about coordinated action and aligning the workforce from the top down behind shared goals.

Figure 1, Kotter’s 8 step model (Kotter, 1996)



While simpler in concept, Lewin’s 3-step model shares Kotter’s affinity for the top-down organizational perspective. For Lewin, leading change is a function of a leader’s ability to balance the organizational forces working to upset the status quo (unfreeze) relative to those that would maintain it (maintain or refreeze). While Lewin’s model stresses the importance of employee involvement, it shares Kotter’s assumption of top-down coordination and control (Hussain, et al., 2018).

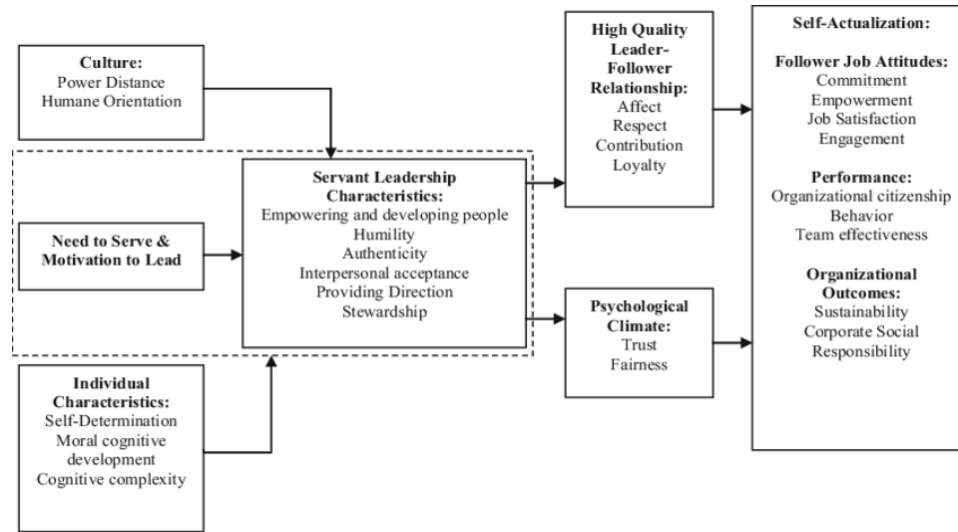
Figure 2, Lewin's three step change model (Hussain, et al., 2018)



In contrast, servant leadership puts the needs of employees first so that they are able to implement and lead the desired change themselves. The human element in servant leadership is about caring for individuals and enabling them to succeed by actively offering support, resources, and encouragement. Servant leaders focus on the well-being and development of the employees and strive to meet their needs first, believing that in doing so those employees will be better positioned to meet the needs of the organization in turn.

In Kotter and Lewin's model, change leadership comes from the top, with executives and key leaders driving the work. While the idea of such "top cover" may be conceptually comforting for those doing the work, this top-down approach has been shown to actually decrease the odds of success in practice (Smith 2002). The relative success rates for change initiatives utilizing a top-down vs. bottom-up approach would suggest that a servant leadership approach is likely to be more successful.

Figure 3, Conceptual Model of Servant Leadership (Reddy, Vasudeva, & Kamesh 2016)

