



The Role of Leadership in Organizational Change

Mona Sarkama

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences

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Abstract

Author Mona Sarkama
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<p>In today's rapidly evolving business environment, leadership plays a critical role in guiding organizations through continuous change. Despite extensive literature on change management, many organizations still struggle with effective implementation. Motivated by personal experience and academic studies in organizational strategy, this thesis investigated leadership's role in successful organizational change, focusing particularly on the leaders' perspective.</p> <p>The goal of this thesis was to identify the key characteristics and practices that enable leaders to drive successful organizational change, to explore how leaders leverage organizational culture during change initiatives, and to understand the challenges they face in the process. The theoretical framework combined modern leadership theories, including transformational, servant, and authentic leadership, with classical and contemporary change management models, such as Lewin's 3-Step Model, Kotter's 8-Step Change Model, and the ADKAR model.</p> <p>The research adopted a qualitative, constructive approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews with six experienced leaders from diverse organizational backgrounds. Data collection took place in February 2025, and thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns and insights. The thesis work started in May 2024 and concluded in April 2025, following a detailed project plan covering topic development, theoretical grounding, data gathering, and analysis phases.</p> <p>Key findings revealed that successful change leadership relied on visionary thinking, emotional intelligence, adaptability, trust in teams, and strong communication skills. Leaders often naturally applied concepts from change management theories without formal adherence to models. Organizational culture emerged as both an enabler and a barrier to change, depending on the company's history and size. Challenges faced by leaders included managing resistance, addressing information gaps from senior management, navigating remote and matrix organizations, and ensuring adequate follow-up after change implementation.</p> <p>In conclusion, the study emphasized that modern leadership and change management were inseparable in practice. Effective leaders needed to combine emotional awareness, strategic vision, and structured change processes to manage continuous transitions successfully. The findings offered valuable insights for leadership development and future research on human-centered approaches to organizational change.</p>
Key words Change management, leadership, organizational change, change, organizational culture

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1 Introduction

Different leadership styles and their effectiveness have been studied for decades as the ground for organizational performance. Leadership plays a crucial role in guiding organizations through change, especially in today's business environment. Leadership in organizational change involves guiding, influencing, and supporting a group toward achieving a shared vision or adapting to new circumstances. It emphasizes strategic direction, fostering collaboration, and empowering individuals to embrace and drive change. Ultimately, leadership is about bridging the gap between the current state and the desired future state while cultivating buy-in and collaboration across the organization. (Ahn, Adamson & Dornbusch 2004, 114-115.)

Today, organizational change has become a new norm rather than an exception. The ability to successfully navigate and implement change is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in organizational survival and success. Even though there is plenty of literature on change management and leadership, many organizations continue to struggle with change implementation. (Gill 2002, 307-308).

The author's personal interest in organizational changes began years ago. The author has been working in the private sector her entire adult life and she has gone through more organizational changes than she can count. Estimated average once every other year. Not all of them have been big changes where the entire organizational chart has been rearranged but changes, nevertheless. In the author's experience organizational changes are talked about more from the employee's perspective, which is understandable since the bigger changes and the outcomes usually hit harder to the employees than the leaders or managers. After the author started her studies on organizational strategy work, she felt that the side of leaders is not talked about enough. Change processes, for operational staff as well as for leaders, are physically and emotionally hard and usually they take a lot of time as well. In the end we are just all people, no matter at which level of the organization we work in. The process of change is not easy, and she wanted to bring light to the leader's point of view of this process, since she has only experienced it from the operational employees' point of view.

1.1 Scope and objectives

This thesis aims to analyze the key factors that enable leaders to drive successful changes in organizations. By examining the intersection of leadership theories, change management practices, and real-life experiences from the interviewees, this thesis seeks to identify the critical

elements that distinguish effective change leadership from ineffective attempts. Additionally, the focus is on exploring how leadership theories have changed and what are the crucial things demanded from managers and leaders today.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze ways experienced leaders have succeeded in managing and implementing changes in their careers. In more detail, interest is in exploring how leaders today can execute organizational changes in the best way possible, what traits do they need for it and what are the pain points to avoid in these delegate situations.

The secondary objective is to analyze how does the organizational culture impact the implementation of change. And the third objective is to discover how does the organization culture affect the style the change is communicated to the employees. The key concepts in this research are leadership, organizational change, organizational culture and change communication.

To achieve the objective of this thesis the research wants to find answers or suggestions to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the key characteristics of leadership that contribute to successful organizational change?

RQ2: How do leaders leverage organizational culture to facilitate change?

RQ3: What are the challenges faced by leaders during the implementation of change?

By addressing these questions, this thesis seeks to provide an understanding of leadership skills useful in organizational change, and the process itself. The aim is to collect insights on the complexity of implementing a change in an organization. The chance of going through an organizational change in modern life is high and it never hurts to see the situation from a broader perspective and understand not only your own feelings but the perspective of the people making the decisions or forwarding the decisions as well.

The research question 1 aims to identify and analyze the specific leadership traits, skills, and behaviors that are most effective in driving successful change initiatives. This exploration will help us better understand what makes someone a good leader during times of change.

The research question 2 focuses on the interplay between leadership and organizational culture, a critical aspect of change management. It looks at how leaders can use and shape an organizations' culture to make change easier and explores ways to make sure the culture supports their goals for change.

The research question 3 acknowledges that change implementation is rarely a smooth process. By looking at the problems leaders face during changes, this research aims to show what can go wrong and how those challenges can be dealt with.

Table 1. Research Questions Matrix

RQ	Theory	Data collection and analysis	Findings
RQ1	2.1.1 & 2.1.2	Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis identifying recurring leadership traits.	Clear communication, empathy and emotional intelligence, visionary thinking, adaptability and resilience, trust and delegation, decision making and problem solving.
RQ2	2.2.1, 2.2.2, 2.1.1 & 2.1.2	Semi-structured interviews and thematic coding of responses to identify how leaders perceive culture as an enabler or barrier.	Culture as a change enabler and as a barrier, psychological safety and open communication, creating a change-positive culture.
RQ3	2.2.1, 2.2.2, 2.1.1 & 2.1.2	Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis identifying common barriers and strategies used to address them.	Resistance to change, lack of information and communication gaps, challenges in leading remote, balancing transparency with confidentiality, follow-up and sustaining change.

1.2 Report structure

This report is organized into five main chapters. Chapter one outlines the background of the study, presents the research scope and objectives, and provides a brief overview of the report structure. After this the thesis comes to chapter two, theoretical framework. This chapter reviews relevant leadership and change management theories and covers key leadership approaches. The chapter concludes by exploring how leadership and change management concepts intersect and together create a new phenomenon named change leadership.

Chapter three shares details of the research methodology, including the workplan, research design, research method and the rationale for using semi-structured interviews. The participant selection process, the development of interview questions, and the use of thematic analysis as the method

for data analysis are also described in chapter three. ChatGPT-4 was utilized as support for defining the interview questions based on the research questions.

After this the thesis comes to the fourth main chapter, results. This chapter presents the key findings from the interviews. First, the chapter examines how the results align with the theoretical framework, followed by a thematic analysis structured around four main themes found from the results. The chapter concludes with a focused analysis of leadership's role in facilitating change.

The thesis ends in the final and fifth main chapter, discussion. This chapter synthesizes the findings in relation to research questions and theoretical literature. In this chapter the author discusses the practical and theoretical implications of the study, reflects on the ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the research, evaluates the research process, and offers personal reflections on learning. In this chapter directions for future research are also proposed based on the study's key observations.

2 Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework for this thesis. The aim is to introduce current leadership theories and reflect on the ways they can be implemented into change management practices. First, this section provides examples of modern leadership theories and change management practices and then combines them and analyses how they can be harvested into change leadership.

2.1 Leadership

Cambridge dictionary defines leader as “a person in control of a group, country, or situation.” Sounds simple, right? Leaders have been among us for centuries. Before leaders were the ones leading a hunt or a war against enemies. Today a leader is someone who paints a vision, inspires and empowers others, builds strong relationships, and acts with integrity to drive positive change and results.

Leadership is by no doubt a hard word to define. Silva (2016, 1) quoted Stogdill (1974) who stated that "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept". Silva (2016,3) defines leadership as "Leadership is the process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals". This implies that leadership itself is a process and not just a quality a person can have. The process of leadership can be characterized by interactive influence between the leader and employees.

In modern society leadership and management are mostly mixed. Although they differ, leadership and management are not mutually exclusive. Effective organizations require both strong management and strong leadership to succeed. While management and leadership are closely related concepts, they represent distinct processes and skill sets. Management focuses on maintaining stability and achieving efficiency, while leadership is about driving change and inspiring others toward a shared vision. Organizations that can balance effective management with strong leadership are better equipped to adapt to uncertainty, implement strategic change, and sustain long-term success. "Management is about coping with complexity. Leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change." (Kotter 1990, 3-4.) In short, leaders drive change and managers maintain order. Though in this modern world the best managers are often also good leaders, and the best leaders know how to manage.

Early leadership theories focused on the innate traits and characteristics of leaders, such as intelligence, charisma, and decisiveness. However, these "Great Man" and trait theories were seen as too narrow perspectives for defining a good leader because they did not consider any situational factors. The attention turned to what leaders do and what skills they have. Behavioral theories emphasize that leadership can be learned and developed through training and experience. This paved the way for leadership development programs that teach specific behaviors and skills. (Zakeer & Allah 2016, 1-2.)

Contingency and situational leadership theories acknowledge that effective leadership depends on the context. These theories propose that leaders should adapt their style based on factors like follower maturity, task complexity, and environmental uncertainty. This emphasis on situational adaptability is critical for leading in today's rapidly changing business landscape. Recent leadership theories have shifted the focus to the leader's ability to inspire and motivate followers. These relationship-oriented theories recognize that effective leadership in modern organizations requires more than just directive authority. Leaders must be able to build trust, empower teams, and create a shared sense of purpose to drive performance. (Zakeer & Allah 2016, 2.)

2.1.1 Transactional and Transformational Leadership

The idea behind transactional theory started with Max Weber in 1947, but it became well-known thanks to Bernard Bass in 1981. Bass and Avolio determined transactional leadership "as a type of contingent-reward leadership that had active and positive exchange between leaders and followers whereby followers were rewarded or recognized for accomplishing agreed upon objectives". Transactional leadership is a practical and directive approach that relies on clear exchanges between leaders and followers, emphasizing the importance of rewards and penalties to achieve organizational goals. This type of leadership style works well in a highly organized environment like the military, meaning also that this approach is not suitable in organizations where managers expect an out-of-the-box thinking and open communication culture. (Zakeer & Allah 2016, 3-4.)

Transactional leadership theory was developed as a response to earlier leadership theories, especially trait theory, which was criticized for ignoring the context and the way leaders interact with their team. It was introduced to address these issues by focusing on the importance of the relationship between leaders and their team members. (Zakeer & Allah 2016, 3-4.)

Transactional leadership theory is often used as an opponent to transformational leadership. Where transactional leadership focuses on organizational performance, efficiency and supervision, transformational leadership focuses on inspiring change, creating a shared vision and motivating

employees to achieve higher levels of performance and personal development. Burns first produced the idea of transformational leadership in 1978, and Bass later built on it. Bass significantly refined Burns' theory of transformational leadership, expanding its conceptual framework and practical applications. Bass emphasized that transformational leaders motivate followers to transcend their self-interests for the collective good of the team or organization. (Reza 2019, 120-121.)

