

Leading Organizational Change: Navigating the Most Common Stages of Concern

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Abstract

Today's leaders must equip themselves with practical strategies to implement and carry out change initiatives to evolve and continuously improve their organizations. Considering the wide range of theories and concepts related to change management, it can be difficult for leaders to agree on the most effective approach or style to use when introducing or navigating change. However, one commonality is the leader's need for trust and commitment from organizational members and those involved with the change, making it critical for leaders to understand the most common stages of concern and develop skills to implement change while creating a transformative workplace culture. This article provides more context for this essential leadership element through a synthesized qualitative analysis of existing research and literature, detailing the most common stages of concern associated with organizational change initiatives and proactive leadership strategies to sustain momentum and establish a culture that embraces change as a necessity for growth and continuous improvement.

Keywords

Leading Change, Change Management, Stages of Concern, Concern-Based Leadership, Organizational Leadership, Proactive Leadership

1. Introduction

Change is essential for adaptation and continuous improvement in almost all organizations. Regardless of the nature of the change—whether small or large, proactive or reactive—it is natural for those involved to feel some level of concern. This concern is particularly pronounced among organizational members directly impacted by the change initiative, as their roles and responsibilities may

be significantly altered. Concerns about organizational change commonly span several stages, from informational to personal to operational to organizational impact, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the change process.

Beyond awareness of a change initiative, [Hall and Hord \(2020\)](#) explain how the stages of concern are primarily based on information, personal impact, management and implementation, consequence, collaboration, and refinement. Humans naturally process various thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and concerns in response to change, especially regarding their organizational roles and the potential impact on their work. The stages of concern describe the various perceptions, feelings, and emotions that people may experience as they approach and participate in the change process ([Hall, 2013](#)). Understanding these stages is crucial for leaders and change facilitators to address concerns effectively and support their teams.

For leaders, it is important to understand and acknowledge that change is a process rather than an event, which means people progressively learn new techniques and become more proficient over time. Recognizing that implementing change is an ongoing process necessitates evaluating and tracking its function to ensure it benefits those involved and results in the intended impact ([Hollingshead, 2009](#)). With that, the quality and quantity of adjustments are also important to note as factors that will dictate the success of change efforts.

Depending on the leadership style and circumstances, leaders send different signals to their employees and spend their time on different activities. Some leaders are rarely seen, spending much of their time in offices or attending external meetings, while others are highly visible and involved in daily operations. These different styles can significantly impact the success of their followers in implementing and using innovations ([Hall & Hord, 2020](#)). Leaders must be aware of how their presence and actions influence the change process. They must also be aware of the volume of initiatives, as focusing efforts prevents employees from being overwhelmed and ensures that each change initiative receives the necessary support for successful implementation.

As this article unfolds, there are five essential functions that change leaders should incorporate. These include 1) creating buy-in by expanding involvement and influence, 2) inspiring vision for change by explaining its purpose and necessity, 3) establishing the right resources and infrastructure through collaboration on the implementation, 4) achieving sustainable results by creating a deeper commitment throughout the organization, and 5) creating options by exploring possibilities ([Roach et al., 2009](#); [Blanchard, 2018](#)). Woven through each of these are the fundamentals of transformational leadership. Combining these functions with a firm understanding of the most common stages of concern, leaders can effectively implement change and prepare organizations for continuous improvement ([Olson et al., 2020](#)).

2. Concerns-Based Model for Change Leadership

Despite decades of research and practice with change implementation, there is

still a lack of understanding of the complexity, time, and perseverance needed to execute large change initiatives effectively. Frances Fuller first provided a model outlining the necessary and sequential stages of concern accompanying any innovation in 1969, later expanded by [Hall and Loucks \(1978\)](#) and other collaborative studies led by Hall leading into the twenty-first century ([Hall & Hord, 2020](#)). The challenge is often that executives within an organization assume that everyone involved understands the presented topics and course of action for a change initiative, while many do not. As a result, the group involved with the initiative often advances only to be frustrated, lacking the information necessary to move beyond awareness and knowledge ([Kelehear, 2003](#)).