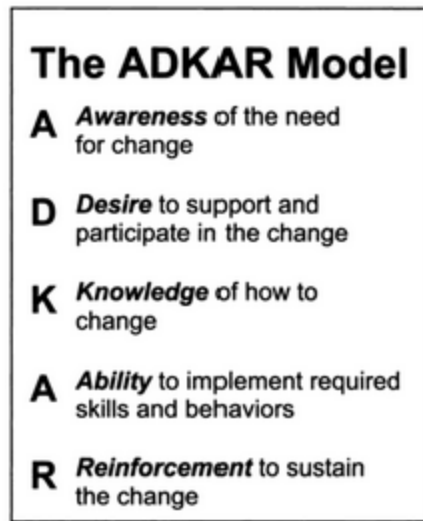


A servant leadership approach to organizational change supports and empowers employees who are closest to the work while intentionally inviting them to have a voice in the decision-making process (Reddy, Vasudeva, & Kamesh 2016). For servant leaders, change is not demanded by a chorus of top-level executives, but rather it is enabled by leaders working behind the scenes to equip team members, empower employees, foster trust, enable collaboration, and demonstrate empathy. The leader, regardless of their position, acts as a facilitator for the activities, discussions, and decision-making needed for change to occur. For Christian practitioners, the example of Jesus' ministry is consistent with this bottom-up approach, having begun far from the center of political and positional power in Jerusalem before ultimately growing into Christianity as it is practiced today.

### The ADKAR Model

A more recently popularized change management model is the ADKAR model developed by Jeff Hiatt in 2003 and utilized by Prosci, the consulting company he founded in 1994 (Hiatt, 2006). In developing the model, Hiatt and his team studied the change patterns of more than 700 organizations and identified ADKAR as an acronym that stands for Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. It offers leaders a structured approach to anticipate, address, and overcome resistance at each stage of the change curve (Angtjan, 2019).

Figure 4, The ADKAR Model (Hiatt, 2006)



ADKAR serves as a framework for change leaders to systematically address both the emotional and practical aspects of change in ways that are consistent with servant leadership. The focus is on the individual with the understanding that employees must understand that the need for change exists (awareness) and that it is a good thing (desired). Furthermore, they must be equipped with the information, training, or skills (knowledge) to do the work and be given both the authority and resources to employ them (ability). Lastly, the ADKAR framework mandates that change leaders design pathways to monitor progress, eliminate barriers, and reward successful implementation that moves or maintains momentum for the organization in the desired direction (reinforcement). In the ADKAR framework, organizational change is the collective product of individual employees, with all five steps seen as necessary to get employees to initiate change and then maintain it over time. The ADKAR model also blends seamlessly with principles articulated within Christian scripture.

### Awareness

Proverbs 29:18 underlines the importance of awareness, stating, "Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint." The King James edition states it more pointedly, saying, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." People-leaders are among the most effectively positioned employees within their organization to understand what's working, what is not, and what needs to change as a result. They are well-positioned to be the canary in the company coal mine who is able to sound the alarm and shine a light on what needs to change.

### Desire

Servant leaders are also uniquely positioned to instill the desire for the employees they serve to participate in and support necessary change through the principle of love. For Christian practitioners, Galatians 5:6 encapsulates this, stating, "For in Christ Jesus... [t]he

only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." Servant leaders cultivate employee desire by emphasizing what's in it for them.

The transformative impact of change on individuals and the organization is rooted in love that is expressed by a deep and sincere desire to serve the needs of others. In doing so, they are positioned to focus their team on what's most important and help individuals understand how they fit within the work to be done and their ability to impact results. They are equipped to respond with empathy and love as they connect with their people, identify risks, address fears, and acknowledge any pain or discomfort they observe.

## **Knowledge**

Knowledge finds its biblical counterpart in the call for wisdom and instruction. Proverbs 1:7 reinforces this, stating, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction." Proverbs 2:6 goes on to say, "For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." At a practical level, servant leaders are motivated to address knowledge gaps in their people. For Christian practitioners, that motivation may take on a spiritual dimension (Blanchard & Hodges, 2016). This faith-based reinforcement of their motivation to foster a culture of continuous learning and development may serve as an additional source of perspective and inspiration to help them overcome the challenges and obstacles of doing so when things get hard.