He defined transformational leaders as those who raise followers' awareness about the importance of outcomes and encourage them to achieve more than they initially believed possible. In contrast to Burns, who saw transformational and transactional leadership as mutually exclusive, Bass suggested that leadership can simultaneously display both styles. He emphasized that transformational leadership builds upon transactional leadership and augments the effects of transactional leadership on followers. (Reza 2019, 120-121.)

Bass's work provided a more detailed model for understanding how transformational leaders operate within organizations. He argued that transformational leadership creates a context that fosters human capacity development by aligning individual and organizational goals, thereby enhancing overall performance and job satisfaction among followers. Bass's refinements led to extensive empirical research that validated the effectiveness of transformational leadership across various organizational settings. His studies demonstrated that transformational leadership positively correlates with increased job satisfaction, motivation, and respect towards leaders, as well as improved organizational performance. (Reza 2019, 120-121.)

There are four core components that transformational leaders have. The first one is idealized Influence which means that leaders serve as role models, demonstrating ethical behavior and earning followers' trust. The second component is inspirational motivation which means that leaders articulate a compelling vision that inspires and motivates followers to commit to shared goals. The third one is intellectual stimulation which means that leaders encourage creativity and innovation by challenging assumptions and fostering an environment where followers feel safe to express new ideas. And the fourth is individualized consideration which means that leaders provide personalized support and mentorship, recognizing the individual needs and contributions of each follower. (Stewart 2006,12.)

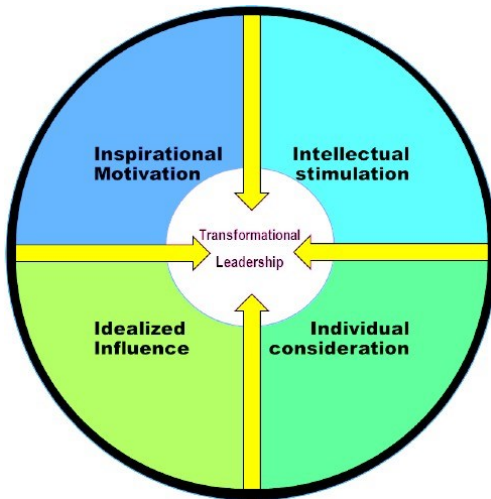


Figure 1. Components of transformational leadership (Susilo 2018, 129)

In summary, transactional leadership is most effective in environments that require routine operations, clear structures, and the achievement of short-term objectives. This approach relies on a system of rewards and penalties to manage performance, often maintaining the existing organizational framework. In contrast, transformational leadership is particularly valuable in contexts that demand innovation, strategic change, and the empowerment of employees. By fostering a shared vision and encouraging personal and professional growth, transformational leaders inspire higher levels of engagement and facilitate long-term organizational success. While both leadership styles have their merits depending on situational needs, transformational leadership is generally linked to greater employee motivation and sustained positive change within organizations.

2.1.2 Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a leadership philosophy that focuses on humility, empathy, and ethical use of power. Rather than pursuing personal gain, a servant leader prioritizes the needs of their employees and aims to foster a supportive and positive work environment. This approach is about unleashing employees' potential, creating a workplace that inspires intrinsic motivation, and building strong, meaningful relationships with mutual respect and dignity. Servant leadership is founded on the belief that leaders earn trust by placing the needs of their followers above their own interests, focusing on benefits for both workers and society instead of merely aiming for profit. It integrates a humanistic and spiritual perspective into leadership, challenging traditional authoritarian models. (Wong, Davey & Church 2007, 7-10.)

While servant leadership has been criticized for being idealistic and difficult to implement in certain situations, its benefits are significant. It helps prevent the abuse of power, boosts morale at work, reduces burnout, and increases both productivity and profits. By focusing on ethical behavior and giving employees more control, servant leadership aims to build caring communities and support everyone's growth, making it a powerful way to manage. It's become popular in leadership discussions and is seen as an answer to problems like corporate scandals, toxic workplaces, and employees feeling disconnected. In the end, servant leadership is a style that combines caring for people with achieving business success. (Wong, Davey & Church 2007, 7-10.)

2.1.3 Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership theory underlines the importance of leaders being genuine, self-aware, and guided by strong moral values. The theory emerged as a response to increasing interest in ethical leadership and the need for trust and integrity in organizational settings. Authentic leaders are characterized by four core components: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective. (Dickson 2023, 15-16.)

Self-awareness refers to a leader's understanding of their own strengths, weaknesses, and values. Relational transparency means being open and honest with others, which helps build trust in the team. Balanced processing means that authentic leaders consider diverse viewpoints before making decisions, ensuring fairness and inclusiveness. An internalized moral perspective ensures that their actions are guided by personal ethics rather than external pressures. (Dickson 2023, 15-16; Avolio, & Gardner 2005, 322-328.)

Unlike other leadership models that focus mainly on achieving performance outcomes, authentic leadership centers on the development of trust-based relationships and long-term personal and organizational growth. The theory highlights the role of life experiences, including adversity, in shaping a leader's authenticity. By being true to themselves and acting consistently with their values, authentic leaders foster a positive organizational culture, employee engagement, and sustainable leadership effectiveness. (Dickson 2023, 15-16; Avolio, & Gardner 2005, 328-331.)

2.2 Change Management

"Successful change management is a function of effective leadership". According to Maxwell, in 1996 a leader must lead from the front to show the way, to encourage change and growth. Kotter

in 1995 lifted that the requirement of an effective leader in change is made even more important by the fact that change, by its very definition, requires the creation of new and therefore it is the leader's responsibility to manage the change. (Mehta, Maheshwari & Sharma 2014, 3.)

Change management started back in 1909 when Arnold Van Gennep described change as three steps: leaving where we are now, going through a transition, and settling into a new future. In 1948 Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist, introduced three states of change: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Before 1990, early research focused on understanding human behavior and the dynamics of change within organizations. Scholars from various disciplines contributed insights that laid the groundwork for understanding how individuals and systems respond to change. In the 1990s organizations recognized the importance of managing the human side of change. Factors such as evolving employee-employer relationships and geopolitical influences drove the adoption of change management practices. After that, change management was formalized as a structured process within organizations. Then the development of various models and methodologies started, such as Kurt Lewin's 3-step change model and John Kotter's 8-step process for leading change. These frameworks provided organizations with actionable steps to implement and manage change effectively. (Mento, Jones & Dirndorfer 2002, 49-56.)

Today, change management is recognized as a critical capability for organizations. It continues to evolve, incorporating insights from related disciplines such as behavioral science and agile methodologies. The focus has shifted towards building organizational change capacity and enhancing the professional development of change leaders. The future of change management is expected to involve greater collaboration across disciplines and a stronger emphasis on individual and organizational development. (Mento, Jones & Dirndorfer 2002, 57-58.)

Change management is an important part of helping organizations grow, but it often comes with big challenges that can hurt even the best plans. As companies try to keep up with changing markets, new technology, and customer needs, they often face problems that make change hard to succeed. Many change efforts fail because employees resist the change or do not get involved with it. Change can create uncertainty, and employees may push back because they are afraid of the unknown, comfortable with how things are, or don't understand why the change is needed. This resistance can show up in different ways, from quietly not following the changes to openly opposing them, and it can slow down or stop the change from happening. (Kerber & Buono 2005, 24-25.)

Overcoming change resistant attitudes and behaviors requires sustained effort and a strategic approach to cultural transformation. Challenges of change management extend to a strategic level as well. Poorly defined change strategies can undermine long-term success. Starting with an

incomplete strategy or being inflexible in the face of evolving circumstances can lead to misalignment between change efforts and organizational realities. A disconnect between the proposed changes and the existing organizational culture can significantly increase resistance and the likelihood of failure. Setting unrealistic expectations is another common reason for failure in change management. Pushing for too much change too quickly can lead to burnout and change fatigue among employees, potentially derailing the entire initiative. Balancing ambition with realistic timelines and expectations is crucial for maintaining momentum and engagement throughout the change process. (Kerber & Buono 2005, 24-25.)

Perhaps one of the most critical functions of communication in change management is its role in addressing resistance. Kerber and Buono (2005, 33) state that organizations that have good communication structures are more likely to have a higher level of change capacity. Change can feel uncomfortable, and it's normal for people to resist it. Effective communication acknowledges this resistance, providing a platform for concerns to be voiced and addressed. It allows management to explore and implement techniques for overcoming resistance, ensuring that employees understand not just the what and how of change, but also the why. (Kerber & Buono 2005, 32-33.)

2.2.1 Kurt Lewin's 3-Step Model

Kurt Lewin's 3-Step change management model is a foundational framework in the field of organizational change, providing a structured approach to managing transitions within organizations. This model emphasizes the importance of understanding human behavior in the context of change, and it consists of three phases: unfreeze, change, and refreeze. (Cummings, Bridgman & Brown 2016, 34.)

The first stage, unfreeze, is crucial for preparing the organization for change. This step is about helping people see why change is needed and why it's important to act quickly. Lewin posits that organizations often operate in a state of equilibrium, where existing behaviors and processes are ingrained. To initiate change, leaders must disrupt this equilibrium by highlighting the deficiencies of the current state and the benefits of the proposed changes. Effective communication is essential during this phase; leaders must articulate a compelling vision that resonates with employees, addressing their concerns and fostering buy-in. Activities such as conducting a thorough analysis of current processes and engaging stakeholders are vital to successfully unfreezing the organization. (Burnes 2004, 985.)

Once the organization is prepared, the second phase, change, involves the actual implementation of new processes, behaviors, or structures. This stage requires a careful, often iterative approach, where feedback from employees is actively sought and incorporated. Leaders play a critical role in guiding their teams through this transition, providing support and resources to help employees adapt to the new ways of working. Continuous communication is key to alleviating uncertainty and reinforcing the vision for change. Celebrating small wins during this phase can also help maintain momentum and motivate employees to embrace the new changes. (Burnes 2004, 985-986.)

The final stage, refreeze, focuses on solidifying the changes within the organization to ensure they are sustained over time. This phase is essential to prevent employees from reverting to old habits and behaviors. Leaders must reinforce the new practices by embedding them into the organizational culture, which may involve updating policies, procedures, and training programs. Noticing and rewarding the first people who support the change can help others accept and adjust to it too. Regular feedback and ongoing support are also critical in this phase to address any lingering concerns and to ensure that the changes are effectively integrated into the daily operations of the organization. (Burnes 2004, 986.)