Beyond awareness of the change, questions about oneself, task, and impact naturally follow and can linger to the point of cultural detriment if not properly addressed by leadership. Questions that people frequently ask during a shift provide leaders with hints about the stage of concern they are in. Change agents seldom hear these questions due to a lack of venues for people to ask them. Too often, few to no opportunities exist for those affected by the change to inquire why the change is being made or what it will entail. As a result, individuals affected by the change resist it rather than becoming advocates because their concerns are not addressed ([Blanchard, 2018](#)). The following sections expand on this common scenario with details on each stage of concern, along with effective leadership practices to identify and navigate each stage to achieve and sustain intended results.

3. Stages of Concern

3.1. Information

At the beginning of any change process, people are primarily concerned about what the impending change will mean for them. This initial concern is natural and must be addressed thoughtfully to ensure a smooth transition. Addressing these concerns early helps build a foundation of trust and openness.

At this stage, individuals demonstrate a general awareness of the change or innovation and an interest in learning more details about it. They appear unworried about their roles in relation to the innovation. Instead, they focus on substantive aspects of the innovation, such as its general characteristics, effects, and requirements for use ([Hall & Hord, 2020](#)). This curiosity is a positive sign and should be nurtured with clear information.

People at this stage ask questions to learn more about the change, such as: What has changed? Why is it necessary? What is wrong with the current situation? How quickly and to what extent must the organization change? Providing clear, factual communication to address these information concerns is crucial ([Blanchard, 2018](#)). Ensuring that the rationale for the change is based on reliable knowledge and disseminating this information helps individuals align with the change initiative. Miscommunication and rumors can be detrimental, so transparent and continuous communication is necessary to prevent misinformation

and build trust within the organization (Blanchard, 2018).

Understanding that the need for information is the initial and most fundamental stage of concern is critical. This stage is where individuals begin to form their opinions about the change. Leaders must recognize that during this stage, they must provide as much clarity and context as possible. The more informed the individuals are, the less resistance they will likely exhibit. This stage also involves educating employees about the benefits of the change, the expected outcomes, and the steps involved in the transition process (Hall, 2013).

Effective strategies for sharing information include using individual meetings, open forums, information packets, short media presentations, and discussions during staff meetings. These methods help disseminate general descriptive information about the change. Providing information that highlights the advantages of the innovation compared to current practices is also important. Expressing enthusiasm for the innovation can encourage consideration while allowing individuals who are excited about the innovation to share their experiences and inspire others. Clearly stating the realistic benefits, costs, and efforts required to use the change sets appropriate expectations.

The initial change leadership strategy is expanding involvement and influence and should be consistently applied throughout the change process to secure cooperation and support from others. Engaging early adopters as peer advocates is essential. These advocates can influence those who are neutral toward the change before they become resistant by helping to establish the business case for the change and sharing their personal success stories (Blanchard, 2018). They can also train others and demonstrate the desired behaviors for those undergoing the change.

The aim of a high-involvement change strategy is to create a widespread coalition of leaders at all levels who support the change and can collectively advocate for it to various stakeholders. When a diverse group of organizational leaders aligns on the need for change and its benefits, there is less resistance, passivity, and blame. If alignment is visible at the top, it signals the importance of personal alignment. On the other hand, a lack of alignment at the top suggests that resistance to change might be effective, as it could stall or derail the initiative. Sustainable organizational change is achieved through conversation and collaboration rather than through the unilateral actions of a few (Blanchard, 2018; Hall & Hord, 2020). High involvement also brings issues and challenges to the forefront earlier, leading to greater alignment and clarity about what and how things need to change. This approach results in a more effective change implementation plan and a higher likelihood of success.