## **Ability**

Ability describes the capacity to take action, and Christian servant leaders understand that knowledge without action is meaningless. James 2:26 speaks to this when it says, "Faith without deeds is dead." For Christian practitioners, action is synonymous with faith. Such leaders are well-positioned to spot and address barriers to action that may get in the way of their team's ability to act in service of the necessary change because it mirrors the biblical emphasis on actionable faith. It is not enough to be aware of the need to improve, desire different outcomes, or understand what it takes to get them. Employees must be provisioned and allowed to implement the required skills and behaviors to generate desired outcomes. They must be willing to take action today with "the assurance of things hoped for" and "the conviction of things not (yet) seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

## **Reinforcement**

For Christian servant leaders, reinforcement is a cyclical process that aligns with biblical principles of perseverance and feedback. James 1:12 encourages this perseverance, stating, "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him," and Proverbs 15:31-33 encourages people of faith to seek out "life-giving correction" and discipline in the form of instruction, feedback, and understanding. Without feedback, it is impossible to monitor progress. Without progress, it is impossible to celebrate, reward, and be thankful for small successes like those mentioned in Zechariah 4:10 and even setbacks like those described in Philippians 4:11-13. This biblical reinforcement provides Christian practitioners with a deep well of tradition, insight, and encouragement to bring to bear on

the work of change management to help sustain their effort through the challenges and difficulties that will inevitably arise along the way.

### **Leadership and Change**

Some research claims that leadership may account for more than 70% of the chances that an organizational change will ultimately succeed. They argue that leaders and the traits they exhibit are “critical factors for change reactions for employees” (Khaw et al., 2022, p. 7). “Change leaders must understand that creating a culture and an environment that supports change is not enough. To successfully implement a change initiative, leaders must also attend to the behaviors, motivations, skills, and abilities of their employees” (Alnoor, 2020, p. 49). Change leaders must also focus on the external and internal factors that determine the degree of the employee’s engagement in a change initiative (Alnoor, 2020).

Leadership style affects employees in different ways, with credibility and trust playing an important role in determining change receptivity (Khaw et al., 2022). “Change leaders may specifically need to be creative in working with people. A consistent theme among organizational change scholars is the importance of understanding and managing people’s emotions” (Matthew, 2009, p. 2).

Creative and transformational leadership motivates employees and fosters positive responses to change. Effective change leaders embody both creativity and transformative qualities (Matthew, 2009). “Transformational leaders are committed and willing to bring change and react in a way to defuse resistance to change. Transformational leaders play an important role in shaping positive reactions towards organizational change and supporting the change process” (Khaw et al., 2022, p.10). “Transformational leaders are conceptualized as leaders who attempt to shape and create, rather than react to environmental circumstances” (Matthew, 2009, p. 3). The success of the organizational change also depends on the leader’s competency in leading and introducing the change. “Transactional leadership encourages critical thinking and participation to ensure the success of a change process” (Khaw et al., 2022, p. 11).

When considering the low rate of success in leading organizational change and the employees’ emotional and rational resistance, it is clear that to effectively lead change, it requires more than just strategy, planning, and giving directives. It requires a leadership approach that actively considers and engages with the needs, emotions, fears, and motivations of employees. Servant leadership fills that gap by prioritizing the well-being of employees, fostering trust, and empowering employees, and is thereby uniquely positioned to address both emotional and rational resistance (Williams, 2009).

### **Servant Leadership and Change**

Robert Greenleaf asked the question, “Servant and leader—can these two roles be fused in one real person, at all levels of status or calling? If so, can that person live and be productive in the real world of the present?” (Stewart, 2005, p. 192). Throughout his career, Greenleaf sought to answer those two questions, and it started with the need for a leader to first function as a servant to those whom they are leading. “The focus of the servant is making sure that the highest priority of others is met first. Stakeholders who are being served strengthen their attachment to the work of an institution” (Stewart, 2005, p. 192). Greenleaf believed that in doing so, those being served should grow, becoming healthier,

wiser, more independent, and more likely to serve others in turn. A central principle is to ensure no harm is done to the most vulnerable in society (Stewart, 2005).

Greenleaf believed that a true servant instinctively first listens when faced with a problem. Even if this is not natural and at times challenging, one can be trained to adopt listening as their first response. Silence and active listening often lead to deeper understanding. For religious readers, the concept of a "servant" has strong biblical roots (Stewart, 2005). For Christians, the model servant leader is Jesus Christ.