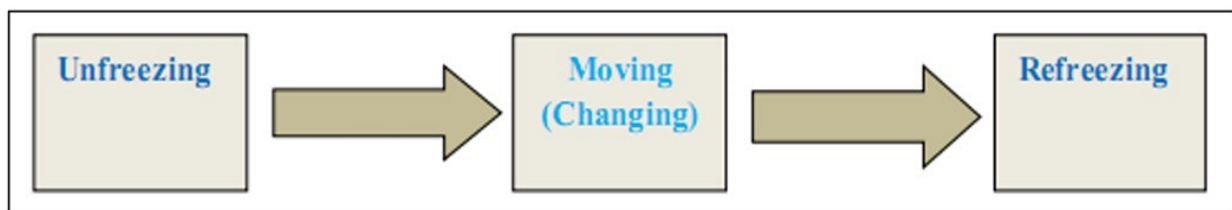


Figure 2. Lewin's Change Model (Laig & Abocejo 2021, 35)

One of the primary criticisms of Lewin's model is its simplistic approach to change. This linearity fails to capture the complexities and nuances of real-world organizational change, which often involves multiple overlapping processes and feedback loops. In contemporary settings, change is rarely a straightforward, one-time event; it is often ongoing and requires continuous adaptation rather than a fixed endpoint. (Cummings, Bridgman & Brown 2016, 34; Burnes 2004, 992.)

Lewin's model operates under the assumption that organizations can be stabilized after change is implemented. This "refreezing" stage implies that change can be solidified and maintained. However, in today's fast-paced business environment, organizations must remain agile and responsive to external and internal shifts. The need for continuous improvement and adaptation contradicts the model's notion of a stable state after change. (Burnes 2004, 990.)

2.2.2 The 8 Steps of Kotter's Change Model

Kotter's 8-Step Change Model is a framework designed to facilitate successful organizational change. Developed by John Kotter, a professor at Harvard Business School, the model is based on his extensive research into the change processes of various organizations. The steps are structured to create a systematic approach to change, ensuring that all critical aspects are addressed. (Appelbaum, Habashy, Malo & Shafiq 2012.)

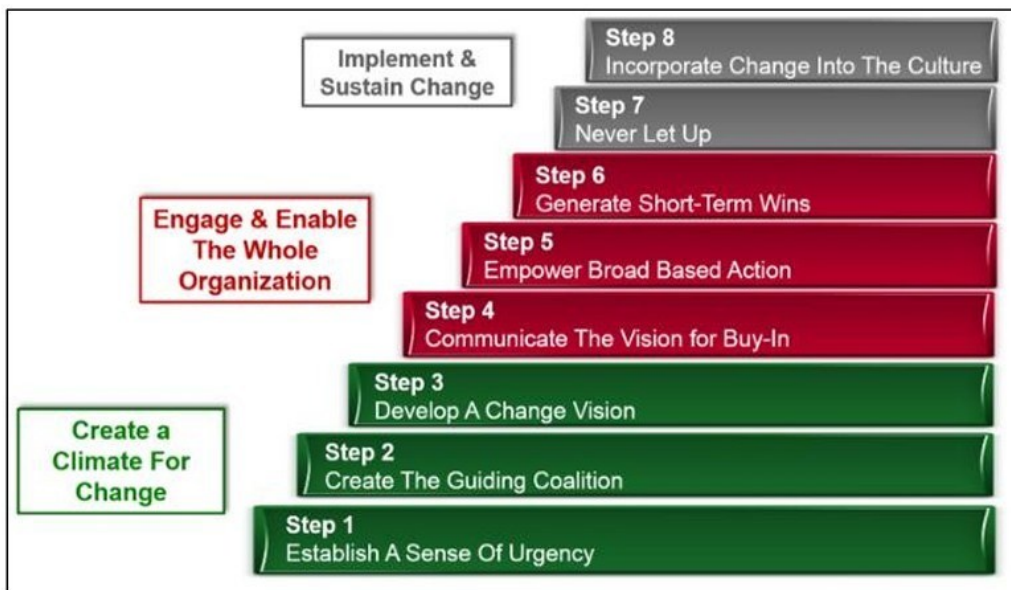


Figure 3. Kotter's 8-Step Change Model (Laig & Abocejo 2021, 36)

In the first three steps the idea is to focus on creating a climate for change. This step includes creating a sense of urgency, creating the guiding coalition and developing a change vision.

Establishing a sense of urgency is crucial to gaining needed cooperation. With complacency high, transformations usually go nowhere because few people are even interested in working on the change problem. With urgency low, it's difficult to put together a group with enough power and credibility to guide the effort or to convince key individuals to spend the time necessary to create and communicate a change vision. (Kotter 2012, 37)

Here establishing a sense of urgency means that the need for change is created by highlighting the potential threats and opportunities ahead. This step is crucial for motivating stakeholders to engage in the change process. After the sense of urgency is created you assemble a group of influential individuals from various levels and departments within the organization to lead the change initiative. This group should be committed to driving the change forward. (Kotter 2012, 37-48.)

Kotter emphasizes the importance of powerful guiding coalitions as the drivers for change implementation. "Today, and more so in the immediate future, we will be seeing many additional

attempts to transform organizations. Yet without a powerful guiding coalition, change stalls and carnage grows.” (Kotter 2012, 49-61.)

The next step is to create a clear and compelling vision for the future that outlines how the organization will change. “Vision refers to a picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create that future.” Vision should be easily communicated and understood by all stakeholders. (Kotter 2012, 62-67.)

Once the climate for change has been established, the next step is to engage and empower the entire organization in the change process. This involves clearly communicating the vision, enabling broad-based action, and generating short-term wins. The vision should be shared widely and frequently across the organization to build support and ensure everyone understands the goals of the change initiative. After communicating the vision, it is crucial to identify and remove any barriers that might hinder progress. This may require addressing individual resistance or modifying organizational structures that stand in the way of change. Setting achievable short-term goals that demonstrate early success is also important. Celebrating these early wins helps to build momentum and maintain enthusiasm for the change effort. It is essential to leverage the credibility gained from these early successes to drive further change. This means reinforcing the new behaviors and addressing any remaining obstacles. Finally, to sustain change over the long term, ensure that the new approaches become embedded in the organizational culture by clearly articulating how they contribute to ongoing success. This step is vital for making the change last. (Kotter 2012, 75-108.)

2.2.3 The ADKAR Model

In the evolving landscape of organizational management, the ADKAR model has emerged as an important framework for implementing and sustaining change. The acronym ADKAR encapsulates the five stages of individual change: awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement. At its core, the ADKAR model posits that successful organizational change is fundamentally rooted in individual transformation. It provides a framework that guides individuals through the change process, ensuring that each person understands the need for change, develops a willingness to participate, acquires the necessary knowledge, demonstrates the ability to implement new skills, and receives reinforcement to sustain the change. (Hiatt & Creasey 2012, 22; Hiatt 2006, 15).

One of the key strengths of the ADKAR model lies in its structured approach to change management. By breaking down the change process into distinct stages, it allows organizations to address specific challenges easier. This systematic approach creates more clarity and significantly

increases the likelihood of successful change implementation. Also, what makes the ADKAR model different from others is that it focuses on how each person changes. By recognizing that organizational change ultimately depends on individual adoption, the model helps mitigate resistance and build commitment at a personal level. This focus on the human element of change is particularly crucial in today's workforce, where employee engagement and buy-in are paramount to success. (Hiatt & Creasey 2012, 22-35; Hiatt 2006, 15).

Good communication is key in the early stages of ADKAR, like building awareness and desire. By focusing on clear and effective communication, organizations can make sure employees understand why the change is happening and what part they play in it. This transparency helps reduce uncertainty and resistance. The model also places significant emphasis on skill development and reinforcement. The knowledge and ability stages ensure that employees receive the necessary training and resources to adapt to new processes or technologies. The final stage of reinforcement is crucial for sustaining changes over time, increasing the long-term success of change initiatives. (Hiatt & Creasey 2012, 40).

The individual-centered approach of the ADKAR model enables targeted and effective change management across individuals in different organizational roles. For instance, leaders, supervisors, and employees may find themselves at different stages of the change process, and ADKAR provides a structured framework to support each of them accordingly. This personalized approach is critical to the success of change initiatives, as organizational transformation ultimately occurs only when each individual internalizes and implements the change. (Hiatt 2006, 58).

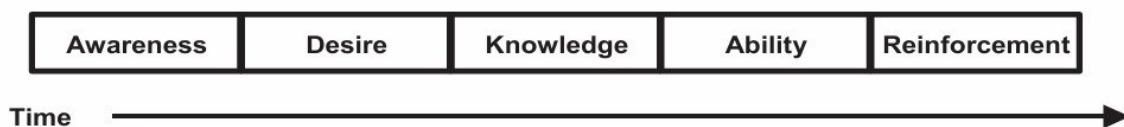


Figure 4. ADKAR change elements (Hiatt & Creasey 2012, 35)

2.3 Summary: Combining leadership and change management

Effective leadership is crucial for driving organizational transformation. By combining various leadership theories with established change management practices, leaders can create a framework for guiding their organizations through periods of transition and growth (Gill 2002, 312-

314). At the heart of successful organizational change lies the ability to inspire and motivate employees. “We can no longer discuss leadership in general terms with no reference to the changing environment.” (Mehta, Maheshwari & Sharma 2014, 3.)

In today’s business environment, combining leadership and change management theories is essential for effective organizational transformation. Leadership provides direction and motivation, while change management offers tools and processes to implement change. Combining leadership theories and change management practices together can provide us certain advantages. (Gill 2002, 312-314.)

Leadership is seen as a driver of change. Modern leadership theories emphasize flexibility, engagement, and the importance of building relationships. Transformational leadership centers on developing a collective vision, inspiring team members, and encouraging individual development. Its key elements include idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. (Gill 2002, 312-314; Reza 2019, 120–121). This style supports change by aligning individual and organizational goals and improving job satisfaction.

Servant leadership emphasizes empathy, trust, and ethical behavior. It prioritizes employee development and well-being over authority, aiming to build motivation and reduce resistance during change (Wong, Davey & Church 2007, 7–10).

Structured approaches from change management are useful in today’s world. Change management theories provide practical frameworks for guiding change efforts. Lewin’s three-step model (unfreeze, change, refreeze) outlines how to prepare for, implement, and sustain change (Burnes 2004, 985–986). Kotter’s eight-step model expands on this by emphasizing urgency, vision, communication, and culture reinforcement (Kotter 2012, 37–108).

The ADKAR model focuses on individual change and includes awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement (Hiatt & Creasey 2012, 22–40; Hiatt 2006, 15–58). This person-centered approach helps identify where individuals are in the change process and what support they need.

Leadership and change management intersect in practice. Effective change requires both strong leadership and structured processes. For instance, Kotter (1995) as cited in (Mehta, Maheshwari & Sharma 2014, 3) argues that change must be led from the front. Leaders create urgency (Kotter 2012, 37), support transition (Burnes 2004, 985), and build trust (Wong, Davey & Church 2007, 9). The ADKAR model supports this by giving leaders tools to manage individual resistance and promote engagement (Hiatt 2006, 15–58).

Organizational culture strongly influences change outcomes. Leaders shape culture through decisions and behavior, and cultural alignment is critical for change acceptance (Kerber & Buono 2005, 24–25). Clear communication reduces resistance and increases change capacity (Kerber & Buono 2005, 32–33).

We can therefore state that leadership theories and change management models complement each other. Together, they help organizations manage both the human and structural sides of change. Leaders who understand and apply both areas can guide organizations through transformation more effectively and sustainably.

3 Conducting the research

This chapter outlines the research approach, methodology and process. The approach integrates qualitative case study methods, semi-structured interviews with professionals working as leaders in different organizations, and a thematic data analysis. Interview questions and thematic analysis were performed partially with the help of ChatGPT-4.