3.2. Personal

In the second stage of concern, individuals are uncertain about the demands of the change, their adequacy to meet those demands, and their roles in the innovation. This includes analyzing their role in relation to the structure of the organi-

zation, decision-making processes, and potential conflicts with existing structures or personal commitments. Additionally, the financial or status implications for themselves and colleagues may also be reflected (Hall & Hord, 2020). At this point, people raise questions regarding their own personal impacts. They ask: Why should I change? Will I succeed or fail? How will I look to others? How will I manage the time to implement this change? Will I need to acquire new skills? Can I handle it? Addressing these personal issues in a way that makes people feel heard is essential. Personal concerns revolve around how the change will affect them individually. Leaders must demonstrate empathy, provide support, and ensure that individuals feel valued and understood (Blanchard, 2018).

During this stage, people tend to focus on what they will lose rather than what they will gain. It is essential to address these private issues in a way that makes people feel heard. If individuals cannot express their concerns, these feelings will persist and hinder progress. Allowing individuals to voice their worries often leads to a sense of relief, similar to the feeling of “getting something off your chest”. This release can clear the mind and inspire creativity that supports the change efforts rather than obstructs them (Blanchard, 2018).

Simply discussing concerns during a transition can be therapeutic and foster creative solutions, with listening playing a crucial role. Leaders must allow staff to voice their issues openly without fear of criticism or retaliation. While personal concerns may not always be resolved, listening can significantly reduce resistance to change. Understanding that individuals are at varying levels of change readiness is beneficial. Identifying change advocates or early adopters within leadership is valuable, as their objections may highlight caution or issues that need addressing (Blanchard, 2018).

The personal concern stage, characterized by self-doubt, fear, and hesitation, can hamper effective leadership (Northouse, 2018). Overcoming this requires a transformational leadership approach that builds self-confidence and encourages collaboration. Transformational leadership focuses on personal growth, inspiration, and fostering strong relationships with followers. This style encourages leaders to seek new knowledge and experiences continually, enhancing their abilities to serve their followers better (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By engaging in self-improvement activities, leaders develop greater self-awareness, allowing them to address personal concerns effectively. This increased self-awareness enables them to confront fears and uncertainties, strengthening their resolve to succeed.

Transformational leaders emphasize building strong relationships with followers through empathy, active listening, and open communication (Northouse, 2018). By fostering these connections, leaders create a supportive environment where they can openly share concerns with trusted team members. This exchange of ideas helps address underlying fears and allows for valuable feedback, further building confidence while increasing psychological safety. Since its resurgence in the 1990s, psychological safety research has thrived, driven by the growing acknowledgment of the challenges in navigating uncertainty and change

(Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Leaders who embrace psychological safety best practices empower team members to feel secure and embrace change (Schein & Bennis, 1965) while assisting them in overcoming defensiveness and learning anxiety at work, enabling them to concentrate on achieving shared goals and solving problems without excessive self-protection (Schein, 1993).

Building on the transformational approach, the second change leadership strategy, explaining why the change is needed, addresses both information and personal concerns by helping people understand the change, its rationale, and why the status quo is no longer viable (Blanchard, 2018). To effectively lead people into the future, connecting with them deeply in the present is essential. The most impactful visions are those that are shared, and these can only be crafted by truly listening to others while valuing their aspirations and needs (Kouzes & Posner, 2009). Involving people in the visioning process is a key way to help them resolve personal concerns. The more individuals are involved in creating the vision, the more likely they are to want to be part of the change.

3.3. Management and Implementation

In the task concern stages centered on management and implementation, attention is focused on the processes and tasks of using the innovation and the best use of information and resources. Issues related to efficiency, organizing, managing, scheduling, and time demands become paramount (Hall & Hord, 2020). People are curious about how the change will be executed and want to know the specific steps involved. Questions like, “What should I do first, second, and third?” and “How will I handle everything?” are common. Concerns about handling unforeseen issues, finding assistance, and understanding the timeline are also prevalent (Blanchard, 2018).