Greenleaf challenged the traditional top-down leadership model, where a single individual holds ultimate authority. Instead, he proposed a leadership approach based on the principle of *primus inter pares*, or "first among equals." In this model, the leader functions as part of a team, working collaboratively rather than commanding from above and expecting the employees to follow. One of the Kotter change management model's shortcomings is that it is a top-down approach to motivate employees to engage in the vision. A servant leadership approach would be to cast vision and embrace the change but also engage the employees so that they both contribute to the choices being made and, in turn, will desire the changes. A servant leader would also work through an employee's rational and emotional resistance (Stewart, 2005).

According to Spears and Lawrence (2002), the ten characteristics essential for developing servant leaders are

- (1) Listening and paying attention to what is and what is not being said.
- (2) Empathy, to understand the other person's emotional state.
- (3) Healing, being part of others' healing processes by assisting in mending broken hearts and spirits.
- (4) Awareness of their own values and ethics to be able to lead others.
- (5) Persuasion, leading through influence instead of title, position, or power.
- (6) Conceptualization: Engage in broader thinking, past the normal, everyday realities.
- (7) Foresight, taking lessons from the past, realities of the present, and a probable future in decision-making.
- (8) Stewardship, responsibly managing the organization's assets.
- (9) Commitment to the growth and development of the people.
- (10) Building community among a group of people (Spears & Lawrence, 2002, as cited in Ertel, 2017, p. 14)

The servant leader model fosters strong relationships between leaders and followers, leading to high-performing teams within organizations. This approach enhances trust, empowerment, and overall organizational performance. To build and maintain trust, leaders must cultivate open and transparent relationships with their followers, which is crucial for sustained success (Claar et al., 2016). There is a positive, direct relationship between servant leadership, trust, and the perceptions of followers. "Managers and leaders can improve organizational performance through the practice of servant leadership behaviors that increase trust in the manager and in the organization" (Joseph & Winston, 2005, p. 16). To effectively practice servant leadership, agreeableness is an essential element of the personality of servant leaders, as well as the leader's integrity and empathy toward others. These factors correlate with Greenleaf's view of the servant leader with a

focus on service above self-interest (Claar et al., 2016) and echoes the biblical exhortation from James 1:19 that leaders “should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (NIV).

Change is inevitable, but growth in response to that change is optional. As the speed of change accelerates in today's world, organizations naturally go through phases of transformation and maturation. However, people often resist change for valid reasons, whether due to fear, uncertainty, or lack of trust. It's important to recognize that people cannot be forced to change; they must choose it themselves. Understanding the source of resistance is key to overcoming it. Communication is essential throughout the process, and leaders must actively enlist and engage both the culture and the people within the organization. Trust is the foundation of leadership during times of change, and anyone, regardless of their role, can be an agent or facilitator of change. By fostering trust and collaboration, leaders can guide their organizations through change more effectively. The authors posit that by applying servant leadership to organizational change initiatives and attending to the behaviors, motivations, skills, and abilities of their employees and working through rational and emotional resistance, the effectiveness of change efforts will improve.

### **Servant Leadership, Christian Perspective, and Kotter's Critical Errors for Leading Change**

In addition to his 8-step model, Kotter also identified seven common, yet critical, errors that change leaders make when guiding their organizations through change (Rajan & Ganesan, 2017). While a full deep dive into each would be beyond the scope of this article, the author's focus on the intersection of organizational change, servant leadership, and the perspective of individual Christian practitioners warrants a cursory exploration of the errors that practitioners are most likely to encounter and a brief summary of the related insights available within academic literature.