3.1 Workplan and project management

The research work for this thesis started in May 2024, when the topic suggestion was accepted, and a thesis supervisor was appointed. The aim was to finish the thesis work in spring or summer of 2025. In 2024 the focus was more on settling the topic of the research and building the theoretical framework. I had some setbacks with the topic, and I needed to change it during the early summer of 2024. The interview questions were planned and structured in January 2025 and the interviews took place in the last week of February 2025. The data analysis started right after the interviews in March 2025 and lasted until early April 2025. The results of the analysis and answers to research questions are presented in chapter four. The timetable plan is shown in table 2 below.

Table 2. Thesis timeline

Task	Timeline
Setting up the topic and research questions	March – June (2024)
Writing the theoretical framework	May - August (2024)
Interviewee selections	September 2024 – November 2025
Sending out the interview invitations	January 2025
Defining the interview questions and themes	December 2024 – February 2025
Holding the interviews	February 2025
Making the transcriptions	March 2025
Data analysis	March 2025

Findings	April 2025
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3.2 Research objectives and approach

This study relies on the insights made from the interviews combined to leadership theories and change management theories. The core of this study lies in conducting developmental research through applied research methods. In this approach, existing knowledge is utilized to generate new insights and practical applications for professional practice. (Toikko & Rantanen 2009, 19-23.)

The research task is approached by using a constructive research methodology. Constructive research is a form of applied research in which the desired outcome of the study is clearly defined. It involves creating a concrete solution to a real-world problem by drawing on theoretical knowledge. This study is qualitative in nature, aiming to produce knowledge that enhances understanding of organizational change and its impact from leaders' point of view, including reflections from leadership. (Moilanen, Ojasalo, Ritalahti 2009, 38.)

Constructive research can also be regarded as a form of case study research. It shares similarities with ethnographic studies, theory-illustrating, and theory-testing case studies, as well as action research. Compared to these approaches, constructive research places a stronger emphasis on problem-solving and includes an authentic attempt to derive theoretical conclusions from empirical work. A defining characteristic of constructive research is its integration of practical problems and their solutions with theoretical knowledge. Through the constructive research process and the resulting solution, the objective is to influence and improve organizational practices and operations, particularly in cases where solving the problem necessarily requires theoretical understanding. (Moilanen, Ojasalo, Ritalahti 2009, 67-68.)

3.3 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are a good research method when one wants to get a deeper understanding of a situation or clarify aspects of a situation. There are different type of interviews and which one used is dependent on the fact that what type of information is needed.

According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2022) the reason for conducting a semi-structured interview instead of a survey is for example the possibility to deepen the understanding of the topic by asking clarifying questions or follow-up questions or inquiring after the rationale behind the expressed opinion. Semi-structured interviews also allow the emergence of possible new themes

related to the subject from the interviewee (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000, 35). Semi-structured interviews are usually based on the themes of the study. In addition to the structured themes, it is useful to write down some specific questions in case the conversation does not start to flow. Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2000) also recommend considering if it is necessary to include all the themes of the study in the interviews. This allows for more flexibility in the interview situation. It is also important to formulate the questions in a way that allows the meaning of the question to be clearly understood. Neutrality in the formulation of the questions is also recommended especially in the sense that the interviewee does not use negative terms in the formulation of the questions (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022, 103-105.)

In semi-structured interviews questions are open-ended, and the interviewer is freer to choose the order of the questions even though the questions would be predefined. The discussion topic, aka themes, is predefined, but the conversation flows without predefined questions. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher does not strictly follow a fixed order when covering the topics of the research. Instead, the questions are designed to ensure that the main topics, or as many as possible, are addressed during the conversation. The researcher actively manages the interview, using a prepared interview guide to stay on track. If the participant's answers move away from the intended topics, the researcher uses conversational techniques to bring the discussion back to focus. The researcher may also ask new, unplanned questions if interesting or important issues come up during the interview. Open-ended questions are used to encourage participants to expand on their ideas, share their personal views and experiences, and speak in their own words. Although yes/no questions might occasionally be asked, they should always be followed by open-ended questions that seek to gather more detailed information through clarification, elaboration, justification, examples, or illustrations. (Karatsareas 2022, 100-104.)

3.4 Participant selection

Choosing experts for the interviews was a straightforward process. I consider myself to be lucky to be surrounded with so many experts that were eager to join this research. I aimed to gather deep insights of the research topic and personal reflections on organizational changes from a leader's point of view. The interviewees were selected based on multiple considerations: their direct relevance to the research subject, the potential to provide unique insider perspectives, and their ability to offer comprehensive knowledge across different hierarchical levels. The selection process was focusing on identifying individuals who can provide high-quality, specialized information that addresses specific research questions.

When choosing the experts, I evaluated them according to professional backgrounds, depth of expertise, and potential to contribute meaningful insights. I aimed to seek balanced perspectives by including experts from various levels of different organizations and viewpoints, which helped mitigate individual biases and created a more holistic understanding of the research area.

The interviews were held to leaders and organization heads who have been planning and implementing multiple strategic changes in their career. The process started with three candidates that had expressed their interest to be involved with this research and the rest of the candidates were people they recommended would be suitable for an interview as well. The process also included choosing between candidates since there were more enthusiastic participants than room for interviews. The interviewees included people with different ages and people from different stage of their career and organization.

3.5 Defining the interview questions

As the aim was to get a deeper understanding of the role of leaders in change the focus when defining the interview questions was to make sure that the conversations could be flowing and leave as much room as possible for the interviewees to share their experiences through examples. When choosing the interview questions the focus was to keep the questions open ended and to guide the interviewees to make reflections on their past experiences all the while remembering that the idea is also to find answers to the research questions. ChatGPT-4 was asked to provide examples of possible themes for questions based on the research questions. The options given by ChatGPT-4 were enhanced and modified by the author and the author also added other questions related to the themes.

The interview questions were categorized by the themes of the research questions and the key concepts of this research. The main themes were key characteristics of leadership, change management and communication, challenges during change and leveraging organizational culture. These themes were rooted in the research questions and the theoretical framework.

The first theme I focused on was the key characteristics of leadership. This theme was related to the first research question as well as the leadership theories presented in the theoretical framework.

The second theme explores how leaders leverage organizational culture to facilitate change. This theme came from the second research question. Culture and especially a change ready culture is also emphasized in the change management theories, like Kotter's 8 step models last step

“incorporate change into the culture” and ADKAR. A change-ready culture is not something that happens by chance; it is cultivated by leaders who understand the power of organizational norms and values in driving transformation.

The third theme addresses the challenges faced by leaders during the implementation of change. Managing resistance is perhaps one of the most significant obstacles, as leaders must find ways to address and mitigate opposition from employees at all levels of the organization. This theme is related to the third research question and the resistance of change is a major part of the change management models discussed in the theoretical framework. All the models (ADKAR, Kotter’s 8steps and Lewin’s 3-steps) emphasize communication as a crucial part of change management processes and with successful communication an organization can have less resistance to change.

In total there was twenty-four different questions categorized by the themes and then two additional questions that defined the interviewees background. Key characteristics of leadership theme had the most question options.

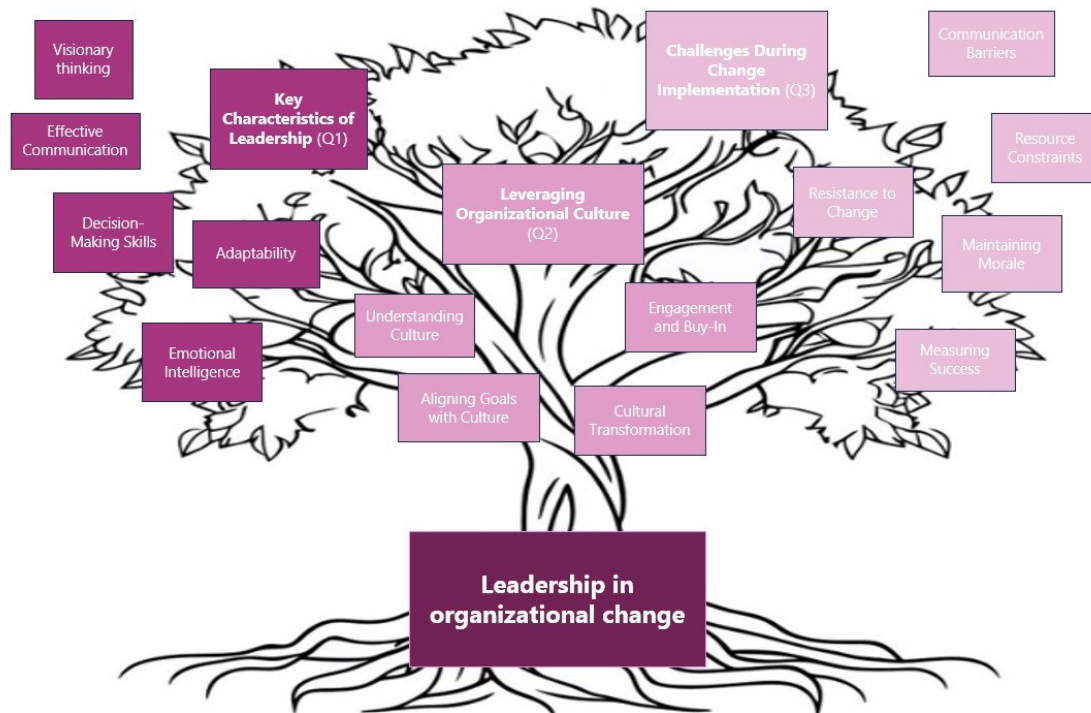


Figure 5. Interview themes derived from the theory.

When defining the interview questions and themes I made this theme picture, and I also added it to the research briefing that I sent to all interviewees beforehand (appendix 2). The aim of this was to make it also easier for the participant to get familiar with the topics of the interview without having to do that much or any research beforehand.

3.6 Interviews

All interviewees had received a research briefing and a consent form before the interview time via email (appendix 2). The timeslots for the interviews were booked from each calendar on January to make sure people had the time to attend and to prepare for the interview if they wished to do so. No preparation from the participants was demanded beforehand. By attending the interview, the participants gave their consent to be involved in the research (appendix 2).

All questions from the combined interview questions were not asked, but the aim was to ask about each theme and to have all candidates answer few set questions. Otherwise, the questions came in different orders and in different forms in all interviews. The focus was to let the candidates focus on talking and give them time to reflect.

The time booked for each interview was one hour, but there was no time pressure. We spent the time that the interviewees wanted to spend on answering the questions.

Table 3. Interview details

Identifier	Interviewee role	Length (minutes)	Method	Date
INT1	Department Head	49	Teams	24.02.2025
INT2	Leader	56	Face to face	25.02.2025
INT3	Organisation Head	90	Teams	25.02.2025
INT4	Leader	50	Face to face	26.02.2025
INT5	Department Head	58	Teams	26.02.2025
INT6	Organisation Head	49	Face to face	27.02.2025

While the intention was to follow ready-set questions with all participants the interviews were all different from each other in some way. In the interviews, questions were designed to guide the discussion, but responses did not always directly address the questions or initially provided very

limited information. Discussions also flowed differently, and respondents shifted back and forth between themes and questions. The interviews also contained many relevant reflections from the interviewees and those led to additional questions and findings.

