

EMERGENT ØRGANI\$ATIONAL ©HANGE



Why the Old Playbooks Don't Work and Why It's Time to Stop Pretending They Do

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Let's start with the obvious: most organisational change doesn't fail because people resist it. It fails because the approach was doomed from the start. The playbooks we keep reaching for, ADKAR, Kotter, the tidy five-step pyramids, were built for a world that looked nothing like the one we operate in now. A world where "alignment" wasn't a myth and "future states" didn't dissolve the moment a project kicked off.

Today, change doesn't move in steps. It accelerates wildly in one corner of the organisation and dies quietly in another. The models don't explain this and they certainly don't fix it.

This paper proposes something different: emergent organisational change, an approach that accepts complexity instead of fighting it. It proposes that we work with human behaviour instead of narrating over it; that stories of trust, understanding behaviour, scaffolding, belief, and tempo matter more than process charts.

This paper is based on five months of research, interviews and ten years of organisational change projects.

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1. THE FAILURE OF LINEAR MODEL\$ IN CØMPLEX ORGANISATIONS

The truth is, ADKAR and the associated models aren't bad so much as misleading. They offer a false sense of certainty. A way to package chaos in neat boxes and clients love them because they make change look manageable. Teams tolerate them because they've learned to survive whatever leadership invents this quarter.

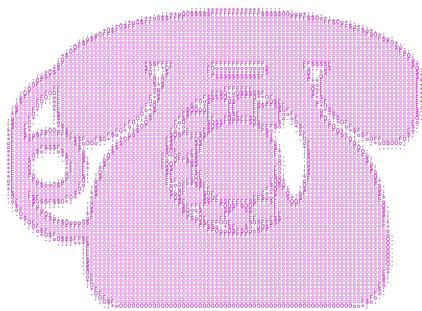
But when you actually sit inside a real transformation, not the slides, you see the flaws immediately.

Linear models assume predictable humans.

People don't move through "Awareness → Desire → Knowledge..." like ducks in a row. They oscillate and backtrack, they sprint then stop. They nod along and do nothing and none of this is a bug, it's the system working as humans work.

They assume the organisation is one organism.

It's dozens of loosely connected tribes, subcultures, cliques, and mini-economies. One function is artful, the next is bureaucratic, the third is exhausted. You can't "cascade" change through that and the idea itself is delusional and breaks the moment it starts.



They assume leadership has infinite bandwidth.

Leadership today comes with emotional labour, narrative-making, psychological safety, strategic clarity, operational competence, and the obligation to sound inspired at all times. Leaders are drowning and the idea they can uniformly “model behaviours” across thousands of people is fiction.

They assume the “future state” is real.

As soon as you define it, the market shifts and the model breaks. The powerpoint expires and too many transformations collapse because the “future state” was a mirage: too abstract to act on, too perfect to believe.

As one person I interviewed at Bytedance put it, “We don’t do transformations. We are always changing.” They’ve embraced the truth the rest of us lie to ourselves that we say we’re good at. This sets them up for success but for some of us to fail before we’ve even got started because it was never possible.

Summary

It’s never been easy to sell a million pound project that can’t predict an outcome and that’s precisely the reason so many people rely on models that fail when they meet complexity. Humans like to feel in control and the more kid ourselves believing we are in control, the less control we actually have.

If we don’t start with the premise that all change is unpredictable, we don’t even stand a chance.

2. TOWARD\$ AN EMERGENT PERSPECTIVEØN ORGANISATIONAL ©HANGE

If linear approaches collapse under complexity, emergent ones feed off it. We need to look deep into the organisation and see the patterns of behaviour, pulling the right levers as required, to help people progress through the change.

Change emerges. It isn't delivered.

This is the uncomfortable centre of Ralph Stacey's work at the University of Hertfordshire. Change doesn't come from plans. It comes from people, their conversations, stories, moods, incentives, frustrations and their improvisations. These micro-interactions create organisational patterns and you can't manage those with stages. You can only shape the environment they happen in.

Narrative is the real operating system.

Not the corporate strategy. Not the comms plan.
The story people tell themselves.

The big story, the transformation pitch, matters.

But the little stories, *"Does anything actually change here?"* *"Is leadership serious this time?"* *"Do we even know why we're doing this?"*, matter far more. They're the stories that spread in corridors, zoom calls and private chats.

If the big story and the little stories disagree, the little stories always win.

Tempo is the hidden variable no model touches.

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Venkatesh Rao said it plainly: tempo mismatches break systems and our organisations are full of them.

Some teams sprint whilst others limp and others overdeliver whilst some haven't understood the brief. New starters are energised but those that are still here are traumatised by the last transformation.

Most change programmes try to force uniform speed whilst everyone moves at their own pace. The programme has raced past them, assuming everyone is on the same page creating more friction, misaligned and guaranteed failure.

Triggers shift behaviour — but only if supported.