#### *Mistake 1: Not Establishing a Great Enough Sense of Urgency (Why Now?)*

When it comes to organizational outcomes, urgency has been shown to be a double-edged sword (Fredberg, & Pregmark, 2022). When urgency is absent, employees see little reason to change, undermining motivation and perceived incentives to modify the status quo. Lack of urgency results in continued reliance on established routines and is associated with delayed execution of tasks that are more impactful to organizational outcomes in the long run (Kennedy, & Porter, 2022). Apply too much urgency, however, and researchers note that employees typically respond by adopting a loss prevention mindset in which the dominant strategy is to respond to the immediate situation quickly but do so with an eye toward avoiding mistakes that could be catastrophic (Fredberg, & Pregmark, 2022). In truly pressing situations, this may predispose organizations toward incremental change precisely when transformational change is most needed.

Servant leaders understand how to meet the needs of their people. From knowledge and training, information and authority, resources and manpower, to social and emotional support, servant leaders focus on giving their people what they need to succeed; the context surrounding the need for change is no different. When employees understand the context, they are equipped to act in concert with the organization without compromising autonomy.



Researchers have shown that employee autonomy plays a significant role in supporting the acquisition and integration of new knowledge practices (Burcharth, Præst Knudsen, & Søndergaard, 2017).

For Christian practitioners, these findings resonate with Proverbs 29:18 (NIV) when it states, "Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint; but blessed is the one who heeds wisdom's instruction." The need to create the right amount of urgency to drive, rather than stifle, change aligns with the biblical notion of heeding divine wisdom, with leaders seeking to establish the appropriate level of urgency rooted in the higher purpose of the organization.

*Mistake 2: Not Creating a Powerful Enough Guiding Coalition (Involving a Cross Section of Your Employees and Early Adopters)*

Organizational innovation and change are often simplistically described as moving from a current state, point A, to a desired state, point B, with the expectation that doing so will create meaningful benefits or advantages for the firm or its stakeholders. While empirical researchers have consistently shown that expectations regarding change do indeed influence performance outcomes (Greve, 1998; King, 1974), the literature also demonstrates that change adoption is rarely a smooth or linear process (O'Leary, 2009; Ryu, 2009).

Rogers' diffusion of innovation model, and companion adoption curve, captured this phenomenon beginning in the early 1980s and remains widely used to predict and describe organizational change from the perspective of organizations and stakeholders (Rogers, Medina, Rivera, & Wiley, 2005; Vagnani, Gatti, & Proietti, 2019). Rogers described successful change as beginning with innovators and early adopters who combine to form a critical mass. This initial critical mass then influences laggards who are slower to implement new ideas, technologies, or processes. Ultimately, this leaves only non-adopters as the lone holdouts that continue to resist, clinging to familiar practices and refusing to modify their behavior.

Servant leadership has been shown to significantly improve levels of innovative work behavior among public sector employees (Almazrouei, Bani-Melhem, & Mohd Shamsudin, 2023), suggesting a potential advantage or insight that servant leaders may benefit from when it comes to understanding and meeting the needs of innovators, early adopters, laggards, and even non-adopters to improve their capacity to accept and ultimately adopt change behaviors. For Christian practitioners, this type of coalition building evokes biblical principles such as the one conveyed in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 when it states, "[t]wo are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (NIV). When it comes to successful change, critical mass matters.

*Mistake 3: Lacking a Vision (Replacing Uncertainty and Fear with Expectation and Uninformed Enthusiasm)*

Leaders who communicate a clear vision and develop emotional bonds with their employees have been shown to instill higher levels of confidence and organizational trust in their people (Dvir, Kass, & Shamir, 2004; Kantabutra, & Avery, 2007). In addition, servant leadership has been shown to be particularly effective in building leader trust that transcends leader-follower relationships to translate into organizational trust (Joseph & Winston, 2005; Van Dierendonck, 2011). For Christian practitioners, Habakkuk 2:2 speaks

directly to the need for vision. “Then the LORD answered me: ‘Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald[a] may run with it’” (NIV). Organizational change is never a solo sport, and a clear vision plays a vital role in equipping others to coordinate their individual efforts in a single collective direction.