As people delve into the specifics of implementing the change, they focus on the fine details. They want to know if the change has been piloted and where to go for assistance and problem-solving. They are aware that the transition may not go exactly as planned and seek effective ways to utilize knowledge and resources. Additionally, understanding how the organization’s systems—such as performance management, rewards, and career development—will support the change initiative is crucial (Blanchard, 2018).

The management and implementation concern stage presents leaders with challenges, characterized by employee apprehension and resistance due to fear of failure, job disruption, or impacts on professional relationships (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Hall & Hord, 1987). Utilizing a transformational leadership approach is essential to address these concerns and prevent failure in adopting new initiatives, considering it involves four key behaviors: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Idealized influence involves the leader acting as a role model by exhibiting strong moral values and ethical behaviors. Leaders who consistently exhibit ethical conduct and integrity, by living the values and principles they promote, earn

the trust and admiration of their team members. Employees are more likely to follow a leader who demonstrates commitment to the cause and adheres to organizational values, reassuring them of the leader's intentions (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). By tying the vision to the collective's future, transformational leaders inspirationally motivate followers to exceed expectations, fostering acceptance of group goals and enhancing team cooperation (Steinmann et al., 2018).

Inspirational motivation relates to conveying vision or goals in an inspiring manner, empowering employees to overcome their fears. Employees seek leaders who can articulate a vision that is both compelling and meaningful. By effectively communicating a vision that resonates deeply with their employees, transformational leaders enable them to internalize it, adopt the goal of realizing that vision as their own, and help provide them with a sense of purpose in their work (Bass et al., 2003; Steinmann et al., 2018). This process begins with instilling a strong sense of purpose in employees and establishing high standards and expectations for achievement. The motivation to achieve is driven not by fear but by inspiration derived from the leader's example of exemplifying these standards through their actions. Transformational leaders instill an awareness of shared goals that can yield long-term organizational success. As employees understand their contribution to these objectives, they are less likely to harbor concerns about their roles or tasks (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Intellectual stimulation encourages creativity and innovation among followers. Transformational leaders challenge assumptions and promote openness to new ideas. By allowing employees to express their concerns and supporting them in addressing potential challenges, a sense of collective responsibility for problem-solving emerges. Intellectual stimulation cultivates a culture of psychological safety by empowering employees to question existing assumptions and reframe challenges. This approach encourages the development of innovative solutions, ensuring that employees feel safe to make mistakes and challenge their leaders' ideas without fear of public criticism. This environment fosters active participation in the change process and the identification of innovative solutions to potential implementation roadblocks (Zhu et al., 2009).

Individualized consideration involves providing personal support and attention to each individual's needs, skills, and development. By engaging with each employee on a deeper level, leaders gain a better understanding of their concerns and can address misconceptions about the implementation process. Tailored developmental opportunities ensure that employees have the necessary capabilities to carry out their new roles effectively amid organizational changes (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This approach focuses on developing the employee's potential to achieve higher levels of performance. A significant aspect of individualized consideration is developmental, focusing on diagnosing followers' growth needs and offering mentoring or coaching while fostering their autonomy and empowering them to assume greater responsibility in alignment with their expanding exper-

tise and interests (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994).

In summary, transformational leadership is ideal for overcoming the implementation concern stage due to its four key behaviors, which create trust in the leader's intentions, empower employees towards shared goals, foster creativity and problem-solving around implementation challenges, and provide tailored support that contributes significantly to the change initiative's success.

Again, building on the transformational leadership model, the third change leadership strategy, collaborating on the implementation, aims to create the right conditions for successful change implementation and address personal and implementation concerns. Engaging others in planning and piloting the change encourages collaborative efforts to identify the right resources and build the necessary infrastructure (Blanchard, 2018). Ensuring that the change implementation plan is dynamic and involves others in the planning process helps surface and resolve many lingering personal and implementation concerns.