Throwing friction into the system is necessary: new rules, new tools, new expectations. But friction without scaffolding creates confusion and resentment. It's essential the "new floor" is established, so everyone has that fall back plan for when, not if, they feel lost. *"If you don't know what to do, do this"* is essential for every individual, team and function.

Incentives shape everything.

You can't story tell your way past misaligned incentives. Balaji's "We Win" paradox applies here: in a large organisation, collective benefit is rarely the path of least resistance. Unless incentives shift, behaviour won't. For every additional person in the organisation there is a new way to win that doesn't win for everyone. How do you find the only non-zero sum path through the change?

Leadership behaviour is the loudest signal in the system.

When IKEA's founder Ingvar Kamprad toured stores after hours with a torch instead of turning the lights on to save money, it wasn't a gimmick. It was a story people still repeat twenty years later. Leaders have to be able to authentically embody the new vision at every turn, showing up in the right way before their brain even kicks into gear.

3. THE CORE COMPONENTS OF AN EMERGENT APPROACH

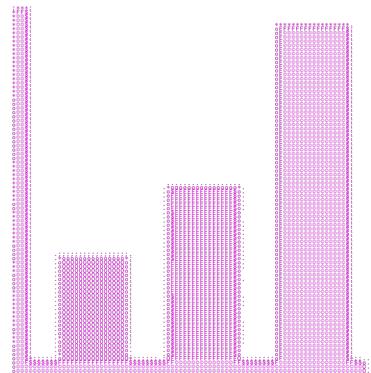
If emergent change is about conditions rather than steps, then four conditions matter more than anything else and they aren't sequential, they reinforce each other. And if one collapses, the whole system wobbles.

Condition One: A believable narrative

This is where most transformations die. Narratives become slogans rather than stories. Strategy slides masquerade as belief systems and people sniff out the disconnect instantly.

A believable narrative:

- acknowledges reality
- is simple enough to remember
- is specific enough to matter
- is emotionally true
- sets direction, not destinations



When Howard Schultz told Starbucks managers they “they were in the people business serving coffee” and all they needed to do was “10 more customers per store per day,” and that he wasn’t handing them a plan. He was handing them the opportunity to work it out for themselves.



Condition Two: Leadership behaviour that proves the narrative

You don't need leaders who say the right things.

You need leaders whose behaviour *is* the story.

Employees are forensic about this and one contradiction, one "do as I say not as I do" moment and belief collapses. Linear models treat leadership as a communication channel. Emergent change treats leadership as the signal the system orients around.

And tempo matters here too. Good leaders know when to accelerate the system and when to pull the handbrake. There is no model for this, it's judgement, feel and timing. People watch your feet not your lips.

Condition Three: Loose coordination

Loose coordination is the opposite of forced alignment. It assumes you will never get everyone on the same page at the same time and that you don't need to. You only need coherence: a shared sense of direction.

Loose coordination lets teams experiment, adapt, and operate at their own tempo, while the shared narrative keeps everyone moving the same way.

Condition Four: Scaffolding so everyone can actually participate

A large portion of the organisation simply cannot self-start. Not because they're incompetent but because they're human. They need:

- a first step
- a worked example
- a nudge
- a moment of unblocking
- a person who brings energy when theirs is gone

It's the difference between someone shouting "go change" and "this is what the first 5% looks like."

And in many transformations, the unsung heroes are those that create the vibe not the planners. The ones who lift energy, create momentum, and prevent the system from slipping back into inertia.

Scaffolding turns loose coordination from chaos into progress.



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4. IMPLICATIONS FØR PRACTICE

Embracing emergent change doesn't mean abandoning structure. It means abandoning the false pretence of structure.

It means:

- ✓ telling the truth about complexity, not simplifying it into fiction
- ✓ designing narratives people can actually believe
- ✓ choosing leaders for behavioural congruence, not just seniority
- ✓ treating incentives as the real engines of behaviour
- ✓ accepting tempo differences rather than treating them as defects
- ✓ providing scaffolding that makes participation possible for everyone

It means understanding that transformation isn't just built but responding to what emerges

It means making peace with the idea that there is no “right model”, only a right way of thinking.

It means understanding that strategy doesn't lead change, story leads, behaviour proves and then people interpret. Eventually culture starts to shift.

This is harder than running workshops and it's messier than project plans. It requires leaders who can tolerate ambiguity and teams who can self-direct. It demands honesty about how organisations really work.

But it actually works.



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CONCLUSION

Most change programmes fail because they were designed for a world we no longer live in, a world where humans behaved predictably, markets moved slowly, leaders had capacity, and culture could be “aligned.”

That world is gone, if it ever existed at all.

Emergent change isn’t a model. It’s a way of seeing organisations as they truly are: complex, human, adaptive, inconsistent, surprising, and capable of remarkable progress under the right conditions. Stop trying to force people through steps and start shaping the environment they move within.

The rest will emerge.

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