*Mistake 4: Under-Communicating the Vision and Failing to Engage*

Employee perceptions regarding alignment with organizational leadership have been shown to impact workplace engagement and change efforts (Caulfield & Senger, 2017; Qin, DiStaso, Fitzsimmons, & Heffron, 2023). In rapid-change situations, servant leadership has proven particularly effective at facilitating alignment through organizational identification and psychological empowerment in ways that support robust work engagement even in the face of extreme uncertainty (Jorge Correia de Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014). This ability to communicate, support, equip, and engage resonates with the biblical call for Christian practitioners to seek input and counsel from others. “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers, they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22, NIV).

*Mistake 5: Not Removing Obstacles to the New Vision (Clearing the Path to Hopeful Adoption)*

Servant leadership offers a number of advantages when it comes to overcoming obstacles and personal resistance to change (Roberts, 2023). Specifically, servant leadership behaviors related to active listening, empathy, social & emotional support (healing), values & ethics-based decision-making, a stewardship mentality, commitment to developing others, foresight, and community building correlate positively with organizational change strategies in ways that appear uniquely suited to anticipate stakeholder needs and influence organizational culture (Spears & Lawrence, 2002; Stauffer, 2019). From a Christian practitioner perspective, this mirrors the message of Isaiah 57:14 when it says, “Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people” (NIV).

*Mistake 6: Not Planning for, Creating and Celebrating Short-Term Wins (Creating Momentum and Enthusiasm)*

When it comes to organizational outcomes, the ability for leaders to recognize success and celebrate victories are critical antecedents to collective momentum and team member integration (Grastorf, 2018; Guntupalli, 2024). In the southern states, it is often said that families ultimately live or die by the size, frequency, and quality of their weddings, baby showers, and funerals. These events serve as markers of time within family history, relational touchstones that reconnect community members who would not otherwise interact, provide a venue for collective experiences, and support the transmission of foundational stories in the form of family lore.

For servant leaders, the celebration of short-term wins offers similar opportunities to demonstrate active listening, build connection, and reinforce community values and standards through the efforts and outcomes they select to celebrate (Brownson, 2007; Ertel, 2017). Planning for wins also echoes biblical encouragement towards generosity,

reciprocity, and community. "A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed" (Proverbs 11:25, NIV).

*Mistake 7: Declaring Victory Too Soon (Impatience, Not Working Through Rational and Emotional Resistance)*

Kotter's final common, yet critical, mistake relates to managerial impatience or dismissal of change resistance that may be present for valid reasons. As Gilley's eight rules of change remind us, change is difficult and often results in conflict (2005). It is personal, requires constant communication to overcome personal and organizational inertia, requires leaders to accommodate variable adoption rates, and sometimes results in worse outcomes instead of improvements.

It is no wonder, then, that both individuals and organizations may become susceptible to change fatigue (Beaulieu, Seneviratne, & Nowell, 2023; Bernerth, Walker, & Harris, 2011). It is tempting for change leaders to seek shortcuts and declare victory too soon, especially during seasons where multiple changes are required in rapid succession. In these circumstances, the value of patience is easily overlooked by organizational leaders despite the benefits it is known to confer on rational decision-making, adaptability, psychological health, productivity, quality control, and long-term profitability (Comer & Sekerka, 2014).

The association between servant leadership and improved job satisfaction and burnout measures among employees suggests that its practitioners may be uniquely well-equipped to protect their organization from falling (Rude, 2004). The servant leadership approach also aligns with biblical cautions against impatience in the face of challenging circumstances. As Proverbs 21:5 states, "[t]he plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty," and Galatians 6:9 goes on to say, "[l]et us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (NIV). For Christian practitioners, the impatience trap stands in contrast with the biblical call for perseverance and the promise of fruitful harvests stemming from enduring commitment.

Servant leadership principles equip organizational leaders to navigate these challenges and avoid Kotter's seven mistakes. Integrating these techniques with inspiration from biblical teachings may allow Christian practitioners to do so even more by allowing them to tap into even deeper motivations through their faith. For these leaders, their change efforts align with a higher purpose in ways that are known to contribute to the flourishing of individuals and organizations.