3.7 Data analysis method – thematic analysis

The analysis of this research was data driven and it was done with a thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis is a commonly used approach for examining qualitative data. This method entails recognizing, analyzing, and describing recurring patterns or themes found within the data. This method is particularly useful for capturing recurring ideas and exploring underlying meanings in interview responses. Thematic analysis follows a six-step process, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step is familiarization with data, where researchers immerse themselves in the interview transcripts by reading and re-reading them to identify initial insights. This is followed by generating initial codes, which involve systematically labeling significant words, phrases, or sections of the data. The next step, searching for themes, requires grouping related codes together to form potential themes that represent patterns across the data. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 87; Karatsareas 2022, 106.)

After identifying themes, researchers proceed to review themes, ensuring that each theme accurately represents the data and is distinct from others. In the defining and naming themes stage, each theme is given a clear definition to capture its essence. Finally, in producing the final report, researchers present their findings with supporting evidence from the data, offering interpretations that contribute to the broader research discussion. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 87; Karatsareas 2022, 106.)



Figure 6. The steps of thematic data analysis (adapted from Braun & Clarke 2006)

Thematic analysis is valued for its flexibility, as it can be applied across different research designs and theoretical frameworks. It allows for rich and detailed analysis, making it suitable for exploring complex qualitative data. Additionally, it is accessible and easy to learn, making it a popular choice among both novice and experienced researchers. Moreover, researchers can choose between data-driven or theory-driven approaches, depending on their study's objectives. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 87; Karatsareas 2022, 106-108.)

Despite its advantages, thematic analysis comes with certain challenges. One major limitation is subjectivity, as researchers' interpretations may be influenced by their personal biases, necessitating careful reflexivity. The process is also time-consuming, requiring multiple rounds of coding and reviewing to ensure accuracy. Additionally, the fragmentation of data into codes and themes may lead to a loss of context, potentially oversimplifying complex narratives. (Karatsareas 2022, 106-108.)

3.7.1 Analysis process

All interviews were recorded with a mobile phone, even though some of the interviews were held via Microsoft Teams. The capability of Microsoft Teams to produce transcriptions or summaries,

particularly during flowing and open dialogues that may contain words or phrases unrecognized by the system, was not favored by the author. Therefore, independent recordings of the interviews were made to facilitate the creation of accurate transcriptions. This approach also allowed for the notation of long pauses or changes in tone, for example. At the beginning of each interview, interviewees were encouraged to speak freely without concern for GDPR-related issues.

Once the interviews were conducted, the transcriptions were “cleaned” to be used in analysis. The recordings were listened to carefully, with frequent pauses, and detailed notes were taken. Word-for-word transcriptions were produced, including notations of pauses between questions and answers, as well as changes in tone and reactions to questions. During this process, all responses were anonymized to ensure that neither companies nor individuals could be identified. The transcriptions and recordings were reviewed multiple times to identify similarities and patterns in the responses. As the transcriptions were being prepared, a theme and code map was developed on a Miro board, as shown below.



Figure 7. Miro board for data analysis.

After doing the analysis of the interviews all the recordings and transcriptions were deleted from the authors computer and phone, as was informed to the interviewees in the research briefing (appendix 2).

4 Results

This chapter will dive deeper into the results of the research and the findings from the interviews. Results are presented in three different categories. First, they are analyzed based on the connections to the theoretical framework of this thesis, then they are analyzed based on the themes found from the interview data and after these, this chapter will summarize the role of leadership in an organizational change based on the findings.

The aim was to explore the role of leadership in organizational change, guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the key characteristics of leadership that contribute to successful organizational change?

RQ2: How do leaders leverage organizational culture to facilitate change?

RQ3: What are the challenges faced by leaders during the implementation of change?

It is important to note that the sample size of this thesis consisted of six participants. Thus, the findings reflect the perspectives and experiences of these individuals and may not be representative of the broader industry. However, the insights provided by these professionals offer valuable viewpoints of leadership skills needed in the current business environment.

The analysis of the interviews is categorized into themes based on the findings from the interviews. The four themes for the analysis are: who leaders need to be, how leaders drive change, the context in which leaders operate, and obstacles leaders face in change management. Each interviewee had different paths of how they became a leader and the years of experience when calculated together was 165 years.

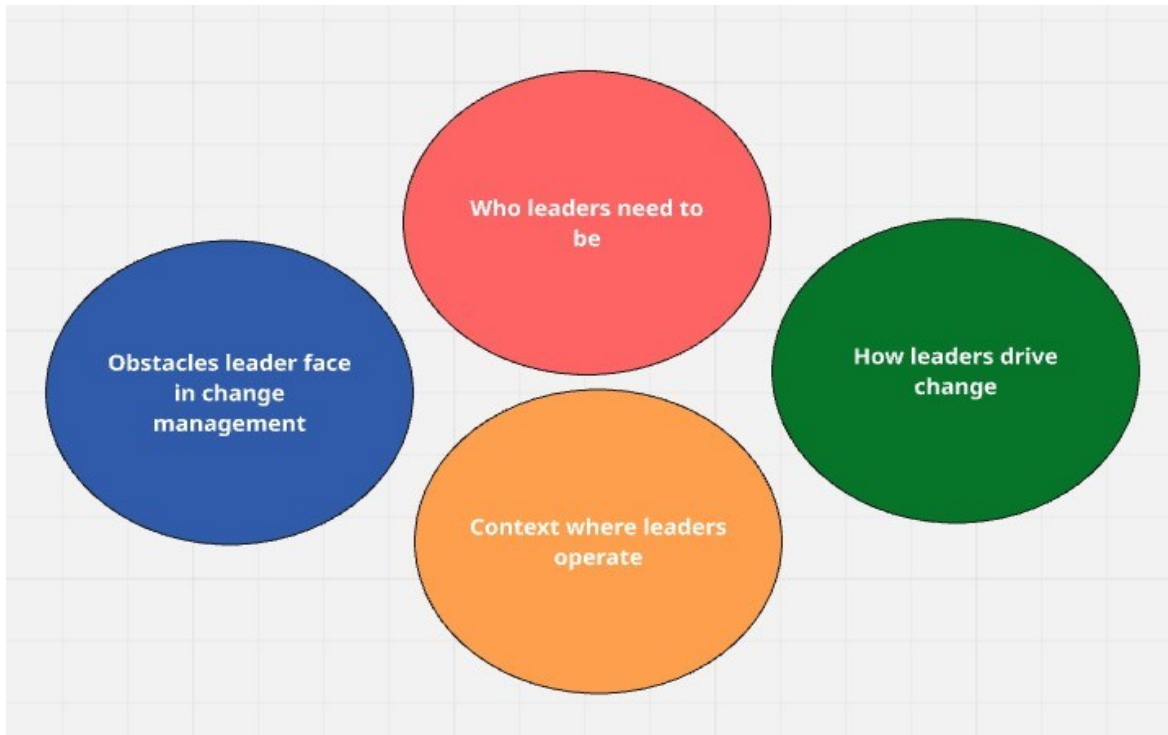


Figure 8. Themes from findings.

The interviews revealed significant connections to change management theories, leadership theories, and change leadership principles. Through the perspectives shared by the interviewees, key insights emerge that align with my theoretical framework, offering a deeper understanding of how leaders navigate organizational change and inspire their teams.

4.1 Connections with theoretical framework

Here the alignment between interview data, change management, leadership theories and change leadership principles is examined. The six interviewees shared personal and practical approaches to leading organizational change, which reflect elements of the theoretical framework.

The interviews revealed an alignment between lived leadership experiences and established theories. The interviewees didn't use these models in a formal or textbook way, but they put the ideas into practice through real, thoughtful, and caring leadership actions. The themes of clarity, vision, empathy, adaptability, and structured communication emerged as common topics.

This shows that while formal change models help to give structure, successful leadership during change is really about being human, staying self-aware, emotionally intelligent, and open to learning and growing. The leaders in these interviews naturally blended ideas from ADKAR, Kotter,

Lewin, and different leadership styles like servant, transformational, and authentic leadership to fit their own situations.

4.1.1 Alignment with change management theories

Leaders in the interviews expressed the importance of creating awareness, urgency and building desire for change through proactive communication. These are the fundamental steps also in ADKAR model (Hiatt 2006, 15), Kotter's 8-step model (Kotter 2012, 37-48), and Lewin's 3-step model (Burnes 2004, 985). INT1 and INT4 highlighted the need for change, demonstrating both awareness and desire creation in the change process. "We started the communication about the change very early and we repeated the information many times to make sure that people were onboard" (INT1). "All changes I need to chop into pieces and find the key things to my team... and what do the changes mean to us and our daily lives." (INT4).

Communication and its importance was also highlighted by all the interviewees. Like Kotter's model setting out a clear and compelling vision (Kotter 2012, 62-67) and then communicating it clearly was seen as an important step by all the interviewees. "I like to keep the focus on the organization's vision and goals, so people understand the reason behind the change." (INT6). "Clear and short. The less fluff you have in your communication, the less misunderstandings there will be." (INT5).

Change management models also include steps of sustaining the changes with reinforcement (Hiatt 2006, 58) and incorporating the change into the culture of the organization (Kotter 2012, 75108). These were fields where the interviewees found the most room for personal growth when reflecting the past change initiatives they have been implementing. A lot of effort is put into the planning and implementation of the change initiatives, but the follow-up and reinforcement were falling behind.

A very important and difficult part of change that I see that I am lacking is the follow-up. A lot of effort is put to get through the change but the follow-up I am not that good at. That is for me an improvement area. (INT1)

Reinforcement, follow up and the rest of the change journey. I have put a lot of effort not to the beginning of the change journey and implementing the change, but I want to improve in the reflections and learnings. (INT1)

4.1.2 Alignment with leadership theories

Servant leadership prioritizes the growth and well-being of people and communities (Wong, Davey & Church 2007, 7-10). It was deeply reflected in the compassionate and empathetic practices described by several leaders in the interviews. INT4 clearly embodied this approach: "I take my people into consideration. I think how I would want to be led in this situation." Similarly, INT5 noted, "Treat other people as you would like them to treat you." INT2 described creating psychological safety: "There can be individuals who don't have the courage to speak... I try to create the space with my own communication." Handling resistance individually, rather than collectively, was another consistent trait. "We share positive things together, and negative things are handled face-to-face with me." (INT4)

Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring change through vision, motivation, and individualized consideration (Reza 2019, 120-121). It was notably present in the way interviewees described motivating and aligning their teams during uncertainty. INT6 described herself as a "visionary with a holistic view," while INT3 explained the importance of being "a person who is relatable and human, but clear about the process and goals." INT1 reflected on successful post-change collaboration: "Seeing people come together... made it easier for a lot of people to understand the new structure." By these examples the interviewees illustrated a drive to inspire, align, and grow others, key characteristics of transformational leadership (Reza 2019, 120-121).

Authentic leadership involves leaders being self-aware so that they can deal with change and that requires learning new ways of operating. This leadership style was evidenced in responses dealing with resistance of change and the adaptations of approaching methods used by the interviewees. INT3 stated, "Every time... especially in bigger organizational changes, coming to terms with the changes takes time for me." Also, INT2 shared a similar sentiment: "I have had to have inner 'fights' with myself to be okay with the upcoming change." These reflections highlight a process of internal adaptation, openness to feedback, all central to authentic leadership.

