ADKAR: A Practical Framework for Leading Change

Leading the Human Side of Change

The **ADKAR model** (Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability and Reinforcement) is a practical framework for managing change. Its purpose is to help organizations implement change successfully by combining a structured methodology with a deep understanding of the people experiencing the change.

ADKAR describes **five sequential building blocks** that every individual needs to move through in order to adopt a change successfully:

1. **Awareness** – *I understand what is changing and why.*
2. **Desire** – *I want to support the change.*
3. **Knowledge** – *I know how to change.*
4. **Ability** – *I can apply the new way of working in practice.*
5. **Reinforcement** – *The change becomes part of everyday work.*

Why ADKAR is Useful for Managers

For managers leading change, ADKAR provides a practical roadmap for managing the human side of change.

1. It starts with the WHY (Awareness)

People need to understand **why** the change is necessary, what risks the organization faces, and why acting now matters.

When people do not understand the reason for change, resistance naturally follows.

Managers reduce resistance through clear communication, coaching and visible leadership.

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2. It focuses on motivation (Desire)

Instead of simply announcing a change, managers work to build commitment.

They communicate the future vision, help people see the benefits of the change and involve influential supporters who can encourage others to join.

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3. It distinguishes learning from doing (Knowledge & Ability)

Knowing **how** to do something is different from being able to do it consistently.

Managers first provide learning opportunities, training and new skills (**Knowledge**).

They then support people through practice, coaching, mentoring and regular feedback until the new behaviour becomes part of everyday work (**Ability**).

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4. It helps make change stick (Reinforcement)

Successful change does not end with implementation.

Managers reinforce new behaviours by measuring progress, communicating results, recognising success and ensuring that people do not return to old ways of working.

The ADKAR Model in Practice

ADKAR Element	Individual Outcome	Manager Actions
Awareness	**I understand why the change is needed.**	Explain why the change is necessary, why it is happening now and what the risks are if nothing changes. Communicate openly, provide context, answer questions and help people understand the bigger picture.
Desire	**I want to participate in and support the change.**	Build commitment by helping people see the value of the change. Connect it to what matters to them, involve influential supporters and encourage active participation.
Knowledge	**I know how to change.**	Provide the knowledge, skills and information people need to succeed. Combine formal training with practical learning and involve key people early in the process.
Ability	**I can apply the change in my daily work.**	Create opportunities to practise new skills. Support people through coaching, mentoring, feedback and practical experience until they can perform confidently in the new way.
Reinforcement	**The change becomes part of everyday work.**	Reinforce the change by recognising success, measuring progress, communicating results and ensuring that new behaviours become part of the organisational culture.

Principles of Successful Change

Successful change is rarely the result of a single action. It is created through a combination of clear direction, meaningful engagement and consistent support.

The following principles can help you lead change more effectively:

1. **Create the conditions for change to succeed.**
   Use a structured framework, such as ADKAR, to guide both the process and the people experiencing the change.
2. **Communicate the why.**
   Explain why the change is needed, why it is happening now and why this approach has been chosen.
3. **Don't convince people. Involve them.**
   People are more likely to support what they help create. Build participation instead of relying on persuasion.
4. **Break the change into manageable steps.**
   Make it clear what people are expected to do, how they should do it and when.
5. **Support people throughout the journey.**
   Show genuine interest in people's experience, remove obstacles and provide practical support as they learn new ways of working.
6. **Create early wins.**
   Plan visible successes that demonstrate progress and build confidence in the change.
7. **Reinforce progress.**
   Monitor adoption, recognise achievements and keep motivation alive throughout the change journey.

Understanding Resistance to Change

People rarely resist change simply because they dislike change. What they often resist is **uncertainty**, **loss**, or the feeling that something important is at risk. Even positive change can create discomfort because familiar ways of working provide a sense of security.

When leading change, it helps to understand what we might call **the mathematics of change** - the different ways people respond when change is introduced.

A Simple Picture of Change.
Imagine your team is in a boat.

- One person stands at the front, setting the direction.

- Some people immediately pick up the oars and start rowing.
- Some sit quietly and wait to see what happens.
- Others quietly drop an anchor into the water.



This simple image reflects what happens in almost every organisational change.

As soon as change is announced, people begin forming attitudes, often before they say a single word.

Some become enthusiastic.
Some become cautious.
Some become anxious.
Some appear supportive while internally resisting.

Understanding these different reactions is one of the first steps towards leading change successfully.

Different Attitudes Towards Change

People respond to change in different ways. Understanding these different attitudes helps managers choose the right response instead of treating everyone the same.

Attitude	**Typical behaviour**
Active Resistance	Openly disagrees, challenges decisions and slows the change down.
Passive Resistance	Says very little but does not actively support or engage with the change.
Neutral	Waits, observes and follows the majority without contributing much.
Compliance	Does what is required, especially when expectations are clear and progress is monitored.
Commitment	Actively supports the change, contributes ideas and looks for ways to help it succeed.
Change Champions	Lead by example, inspire others and help build momentum for the change.