## **Organizational Culture and Change**

Culture has been shown to have a significant impact on the success or failure of organizational innovation and change (Abdi & Senin, 2015).

"It is well known... that as many as three-quarters of reengineering, total quality management (TQM), strategic planning, and downsizing efforts have failed entirely or have created problems serious enough that the survival of the organization was threatened. What is most interesting about these failures, however, is the reported reasons for their lack of success. Several studies reported that the most frequently cited reason given for failure was a neglect of the organization's culture. In other words, failure

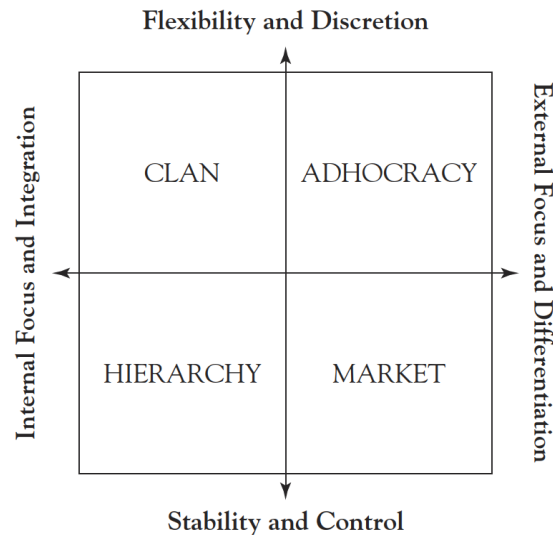
to change the organization's culture doomed the other kinds of organizational changes that were initiated" (Cameron & Quin, 1999).

Culture is typically defined as a set of shared meanings, values, and beliefs that permeate an organization and its decision-making (Austin, 2013). Culture functions as a lens through which prospective change is understood and evaluated (Peretz & Knappert, 2021). As a result, culture demonstrates a reciprocal relationship to organizational change, impacting how a given change is received (including expectations for success or failure) and, in turn, being shaped by change as successful change initiatives or unsuccessful attempts are executed over time.

Culture represents a complex interaction between individual perceptions and group dynamics that can be notoriously difficult for researchers to accurately measure and assess. Yet despite these difficulties, culture has consistently been shown to play a critical role in determining organizational performance over time (Kotter & Heskett, 2008). While a single definitive culture model and set of measurements remain elusive, a number of approaches have been developed that have been validated by research and provide practical utility, such as Cameron & Quin's Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI), which is built on their competing values framework (1999).

While Cameron and Quin's work (1999) on culture and change at the organizational level predates Andreatta's modeling of individuals' psychological response to change (2017), both authors utilize a four-quadrant model. Where Andreatta utilized choice and desire as the axes on which to model the behavior of individuals, Cameron & Quin's competing values framework employs two intersecting ranges of group behavioral norms to model culture at the group level. The framework's horizontal axis focuses on group decision-making objectives and ranges from organizations that consistently prioritize internal needs and organizational integration on one extreme and organizations that consistently prioritize external factors in their decision-making and strive to differentiate themselves from other organizations on the opposite extreme. The vertical axis positions organizations whose preferred decision-making style ranges from a focus on stability and control on one extreme to a preference for flexibility and discretion at the other.

Figure 4, Cameron &amp; Quinn's Competing Values Framework (2017)



Under their model, Cameron & Quinn describe the balance point that uniquely describes a given organization as falling into one of four cultural archetypes.