3.4. Consequence

Impact concerns are more complex as they focus on the effects of the innovation. The major theme of impact concerns is the need to consider ways to enhance outcomes. The consequence stage deals with increasing effectiveness and impact in one's use of the innovation (Hall & Hord, 2020). Leaders face various challenges throughout their careers, including effectively navigating the impact concern stage.

This stage refers to the period during which leaders determine how their actions and decisions will influence others. Transformational leadership is particularly effective during this stage as it focuses on inspiring and empowering others, promoting collaboration and communication, and fostering innovation. Transformational leaders inspire and empower those they lead by appealing to their higher moral values and inspiring them to surpass their self-interest for the collective good (Bass, 1990). During the consequence stage, transformational leadership helps team members understand their contributions to desired outcomes. Transformational leadership is particularly effective when the changes have a significant personal impact on the employees, as it strengthens their commitment to the change (Herold et al., 2008). Leaders should articulate a compelling vision and inspire others to work towards it, ensuring a greater understanding of their actions' potential consequences on others.

Transformational leadership encourages collaboration through shared decision-making processes where everyone's opinion is valued and accounted for (Küpers, 2011). This collaborative environment allows those involved to voice their concerns, ask questions, or provide feedback about potential impacts on others. Transformational leaders foster an atmosphere of open dialogue, ensuring that possible issues are addressed proactively before they become critical obstacles (Küpers, 2011). Furthermore, transformational leaders promote innovation by creating opportunities for creativity and learning within the organization

(Bass & Riggio, 2006). During the consequence concern stage, this innovation helps identify potential improvements or alternate strategies that could help mitigate adverse effects on others.

Addressing the consequence stage is crucial for the successful implementation of any innovation. By focusing on the needs and concerns of those directly affected by the change, leaders can foster a supportive environment that promotes continuous improvement. Transformational leadership, with its emphasis on inspiration, empowerment, collaboration, and innovation, provides a robust framework for navigating this stage effectively. By implementing strategies that recognize and encourage individual contributions, engage in meaningful conversations, share valuable resources, offer professional development, and foster collaboration, leaders can ensure the sustained success and positive impact of the innovation (Hall & Hord, 2020).

3.5. Collaboration

The second impact concern focuses on collaboration, requiring coordination and cooperation with others regarding the use of the innovation (Hall & Hord, 2020). At this stage, people ask questions about collaboration during the change process, such as: Who else should be involved? How can we work with others to get them involved in what we are doing? How do we spread the word? Individuals with collaboration concerns are dedicated to coordinating and cooperating with others. They want everyone on board because they are convinced the change is making a positive difference. During this stage, it is essential to get early adopters to champion the change and influence those who are still undecided (Blanchard, 2018).

One of the essential traits a leader must possess in overcoming the collaboration concern stage is the ability to build trust among team members. Kramer (1999) highlighted that trust facilitates collaboration by enhancing understanding and mutual respect among team participants. High levels of trust often result in increased commitment and motivation, ultimately leading to successful teamwork (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). To foster trust, leaders are advised to demonstrate reliability, give credit where it is due, admit their mistakes, and encourage open dialogue (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2021). Bakker et al. (2013) also found that increased communication contributes significantly to team cohesion and aligns individual goals with collective objectives. By facilitating an environment that encourages collaboration, leaders can create synergies that drive shared understanding (Daft & Marcic, 2017).

This evidence brings us to the fourth change leadership strategy: ensuring the change is sustainable. By making the change enduring, leaders pave the way for lasting outcomes. This approach encourages individuals to adopt the change, acquire new skills, and strengthen their commitment to the organization. Sustainable change fosters continuous improvement and long-term success (Blanchard, 2018). Achieving sustainable change necessitates successful collaboration, where

leaders build trust, enhance communication, and manage conflicts among team members. By adopting these strategies, leaders can effectively address challenges and create the synergy needed for optimal teamwork.