When we observe people's reactions to change, we are not simply looking for agreement.
We are looking for **commitment**.
In change management, commitment means more than saying: *"I like the idea."*
When leading change, ask yourself: **Who is willing to pick up the oars and start rowing?**
Not: Who says they support the change?
Not: Who attends the meetings?
But: **Who is taking meaningful action that moves the change forward?**

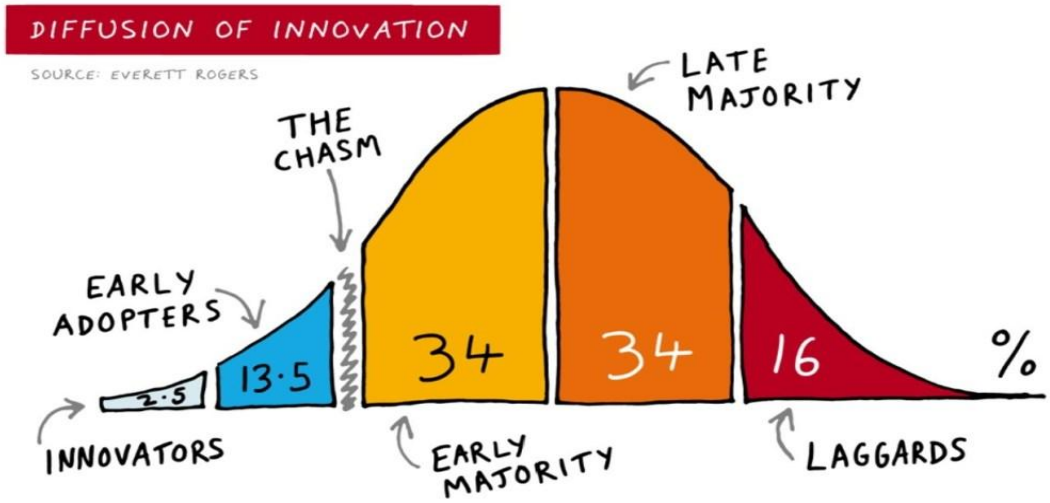
Commitment is not what people say.
Commitment is what people do.

Examples
If you need someone to analyse customer data… Who volunteers to do it?
If a new process needs testing… Who tests it and provides constructive feedback?
If a new solution needs implementing…Who steps forward and helps make it happen?
That is commitment.

Not a declaration.
Not attendance.
Action.
Meaningful action that contributes to the success of the change.

How Change Spreads

Everett Rogers' **Diffusion of Innovations** theory explains how change spreads through a team or an organisation. This distribution is normal. It is not a problem to be solved.



People adopt change at different speeds.

- **Innovators** welcome new ideas and are often the ones who initiate change.
- **Early Adopters** quickly recognise its value and help others move forward.
- **Early Majority** joins once they see evidence that the change works.
- **Late Majority** needs more time, reassurance and practical support.
- **Laggards** adopt the change last—sometimes only because they have no other option.

Where Should You Invest Your Energy?

Different attitudes require different responses. Think about your team:

Some people are already supporting the change and can help move it forward.

Start with them.

Some people are willing to contribute but need more guidance or confidence.

Invest in them next.

Some people are waiting, observing or still uncertain.

Give them time and continue the conversation.

Some people actively resist the change.

Listen carefully before deciding how much energy to invest.

If you spend most of your time trying to convince those who strongly resist the change, you may overlook the people who are already ready to move.

Different Attitudes Require Different Responses

Someone who resists needs to be heard.

Someone who hesitates may need more information, more certainty or more psychological safety.

Someone who is motivated needs trust and the opportunity to contribute.

Effective change leadership is not about treating everyone the same.

It is about responding to people according to what they need at that moment.

Four Practical Principles:

1. Pause before you push.

Before driving the change forward, take time to understand where people are.

Map their attitudes and readiness for change.

2. Ask better questions.

Don't ask only: *"Do you agree?"*

Also ask:

"What makes sense to you?"

"What concerns you?"

"What would help you move forward?"

3. Don't confuse resistance with misunderstanding.

Not everyone who hesitates is resisting.

Some people simply need more clarity.

Others need reassurance.

Still others need time.

Find out what is really happening before you decide how to respond.

4. Focus on the source of resistance, not on the person.

The goal is not to "fix" people.

The goal is to understand and remove the barriers preventing them from moving forward.

When you understand what is behind people's reactions, you gain something much more valuable than agreement.

You gain partners in the change.

The role of a Change Leader

Your role is not to convince people. Your role is to understand them.

Ask yourself: **Why isn't this person ready to pick up the oars and start rowing?**

That question will take you much further than asking: **How can I persuade them?**

When Resistance Is Not the Problem, but the Message

Resistance is a natural response to losing - or feeling at risk of losing - something familiar, important or meaningful.

It can take many forms, from open disagreement to quiet withdrawal. Resistance is not a sign that people are difficult. It is not sabotage.

It is a normal psychological response to uncertainty and to losing a sense of control.

People do not need to be "fixed." They need to feel seen, heard and understood. The first step is to understand what the change is triggering for them.

Logic Versus Emotion

When people resist change, many leaders instinctively respond by explaining the change again. More facts. More presentations. More arguments.