- Cultures in the hierarchy quadrants are described as having an internal focus that seeks to implement a smooth operation while prioritizing stability and control. They most often develop in organizations “whose major challenge [is] to generate efficient, reliable, smooth-flowing, predictable output” and was the dominant cultural model in the early 1900s (Cameron & Quinn, 2017, p. 37).
- In contrast, market cultures (which they describe as beginning to emerge in the 1960s) describe organizations that function as marketplaces unto themselves. These organizations, exemplified in their modern incarnation by the likes of Amazon or Airbnb, are characterized by their orientation toward the external environment rather than internal considerations. Success or value is measured by the volume and quantity of transactions with mostly “external constituencies such as suppliers, customers, contractors, licensees, unions, and regulators” (Cameron & Quinn, 2017, p. 39).
- Clan cultures describe organizations with an internal focus that prioritize flexibility and discretion over stability and control. Organizations demonstrating a clan culture often point to a sense of “family” where shared values and goals, cohesion, participation, and a sense of shared identity are palpable. It is typical for such organizations to prioritize loyalty and personal relationships over policies and procedures and for “teamwork, employee involvement programs, and corporate commitment” to form the basis of social capital within the organization (Cameron & Quinn, 2017, p. 41).

- Adhocracy cultures describe organizations that prioritize flexibility and discretion while also maintaining a high degree of external focus that emerged in response to the demands of the service economy and the information age of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Exemplified by R&D firms, these organizations embrace the idea that “innovative and pioneering initiatives are what lead to success” and that “organizations are mainly in the business of developing new products and services and preparing for the future” (Cameron & Quinn, 2017, p. 43). For adhocracy organizations, management’s primary task is to support entrepreneurial activities, secure resources so that failure is not fatal, and assemble creative teams for largely episodic or project-based engagements designed to create new products and services and the development of new markets.

The authors go on to cite evidence from empirical studies of over 100 organizations engaged in change initiatives such as restructuring, downsizing, or Total Quality Management (TQM) implementations that “successful implementation of both TQM and downsizing programs, as well as the resulting effectiveness of the organizations’ performance, depended on having the improvement strategies embedded in a culture change” (1999, p. 11).

While Cameron & Quinn’s book primarily cites the authors’ own research, their conclusions are well supported by the broader academic literature. Green (2024), Alvesson & Sveningson (2015), Austin & Claassen (2013), Latta (2009), and Rashid, Sambasivan, & Rahman (2004) are just a few of the researchers and authors articulating the reciprocal relationship between culture and successful organizational change. Culture impacts how change is received, how success is defined, and how decisions get made. This not only has a direct impact on whether a given change initiative will succeed or fail. It also determines whether the change will go on to impact the culture over time as it is incorporated as either a failure-based cautionary tale or a celebrated episode in the story that explains how the organization of the future came to be.

Researchers have also taken note of the particular relationship between the extent to which servant leadership is present within an organization and the perceived levels of organizational trust, the effectiveness of organizational recognition and performance awards, and the overall quality of its organizational culture (Setyaningrum, 2017; Harwiki, 2016; Almutairi, Alraggad & Khasawneh, 2020). Taken together, the literature suggests that servant leadership’s employee-first mindset, along with the behavioral skills that practitioners develop, equips them to adapt their approach as needed. Servant leaders are uniquely prepared to navigate both the individual psychological response to change exhibited by their employees at the individual level and the cultural realities of their organization at a group level. Lastly, the alignment between the behavioral attributes of servant leadership described by researchers (Winston & Fields, 2015) and the fruits of the spirit articulated in Galatians 5:22 (including love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) suggests the potential for spiritual reinforcement for Christian practitioners.

## **DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION**

Navigating change is a complex process that requires a deep understanding of organizational objectives, change management practices, organizational culture, human psychology, and leadership principles. This paper has explored various aspects of change, from the foundational concepts and points of failure to some of the most commonly used change models, including ADKAR and Kotter's eight steps. Individual and collective responses to change were considered along with the implications for change leaders and alignment with servant leadership principles. By addressing the practical, emotional, psychological, and organizational aspects of change from a servant leadership perspective, change leaders may be better equipped to see their change efforts through to the resulting organizational transformation they are working toward. As organizations continue to face rapid and often unpredictable changes, these insights represent an increasingly valuable set of frameworks to guide those seeking to implement lasting and meaningful positive change to transform their organizations.

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