3.6. Refocusing and Refining

The final area of impact involves investigating broader benefits of change, including the potential for enhancement with a more effective alternative. Individuals at this stage have clear ideas about different options to the proposed or current innovation (Hall & Hord, 2020). They inquire about refining the change, asking questions like: How can we improve our initial concept? How can we enhance the change? Those concerned with refinement are dedicated to continuous improvement. Consequently, new opportunities for enhancement often emerge at this stage. When individuals focus on refining one change, they frequently envision the next change. Engaging others in exploring alternatives and suggesting different approaches makes it easier to build the case for the next phase of change (Blanchard, 2018).

Leadership plays a significant role in guiding organizations through complex decision-making processes. For successful navigation of the refinement concern stage, leaders must adapt their leadership style depending on the nature of the problem. Northouse (2018) suggests that effective leaders employ various approaches to fit changing situations while providing vision, motivation, support, and direction. The transformational leadership approach has been proven highly effective in overcoming the refinement concern stage. Another promising leadership approach in addressing refinement concerns involves adopting a participatory decision-making style. According to Vroom and Jago's (1988) normative decision-making model, there are varying levels of participation within the decision-making process. Leaders who involve their subordinates in discussions surrounding proposed solutions are more likely to address concerns effectively and refine decisions with greater insight than those who make decisions autocratically (Seifert & Yukl, 2010).

This leads to the fifth strategy in change leadership: exploring possibilities. This approach focuses on refocusing and refining issues. Although an effective change leadership team can create excitement and achieve short-term success during periods of change, it is essential for the change to become ingrained in the organization's culture—its attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral patterns—for it to be sustainable. If the change does not align with the current culture, the existing culture must be modified to support the new initiative; otherwise, the change may not endure (Blanchard, 2018).

Addressing the final impact concern stage of refocusing and refining is essential for the continuous improvement and sustainability of innovation within an organization. By leveraging transformational and participatory decision-making leadership approaches, leaders can effectively navigate this stage, ensuring that refinements are aligned with the organization's vision and strategic direction.

Exploring possibilities helps embed change within the organization's culture, ensuring long-term success and adaptability.

4. Conclusion

The stages of concern are predictable and sequential—in the order of information, personal, implementation and management, consequence, collaboration, and refocusing and refinement—meaning those involved will likely process information and feelings in a similar pattern, even if those feelings are not visibly apparent. It also means that members of an organization may be processing a variety of concerns if they are involved with multiple changes. Effective leaders must be mindful of these dynamics and plan accordingly with enhanced communication and support throughout the process. By involving people and addressing their concerns throughout the change process, leaders can build trust, reduce resistance, and achieve successful change adoption (Hall, 2013).

For organizational leaders, it is crucial to align change initiatives with desired culture, vision, and results. This can be achieved by 1) creating buy-in by expanding involvement and influence, 2) inspiring vision for change by explaining its purpose and necessity, 3) establishing the right resources and infrastructure through collaboration on the implementation, 4) achieving sustainable results by creating a deeper commitment throughout the organization, and 5) creating options by exploring possibilities (Blanchard, 2018).

Change leaders must also recognize that while they may be ready to focus on the benefits and impact of the change, the rest of the organization needs time and support to move through their initial concerns. By balancing support and challenge, fostering an inclusive culture, and reinforcing changes, leaders can guide their organizations through successful transitions and ensure sustained improvements. When leaders can identify the stage of concern, the current conceptual level, and the stress level, they can appropriately support and challenge the group during the innovation process. A leader can prescribe strategies that match (support) the current preferred learning style of the group and then mismatch (stretch) the group by asking it to consider the potential of the innovation (Kelehear, 2003).

Change is rarely easy, and in today's settings, the complexity and shortened implementation timelines make it even more challenging. Therefore, it is more important than ever to communicate clearly, collaborate on implementation, ensure the change is supported and sustainable, and continue challenging the status quo.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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