But resistance is rarely caused by a lack of information. It is much more often driven by emotion.

Research and practical experience suggest that resistance is typically rooted in:

- **80%** emotions such as fear, uncertainty and anxiety about the change process.
- **10%** rational concerns about the change itself.
- **10%** personal interests that people feel have not been taken into account.

The most common response to resistance is to increase pressure.

Explain more.

Convince more.

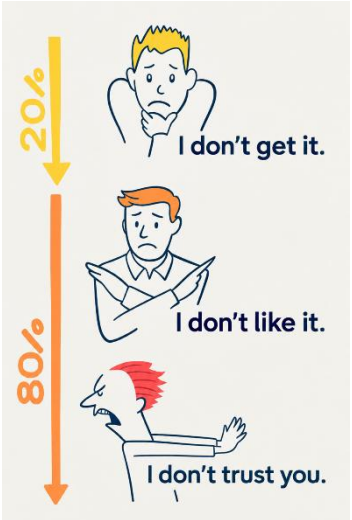
Demand more.

But pressure creates counterpressure.

What looks like resistance may actually be a sign of:

- fear (*"What if I can't do this?"*)
- loss (*"I might lose the role I'm good at."*)
- distrust (*"Why are we really doing this?"*)
- confusion (*"I don't understand what is changing or why."*)

Resistance tells us what matters to people. If we do not understand the message behind the resistance, we cannot address the real issue.



Three Levels of Resistance

Resistance can emerge on three different levels. Understanding these levels helps leaders choose the right response.

Level 1 – "I don't get it."

People do not understand the change. The reason is unclear. The purpose feels abstract. They do not understand what is changing or why.

What helps

- Clear and consistent communication.
- Explain the broader context.
- Use different ways of communicating - discussion, visual examples, stories and practical experience.
- Help people make sense of the change.

Level 2 – "I don't like it."

People understand the change intellectually. Emotionally, they are not ready.

Change often means:

- learning something new,
- leaving the comfort zone,
- letting go of certainty,
- giving something up.

What helps

- Create space for honest conversations.
- Acknowledge what is difficult.
- Invite questions.
- Build confidence through learning, practice and support.
- Encourage learning together, not alone.

Level 3 – "I don't trust you."

At this level, resistance is no longer about the change itself. It is about trust. People may not trust the person leading the change because of previous experiences, poor communication, broken promises or a lack of psychological safety.

What helps

- Build trust through openness and consistency.
- Involve people in shaping the change.
- Show respect for different perspectives.
- In some situations, the most effective solution may even be to change who leads the initiative.

Many change leaders respond only to the logical level.

They provide more information. More slides. More arguments. Then they wonder why nothing changes. The real barrier often lies somewhere else.

Resistance Is Not Your Enemy

Resistance is energy. If you understand what it is telling you, it becomes a valuable source of information rather than an obstacle.

When someone says: *"This is a waste of time."*

Or *"The old way worked better."*

Don't argue first.

Listen first.

Six Practical Responses to Resistance

1. Listen carefully and seek to understand concerns.
2. Remove obstacles wherever possible.
3. Create hope by helping people see a meaningful future.
4. Communicate personally, openly and with empathy.
5. Make the benefits of the change visible and tangible.
6. Recognise and reward behaviours that support the change.

The more people contribute to the solution, the more likely they are to support it.

Change Leadership in One Sentence:

Don't convince, build commitment.

One of the biggest misconceptions about change is that people should be enthusiastic from the very beginning. In reality, commitment usually grows **through participating in the change**, not before it.

People rarely become committed because they listened to a presentation. They become committed because they helped create the solution. If the change is not led well, that commitment may never develop.

Pressure Creates Counterpressure

The more pressure people feel, the stronger their resistance becomes.

Persuasion is a form of pressure.

When people feel pressured, they naturally become defensive.

Instead of pushing harder, **create the conditions for people to build commitment.**

The IKEA Effect

Behavioural research describes a phenomenon known as the **IKEA Effect**. We place greater value on something we helped create. The more effort we invest, the stronger our sense of ownership becomes. The same principle applies to organisational change.

When people help design the solution, they are far more likely to support it. Ownership reduces the need for persuasion. People understand the change because they have helped build it.

Three Ways to Involve People in Change

Inform	People understand the change.
Cooperate	People know what they are expected to do.
Co-create	People develop a sense of ownership *"We created this together."*

Each approach has its place. But they do not produce the same outcome.

Many organisations stop after informing people and assigning tasks.

A presentation is prepared. A meeting is held. Questions are answered.

That is important, but it is rarely enough.

Information helps people understand.

Participation helps people act.

Co-creation builds commitment.

From Cooperation to Co-creation

Cooperation is about completing tasks. People contribute their knowledge, skills, experience.

Co-creation goes further. People contribute not only what they know, but also their ideas, creativity, initiative, ownership. Together they create something that no individual could have created alone. **That is where commitment begins.**

A Final Thought

The role of a change leader is not to convince people. It is to create the conditions in which people choose to participate, contribute and build commitment. Because sustainable change does not happen **to** people. It happens **with** people.

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