4.1.3 Alignment with change leadership principles

The interviewees also demonstrated alignment with key principles of effective change leadership, particularly in areas such as empathy, communication strategies, resistance management, and trust in delegation.

Empathy was highlighted as a core trait for leading through change. When asked about the traits and skills that the interviewees would give to make a person a great leader in change INT1 stated:

“Large portion of empathy combined with clarity. Good communication skills. Visionary and holistic perspective.” INT1 and INT2 also emphasized creating safe spaces where employees felt comfortable voicing concerns or resistance, a practice essential for managing resistance effectively.

As a leader it is about the way to meet people. And how do you make people feel about talking to you about anything. A group of people can have a good level of psychological safety but there can be individuals who don't have the courage to speak or feel less safe psychologically. It shows in the type of interactions we have in the team. (INT2)

Clear, consistent communication during organizational changes was deemed critical by the interviewees. They stressed the importance of repetition and simplifying messages to ensure understanding across teams. INT1: “Keeping things as simple as possible. Giving examples ect. Repetition, come back to things repeatedly. Making sure that people have time to take it in.” INT5: “What makes anyone a good leader is good communication skills. Nothing can be done without it.”

4.2 Analysis by themes

These themes are raised from the interview data in the thematic analysis. The themes are rooted also in the research questions. The themes are who leaders need to be, how leaders drive change and the role of organizational culture in shaping how change is received and implemented.

4.2.1 Personal characteristics of a leader

The findings from the interviews highlight the personal characteristics and behaviors that enable leaders to successfully drive change, so **who exactly leaders need to be**, based on the interviewee's answers and insights. According to the findings, visionary thinking is essential. Leaders must set a clear direction for change and align it with organizational goals. Also, emotional intelligence and empathy play a crucial role in understanding employees' concerns and offering support, fostering trust throughout the transition.

Adaptability and resilience were considered to be equally important. They allow leaders to adjust their approach based on the situation and the team's needs. Also trust and delegation empower leaders to rely on their teams, ensuring that the change process is executed effectively. Finally, strong decision-making and problem-solving skills enable leaders to navigate uncertainty, manage resistance, and address competing priorities with confidence.

In every interview I asked as the last “mind game” for everyone to share what skills or traits would they give a leader who would be able to drive change with 100% succession rate. The picture below demonstrates the answers.



Figure 9. “The perfect change leader”

4.2.2 Approaches to managing change

These findings relate to the tactical approaches leaders use to manage change successfully and **how leaders drive change**. Managing resistance involves addressing employee concerns through open dialogue (emphasized by INT3 and INT6), one-on-one conversations (emphasized by INT4), and reinforcing the positive aspects of change (emphasized by INT3 and INT4). Effective communication strategies ensure understanding and engagement by providing clear, consistent, and transparent messaging.

According to the interviews, leaders must also balance transparency and confidentiality. Knowing when to share information and how to frame messages to maintain trust was a topic raised up by many.

But before that I learned that I need to strip all unnecessary humor and fluff. When you communicate with a large group of people from different cultures and backgrounds it is less likely to offend someone if you just keep to the point without extra fluff. I have made nearly all mistakes in my past and then learned from them to keep my communication clear and short. (INT5)

I want to communicate openly and honestly. But that makes the communication also difficult...No information is information. But communication is a hard skill to manage. (INT3)

Leading by example is crucial, as demonstrating a positive and proactive approach encourages employee buy-in.

There are always people who think that the change is not ok or good. More or less, you always have to look for the drivers for the change. I tend to listen to the worries and negativity for a while and then I just state that I think that that side is now well covered and let's focus on what we can gain from this situation or change. So, the idea is to let people let out the negativity and then start to turn the ship towards the upcoming change and what positive things will come from it. I tend to act as an example and lead through that. (INT3)

4.2.3 The cultural context leaders operate in

This theme focuses on the role of organizational culture in shaping **how change is received and implemented**. This was a theme that had the most diversity in the answers between the interviewees. In the end culture defines the context in which leaders operate.

Culture as a change enabler is evident in organizations with a history of frequent change, where employees adapt more easily. When asked what kind of role culture plays in organizational change, INT6 and INT1 shared similar insights. "A big role. If people are more used to change, they tend to adapt it easier." (INT1)

It plays a big role. Culture can support organizational change implementation... If I think of my current company, we have very stable ground for the business. Stability has made us afraid of change and we change things very carefully. (INT6)

The interviewees also brought up an insight that the organization's size and operating model affect the impact of culture during organizational change. INT2 stated that: "Culture that supports change

helps to implement change. In a bigger company the culture might not be that tight and that creates challenges in change.”

In smaller companies it supports change and people’s wellbeing. In a bigger company, like ours, it makes things harder. In change situations I would love to have someone to spar with communication and situations in the team. Now that my own manager is across the sea it is harder to get that kind of support. In my team our own culture supports us in change, but we all come from a small company where we treated each other like family. (INT4)

In the other hand, culture was also seen as a barrier or a phenomenon that relied purely on the employees of the company.

It doesn’t. Especially when we are implementing a fundamental change. The organization’s culture disappears. Organizational culture is more important in good times, and it matters then. I think that the culture comes from the people in the organization. And in big and unsure changes people get so tense that the culture doesn’t matter anymore. In bigger companies at least this is my experience. In smaller companies it might be different. But then there are not that many or big changes ever in small companies. (INT3)

Psychological safety and openness play a crucial role, as a culture that allows employees to express concerns freely fosters smoother change adoption. To support successful transitions, leaders must focus on building a change-ready culture, like INT1 stated: “If people are more used to change, they tend to adapt it easier.”

4.2.4 Obstacles leaders face in change management

Here I highlight the common difficulties the interviewees encountered during change processes and obstacles they faced in change management. Lack of information and support was seen as a significant challenge, as many leaders struggled with limited guidance from higher management. All, except one of the interviewees shared that they have been in an organizational change so that they did not have all the necessary information about the change while they were obligated to communicate the upcoming change to other employees.

Remote and matrix organizations add further difficulties, requiring leaders to manage change across different countries, legal systems, and virtual teams. INT1 shared that the matrix organization is a good thing except when it comes to change. Here the modern corporation world is facing issues. Even though employees would be able to do their jobs remotely or even in different countries, in times of change it is seen more effective to be present and physically there for your team and change being so common in the modern world it brings us into crossroads. The possible benefits of the matrix organization were discussed as well.

Not sure if it brings anything good or makes anything better. No, I can't really see that there are any benefits. Since you are not able to be physically present, not being able to see people and not being there to support. (INT1)

Also, when asked about reflections from past change initiatives INT2 reflected of the last organizational change and the improvement opportunities so: "I would have travelled to meet people and to see how they are doing. Or I would have brought the team together." This highlights the fact that in a big change when people are very uncertain of their faith the meaning of having physical contact with your manager is meaningful.

Additionally, the emotional toll of change can be considerable. The interviewees had all experienced the pain of dealing with layoffs, employee uncertainty, and their own personal struggles. Quoting INT6: "Change is always related to pain and difference of opinions." Many interviewees also shared that they need to be able to reflect on the upcoming change before communicating with others and that they have been conflicted with the changes themselves.

Most of the time I am conflicted with the changes. All changes I need to chop into pieces and find the key things to my team and what do the changes mean to us and our daily lives. I need to find positive things and then focus on those when communicating with the team. (INT4)

4.3 Summarizing the role of leadership in organizational change

Based on the insights gained from the interview's leadership is the cornerstone of successful organizational change, shaping how change is planned, communicated, and implemented. Based on interviews, leadership plays multiple critical roles in driving and sustaining change.

Leaders set a clear vision that connects immediate actions to the company's long-term goals. When employees understand how changes fit into the bigger picture, they are more likely to accept and support them. Effective leaders reduce uncertainty by clearly explaining the reasons behind change, which helps build commitment. They also influence the organizational culture by encouraging flexibility, openness, and resilience, making change feel like a natural part of growth rather than something to fear. In organizations where change happens frequently, leaders work to make transitions feel normal and help employees feel confident throughout the process.

Communication is essential in managing change successfully. Good leaders communicate honestly and consistently, translating complex corporate decisions into simple, relatable terms. They keep employees informed with regular updates, even when there is no new information, and create a safe environment where people feel comfortable sharing their concerns. This ongoing communication builds trust, which is vital for gaining employee support during times of transition.

Because change often brings emotions like fear, resistance, or anxiety, leaders also act as emotional anchors. They listen carefully to employee worries, address resistance through personal conversations, and remain approachable. By balancing empathy with decisiveness, leaders create a supportive yet structured environment that helps people navigate change more easily.

Leaders are also responsible for solving problems and making tough decisions that arise during change. They manage resistance, work around organizational challenges such as bureaucracy or limited HR resources, and adjust their leadership style to fit new team dynamics, including remote work. When difficult choices like workforce reductions are necessary, effective leaders handle them with fairness and respect, always considering both business needs and employee well-being.

Beyond strategy and decision-making, leaders serve as role models who set the tone for how change is embraced. Those who lead by example, showing confidence, staying engaged, and maintaining a positive outlook even in difficult times earn greater trust and credibility from their teams. By actively participating in the change process rather than just directing it, they inspire others to follow.

In the end, leadership serves as the key force for achieving successful organizational change. Effective leaders provide a clear vision, shape a culture that welcomes change, communicate transparently, support employees emotionally, solve problems thoughtfully, and model the behaviors they want to see. When leaders master these roles, they transform resistance into resilience and help change become a source of growth instead of disruption.

5 Discussion

This chapter brings together the main findings of the study, answers the research questions, and shares the conclusions based on what was discovered. This chapter also talks about what the results mean for theory and real-life practice and reflects on the study's limitations, how trustworthy it is, and suggests ideas for future research.

5.1 Answering the research questions

RQ1: What are the key characteristics of leadership that contribute to successful organizational change?

The interviews highlight several essential leadership characteristics that contribute to successful change initiatives. The most frequently mentioned traits include **clear communication**, which all interviewees emphasized as crucial for ensuring that employees understand the vision and objectives of the change. Effective leaders provide concise, transparent messaging and reinforce key points through repetition to reduce uncertainty.

Empathy and emotional intelligence also play a vital role, as many leaders stressed the importance of compassion, active listening, and understanding employees' concerns. Empathy helps manage resistance and fosters a supportive environment where employees feel valued and heard.

A strong visionary mindset is another key trait of successful leaders. Leaders who effectively implement change connect the transition to broader organizational goals, ensuring employees understand why changes are happening and how they align with the company's vision.

Leaders must also demonstrate **adaptability and resilience**, as several interviewees mentioned the need to adjust their approach based on the circumstances. This was particularly important when facing resistance or when information from higher management was insufficient.

Another critical leadership quality is **trust and delegation**. Leaders managing large, Nordic-wide or matrix teams recognized the necessity of trusting their managers and employees to carry out change initiatives effectively. While some initially struggled with this, they acknowledged its importance in leading at scale.

Decision-making and problem-solving were also seen as essential skills for navigating the complexities of change. Leaders often must make difficult decisions, such as handling layoffs or restructuring, while ensuring fairness and maintaining employee morale. **Balancing objectivity with humanity** was a key theme among those who successfully led change initiatives.

RQ2: How do leaders leverage organizational culture to facilitate change?

The role of organizational culture in change management was viewed differently by the interviewees, with some seeing it as a facilitator and others identifying it as a challenge. Based on leaders who saw culture as a support system, change was easier to implement in organizations where transitions were common. Employees in such environments were more adaptable, making the process smoother. Leaders noted that fostering a culture of change readiness helped reduce resistance and increased engagement.

However, others viewed culture as a barrier, particularly in large or traditionally stable organizations. In these cases, significant transitions often led to uncertainty, and employees struggled to adjust as the usual cultural values seemed to disappear.

Leaders highlighted the importance of psychological safety and open communication in shaping how change is received. When employees feel safe expressing concerns and voicing their thoughts, they are more likely to engage with and accept the change process. Those who built trust within their teams reported fewer disruptions and better overall engagement during transitions.

To address these challenges, some leaders took proactive steps in creating a change-positive culture. They led by example, encouraged positive discussions about change, and provided platforms for employees to express their concerns. By shaping a culture where change is seen as an opportunity rather than a disruption, leaders helped foster an environment that was more resilient to organizational shifts.

RQ3: What are the challenges faced by leaders during the implementation of change?

Several recurring challenges emerged from the interviews, with resistance to change being one of the most common. All leaders encountered resistance at some point, and they managed it through active listening, addressing concerns in one-on-one conversations rather than in group settings, and consistently reinforcing the benefits of change.

Another major challenge was the lack of information and communication gaps. Many leaders expressed frustration over not receiving sufficient details about change initiatives from upper management, making it difficult to communicate effectively with their teams. This lack of clarity often led to confusion and reduced employee engagement.

For leaders in charge of big teams spread out in different places, leading remote or matrix teams makes things even more complicated. Being physically distant from employees made it harder to manage change, while differences in legal requirements across countries created additional layers of complexity. Many leaders also faced the emotional toll of layoffs and workforce reductions, which they found to be one of the most difficult aspects of leading change. Handling such transitions requires strong emotional intelligence and a commitment to treating employees with fairness and dignity.

Another challenge was balancing transparency with confidentiality. Some leaders struggled with how much information they could share, especially when they themselves lacked clarity from upper management. Maintaining employee trust while adhering to corporate communication policies was a delicate balance that required careful navigation.

Follow-up and sustaining change emerged as an area for improvement. Several leaders admitted that while they focused heavily on the initial implementation of change, they needed to do more in terms of reinforcing and sustaining it over time. Ensuring long-term success requires continuous engagement, regular check-ins, and a commitment to supporting employees beyond the immediate transition phase.

5.2 Conclusions

The key findings of this thesis are summarized in table 4 below.

Table 4. Key findings

<p>Leadership qualities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visionary thinking: Clear direction and alignment with organizational goals are critical. - Empathy & emotional intelligence: Foster trust and psychological safety. - Adaptability & resilience: Enables leaders to respond flexibly and effectively. 	<p>Leadership practices in driving change:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leaders manage resistance through dialogue, empathy, and reinforcing positives. - They emphasize clear, simplified messaging and avoid unnecessary "fluff." - Leading by example fosters employee buy-in and sets the tone.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication skills: Clear, consistent, and transparent communication is vital. - Trust & delegation: Empowering teams ensure smooth execution. - Decision-making: Confidence in navigating uncertainty and competing priorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Balancing transparency and discretion is critical during uncertain transitions.
<p>Role of organizational culture:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supportive cultures ease change by normalizing it. - Resistance is higher in stable or larger organizations unfamiliar with frequent change. - The role of culture varied, with some seeing it as crucial, others viewing it as secondary in major changes. - Psychological safety is a key cultural factor for successful change. 	<p>Challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of information and support from upper management. - Matrix and remote structures make it harder to be physically present, which is seen as crucial during change. - Emotional toll includes dealing with layoffs, resistance, and personal conflict with changes. - Leaders often feel unprepared for the "follow-up" phase of change (sustainment and reinforcement).

The results show that effective leadership during change is strongly focused on people. It combines basic knowledge of leadership and change theories with emotional awareness and practical decision-making. Although the leaders interviewed did not formally apply models such as ADKAR or Kotter, they still used many of the same ideas in their everyday work. Leadership also depends on the situation, and the approach can change depending on the size of the organization, its structure, and the people involved.

One of the challenges mentioned was the lack of attention to the later stages of change. Many higher-level leaders said they focus more on starting and implementing change, but less on following up, reflecting, and making the change part of the organizational culture. The follow-up was closer to the operational employees. On the higher-level leaders shared that they would use basic metrics to measure if the change was successful or not, for example leading and lagging indicators and employee engagement. In the interviews with leaders who worked more closely with operative staff the follow-up and measurement were more on the employees themselves and not just on numbers. The focus was more on the atmosphere in the teams and the continuousness of the work.

Change is a process, and it takes time. It takes time from the leaders, the employees and from the entire organization to accept it. In reality the difference between leadership and change management is non-existent. In the modern world from a leaders' perspective leadership and change management are not differentiated from each other. Since change is inevitable and continuous it makes it also impossible for modern day leaders to skip change management approaches all together.

5.3 Practical significance of the results

Many of the actions described by the interviewees were very similar to the ideas found in the change management models mentioned in the theoretical framework. This shows that in real-world leadership, people often use theoretical concepts naturally, based on their experience and the situation they're facing, even if they don't follow a specific model by name.

Some leaders also pointed out that leadership and change management have become closely connected. In today's workplaces, leading people often means managing constant change, so these two areas are no longer seen as separate. Instead, they are part of the same set of leadership skills. So, in practice, it is impossible to be a successful leader without using change management tools.

Overall, the findings highlight that good leadership during change is strongly focused on people. It relies on emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, and the ability to adapt. While leadership theories are still helpful, in practice, what matters most is how leaders build trust, show authenticity, and keep learning from themselves and their mistakes. Based on these findings I suggest that leadership development should focus more on long-term support, emotional strength, and the ability to lead through complex and ever-changing environments.

When considering the generalization of these results it is necessary to take into consideration that they consist of insights and experiences of only six leaders. On the other hand, all the participants have been leaders for years and operated in different industries and environments. So, even though the sampling is rather small in this research the results still give a little light to what it is like being a leader in the modern world, at least in the private sector. Hence these results are usable, at least to give indicators of how things are and what could be the future development areas in leadership and in change initiatives.

5.4 Ethics and trustworthiness of the research

In this thesis, I have adopted the role of a researcher with honesty, care, and accuracy regarding the information, results, and methods used. I have approached the work in a planned and systematic manner. Ethically correct research requires adherence to good scientific practice, and it is my responsibility as the researcher to follow these principles throughout the research process. (Hirsijärvi, Remes, Sajavaara, 2013).

Arene (2025) defines in their ethical recommendations for thesis writing at universities of applied sciences that as a researcher I have the ethical and moral obligations towards my research subject. At the beginning of each interview, the key points outlined in the research briefing were repeated, with particular emphasis on full anonymity and the limited scope of use for the research data. The fact that the interviewees represented only themselves and not any organization was also underlined at the beginning of each interview. According to research ethics, it is essential to protect the privacy of all participants. As the interviewer, I also clarified my role as a neutral and external party. A researcher must remain objective and act impartially throughout the planning, data collection, and analysis phases of the study. Throughout this work, I have maintained consistency in both my actions and reasoning, respecting the parameters established by the target organization and aiming to provide an authentic situational analysis. My approach has been critical and evidence-based, avoiding unwarranted generalizations and ensuring that the reporting is accurate and comprehensive. Additionally, the methodologies employed are thoroughly detailed to promote transparency and enhance the reliability of the findings. (Hirsijärvi, Remes, Sajavaara, 2013, 25–26.)

In this thesis, I describe how the interviews were planned, how and why the participants were selected, and how the interviews were conducted and analyzed. By following the reporting guidelines of Haaga-Helia, I aim to ensure the quality of the thesis and to reference sources appropriately. As evaluating the reliability of qualitative research is often more challenging, particular attention has been paid to ensuring the credibility of the study. The research questions

were examined from multiple perspectives, with interview questions refined as needed. Documentation was also reviewed and condensed throughout the analysis process to support a more accurate and thorough interpretation.

5.5 Evaluating the research process and personal learning

In the evaluation phase the aim is to reflect the thesis as a process and one's personal learning, how did the execution of the thesis go and if there were things that could have been done differently. It is important to also reflect on any new skills that the process might have enlightened.

Throughout this process I kept a clear deadline for this thesis research, and I was able to hold on to it. A timeline was made in the applied design research course where we were asked to make a thesis plan including the possible timeline for the thesis work. Having a clear timeline and a crazy person's decisiveness helped me to keep on going even though I was working full time the entire study period. Writing my thesis helped me improve my academic writing, critical thinking, and time management skills. I learned how to explain my ideas clearly and handle critical feedback from my supervisor. Managing a big project like this also taught me how to set goals and stick to deadlines. The biggest lesson I learned is that it is okay to make mistakes and change direction when needed. If I did this again, I would spend more time reading at the beginning and ask for feedback about my work sooner.

The process had its ups and downs, but each stage taught me something important. As a non-neurotypical individual, I encountered challenges particularly in understanding and applying the theoretical framework during the early stages of the thesis and keeping my writing to the academic standard was also a challenge throughout the process. I felt overwhelmed by all the information out there. It was hard to figure out which sources were the most important ones and how to bring all the ideas together. Abstract concepts and academic literature required extra time and effort to process, and at times, this created moments of frustration and self-doubt. As I kept reading and taking notes, I got better at picking out the main points and connecting them. This made the rest of my research much easier and showed me how important it is to stay organized from the start. Also, working through these difficulties gradually improved my ability to engage with academic texts and apply theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts.

Planning and holding the interviews provided a practical and engaging contrast to the theoretical groundwork. Speaking with experienced professionals helped me close the gap between theory and practice and gave me so much energy and excitement towards this research. I began to see how the abstract models discussed in literature, such as leadership theories and change

management frameworks, are reflected in real leadership behavior, even if not always consciously applied. This realization deepened my understanding of the subject matter and increased my confidence as a researcher. It was rewarding to be able to ask and freely talk about difficult situations and hear the experiences and insight from the leader's point of view. Since these topics are normally not spoken openly between leaders and operational employees.

The most exciting part after the interviews was the process of analyzing the data and writing about results. I had dived to the results "headfirst" so that I forgot to write open the data collection and analysis process. Well, luckily that was fixed.

Looking back, I have improved my ability to think critically, work independently, and communicate complex ideas in a structured and clear way. Most importantly, I have learned to trust in my own process, even when it does not follow a traditional or linear path. The sense of accomplishment in completing this thesis is especially meaningful, given the initial challenges and the personal resilience required throughout the project.

5.6 Future research possibilities

The findings of this thesis highlight several important areas for further exploration in the context of leadership and organizational change. As mentioned previously, leaders primarily focus their efforts on the planning and implementation stages of change initiatives, often placing less emphasis on the long-term sustainment and cultural integration of those changes. This imbalance raises concerns about the durability of organizational transformations and suggests a need for further research to bridge the gap between initiating change and ensuring its continued impact. Such research would provide valuable insights for leadership development programs, particularly in terms of supporting and reinforcing change over time-but also examine how different leadership styles and practices influence the extent to which change becomes embedded within organizational culture.

Another key theme emerging from the interviews is the critical role of emotional intelligence in leading organizational change. Emotional intelligence was consistently identified as essential for managing resistance, fostering trust, and creating psychological safety during periods of transition. Despite its recognized importance, the specific role of emotional intelligence within the context of organizational change remains underexplored. Investigating this area could contribute to more comprehensive leadership development frameworks that balance strategic capabilities with

interpersonal and emotional competencies, while also offering a deeper understanding of how emotional intelligence acts as a stabilizing factor during high-pressure transitions.

The evolving nature of work, particularly the rise of remote and hybrid environments, presents new challenges for leadership during change. Interviewees noted that physical presence is often perceived as important during times of change, yet remote and matrix structures can make this difficult to achieve. This raises important questions about how leaders can remain visible and effective from a distance and underlines the need to adapt leadership and change strategies for digital environments. Insights in this area would help organizations future-proof their change initiatives as hybrid and decentralized work models become increasingly prevalent.

The results underline also the significance of cultural sensitivity in change leadership across different organizational contexts. Factors such as organizational size, structural stability, and internal culture were found to shape how leaders' approach and manage change, necessitating the adaptation of leadership styles based on teams' familiarity with change. Further study into cultural sensitivity would enable more contextually appropriate approaches to managing change, particularly within diverse or international organizations. This research could move the field beyond generalized leadership models by emphasizing the importance of tailored strategies, ultimately enhancing the success rate of change initiatives across varied organizational settings.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Interview questions

Background:

- Leadership experience
- Industry / industries – public / private

Key characteristics of Leadership:

- How would you describe your leadership style, especially when managing change?
- What personal qualities or characteristics do you believe are most important for a leader during a period of change?
- Can you share an example of how specific leadership traits helped you overcome challenges during a change process?
- How do you approach setting a vision for change within your organization?
- How do you ensure that your team understands and aligns with the vision behind organizational changes?
- How do you make difficult decisions in uncertain or rapidly changing environments?
- In your opinion, what behaviors and actions are critical for establishing credibility as a change leader?
- How do you continue to grow as a leader, particularly in relation to leading change?

Change management and communication:

- How do you typically communicate change initiatives to your team or organization?
- Can you recall a time when communication was particularly challenging during a change initiative, and how did you address it?
- What is your approach to communicating about change with your team or organization?
- How do you ensure that everyone is clear about the reasons for and the goals of the change?
- Can you describe a communication plan you developed or used in a past change initiative?
- How do you measure the success of a change initiative?

Challenges during change:

- How do you personally manage setbacks or resistance to change within the organization?

- In your experience, what are the biggest challenges in implementing change, and how do you address them using change management practices?
- In what ways do you encourage resilience and adaptability within your team?
- Can you provide an example of a time when adapting your approach was necessary to lead a successful change?
- What key indicators or outcomes do you focus on to assess the effectiveness of your leadership during change?
- Reflecting on past change initiatives, what do you think you did particularly well, and what would you do differently?

Leveraging organizational culture:

- How do you build trust with your team, especially when implementing significant changes?
- What have you learned from previous change initiatives that you apply in future ones?
- How do you reinforce and embed new behaviors or processes after a change has been made?
- Can you provide an example of how you helped an organization or team fully integrate a change into its daily operations?

Appendix 2: Research briefing and consent form

Research briefing for an expert interview.

Interviewer: Mona Sarkama

Research briefing concerns: Thesis work for Haaga Helia MBA studies.

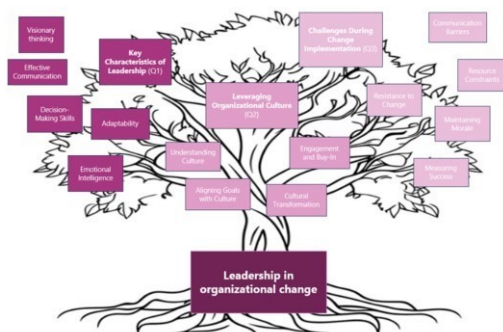
The reason for interviews is to get an insight into leadership strategies, practices and experiences in organizational changes. What works, what does not. What sort of features makes the interviewee a great leader and how they have faced challenging changes in their careers and what they have learned from them.

Collection methods and phases:

Interviews will be held on Teams application or face to face. Time scope for interviews is during February 2025.

Approximate time estimate of interview 20-40minutes. The time reserved for the interview is 60minutes.

There is no need for preparation. If you wish to know the interview themes beforehand, they are presented in the image below with the research questions.



Interview materials handling, preservation, release parties, possible disposing and re-usage:

The interview recordings and transcriptions will be saved to OneDrive-cloud space that belongs to Mona Sarkama and is in Haaga Helias servers. The data will be analyzed during April 2025 at the latest and disposed after that. There will be no personal data handled in the interviews.

Result announcement: Thesis work will be published in Theseus.

Additional information

Mona Sarkama + 358 443804448

mona.sarkama@haaga-helia.com

Consent form

I consent to take part in this thesis work mentioned in the research briefing above.

I have been informed about the content of the research briefing, I understand what the research is about, what attending this research means to me, to what the data given is being used and how it is being stored. I have had a chance to ask questions, and I have gotten a good enough answer to my questions.

I understand that I attend this research voluntarily and it is clear to me that I can cancel my consent at any time, without a reason and for example end the interview if I choose to.

Consent can be cancelled by informing the interviewer by email. Please note that there is no way to exclude one attendances data from an already analyzed research results.

Additional information about the research will be provided by the thesis executor:

Mona Sarkama +



358 443804448

mona.sarkama@haaga-helia.com By attending the interview I consent to these terms and attendance in this research.

Appendix 3: Research question matrix

RQ	Theory	Data collection & analysis	Findings / results
<p>1 What are the key characteristics of leadership that contribute to successful organizational change?</p>	<p>- Transformational Leadership Theory: Emphasizes vision, communication, and inspiring followers toward a shared goal (Bass, 1985).</p> <p>- Servant Leadership: Focuses on empathy, trust, and prioritizing employees' well-being (Greenleaf, 1977).</p>	<p>- Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews</p> <p>- Data Analysis: Thematic analysis identifying recurring leadership traits.</p>	<p>- Clear Communication: Leaders emphasized the need for transparent, concise, and repetitive communication to ensure employees understand change.</p> <p>- Empathy and Emotional Intelligence: Leaders highlighted the importance of understanding employee concerns, fostering psychological safety, and being approachable.</p> <p>- Visionary Thinking: Leaders who connected change to broader organizational goals saw better employee buy-in.</p> <p>- Adaptability and Resilience: Leaders adjusted their approaches based on the change context, particularly in remote or matrix organizations.</p> <p>- Trust and Delegation: Effective leaders empowered their teams, balancing oversight with trust.</p> <p>- Decision-Making and Problem-Solving: Leaders had to manage uncertainty, resistance, and difficult transitions such as layoffs.</p>
<p>2 How do leaders leverage organizational culture to facilitate change?</p>	<p>- Change Management Theories (Kotter's 8-Step Model, Lewin's Change Model): Emphasize the importance of organizational culture in successfully embedding change (Kotter, 1996; Lewin, 1951).</p> <p>- Servant Leadership: Supports creating a trust-based culture where employees feel psychologically safe (Greenleaf, 1977).</p> <p>- Transformational Leadership Theory: Leaders shape culture by motivating employees and reinforcing a shared vision (Bass, 1985).</p>	<p>- Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews.</p> <p>- Data Analysis: Thematic coding of responses to identify how leaders perceive culture as an enabler or barrier.</p>	<p>- Culture as a Change Enabler: Organizations with a history of frequent change had employees who adapted more easily.</p> <p>- Culture as a Barrier: Larger corporations struggled with cultural resistance, especially in significant organizational shifts.</p> <p>- Psychological Safety and Open Communication: Leaders who fostered trust and openness helped employees embrace change more smoothly.</p> <p>- Creating a Change-Positive Culture: Leaders encourage adaptability by setting an example, reinforcing positive narratives, and allowing employees to express concerns.</p> <p>- Resistance to Change: Leaders encountered resistance and managed it through open dialogue, reinforcing positive aspects, and addressing concerns one-on-one.</p> <p>- Lack of Information and Communication Gaps: Many leaders struggled with insufficient details from upper management, making it difficult to communicate effectively.</p> <p>- Challenges in Leading Remote or Matrix Teams: Differences in legal requirements across countries and the absence of face-to-face interaction made managing change more complex.</p> <p>- Emotional Toll of Layoffs and Workforce Reductions: Leaders found downsizing and restructuring to be emotionally challenging.</p> <p>- Balancing Transparency with Confidentiality: Leaders had to maintain employee trust while following corporate communication policies.</p> <p>- Follow-Up and Sustaining Change: Some leaders admitted they focused too much on initial implementation and needed to improve reinforcement and long-term follow-up.</p>
<p>3 What are the challenges faced by leaders during the implementation of change?</p>	<p>- Change Management Theories: Highlight the difficulties of overcoming resistance and sustaining long-term change (Kotter, 1996; Lewin, 1951).</p> <p>- Servant Leadership: Encourages addressing employee concerns and maintaining engagement during difficult transitions (Greenleaf, 1977).</p> <p>- Transformational Leadership Theory: Leaders must inspire employees despite uncertainties and maintain motivation throughout the change process (Bass, 1985).</p>	<p>- Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews.</p> <p>- Data Analysis: Thematic analysis identifying common barriers and strategies used to address them.</p>	<p>- Resistance to Change: Leaders encountered resistance and managed it through open dialogue, reinforcing positive aspects, and addressing concerns one-on-one.</p> <p>- Lack of Information and Communication Gaps: Many leaders struggled with insufficient details from upper management, making it difficult to communicate effectively.</p> <p>- Challenges in Leading Remote or Matrix Teams: Differences in legal requirements across countries and the absence of face-to-face interaction made managing change more complex.</p> <p>- Emotional Toll of Layoffs and Workforce Reductions: Leaders found downsizing and restructuring to be emotionally challenging.</p> <p>- Balancing Transparency with Confidentiality: Leaders had to maintain employee trust while following corporate communication policies.</p> <p>- Follow-Up and Sustaining Change: Some leaders admitted they focused too much on initial implementation and needed to improve reinforcement and long-term follow-up.</p>

Appendix 4. Interview invitation

Sarkama Mona  

Placeholder: Interview Thesis

Mon 2025-02-24 4:00 PM - 5:00 PM No conflicts

Microsoft Teams Meeting

Hi!

Here is a placeholder for the interview for my thesis reseach.
Thank you in advance for your time and effort!

I will send you more information about the upcoming topics and the information form for you to see how and where the interview will be stored and the data handled.

The themes of the discussion are: Leadership, Organizational Culture, Change management and Organizational Change 😊

Hopefully we are able to have free and open discussion about your experience as a leader and insights on organizational change situations.

Looking forward to interviewing you! :) Best, Mona

Microsoft Teams [Need help?](#)

[Join the meeting now](#)

Meeting ID: 393 715 194 207
Passcode: yt6pv3nP

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