

## **Théorie et pensée du changement organisationnel: une synthèse succincte**

## **Organizational change theory and thought: a succinct synthesis**

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## Résumé

Si «le changement des organisations est aussi vieux que les organisations elles-mêmes », « ..., c'est uniquement récemment que le changement des organisations est devenu un intérêt pour les académiciens » (Burke, 2017). Ce papier aspire à fournir une vue d'ensemble succincte et synthétique de l'évolution de la pensée du changement organisationnel au fil du temps. Pour ce faire, il propose d'analyser deux lectures historiques différentes consacrant l'évolution de la pensée du changement organisationnel à travers le temps, celles de Demers et d'Autissier et al, avant de les synthétiser dans un aperçu succinct de l'histoire de cette théorie. Par la suite, cet article entend révéler quelques débats desquels émane la littérature, en l'occurrence deux débats notables : le changement est-il un phénomène ponctuel ou continu, et est-il planifié ou émergent ? Enfin, ce papier fournit un aperçu de deux modèles connus de management du changement : les modèles de changement de Lewin et de Kotter.

**Mots clés :** Changement organisationnel ; littérature ; pensée ; modèles ; débats.

## Abstract

If “[o]rganization change is as old as organizations themselves...”, “..., it is only recently that organization change has become an interest of scholars”(Burke, 2017). This paper aspires to provide a succinct and synthetic overview of how organizational change thought evolved over time. For that sake, it suggests analyzing two different historical readings on the evolution of organizational change thought over time: those of Demers' and Autissier et al's, before synthetizing them in a brief overview of the theory's history. Then, this article aims to unveil some of the debates from which the literature stems, namely two main debates: is change an event or a ubiquity and is it planned or emergent. Finally, this paper provides a glance of two renown models of change management: Lewin's and Kotter's change models.

**Keywords:** Organizational change ; literature ; thought ; models ; debates.

## Introduction

If “[o]rganization change is as old as organizations themselves...”, “..., it is only recently that organization change has become an interest of scholars”(Burke, 2017). Lewin’s contribution, in the 1940-50s, seems to have kicked off the study of change as applied in organizations settings (Autissier, Johnson, & Metais-Wiersch., 2018).

Many reviews attempt to provide a global overview of organizational change thought, be it in the form of debates or typologies or even historical accounts. Yet, a synthetic paper which gathers all relevant information in a one-shot reading *may* be beyond reach. Thus, this paper aspires to meet such a need and provide novice researchers to the field as well as curious readers about organizational change with a synthesis of what had been said with respect to the organizational change thought and how it evolved over the last century since Lewin’s contribution.

For the sake of brevity, this paper is built upon three parts. Part one offers an overview of the thought’s evolution since World War II. It is inspired by Autissier et al.’s (2018) contribution to the change reviews in 2018 along with Demers’s (1999) contextual interpretation of the theory. Part two attempts to build on the preceding section to unveil some debates which seem to have articulated the theory of organizational change. The third part ends up this contribution by providing, in a glance, a summary of some of the most renown models which use have influenced the practice of change in organizational settings. It concludes with a brief reflection on the value of this work.

### 1. Organizational change thought: a historical overview

#### 1.1. Demers’ and Autissier et al’s historical interpretation of change theory’s evolution

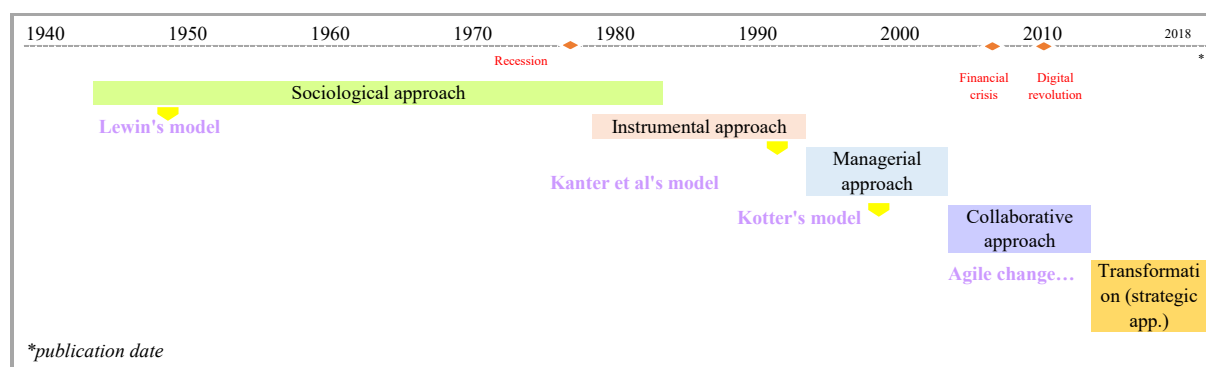
As (Demers, 1999) notices, “it is interesting to look at the evolution of research on organizational change [-] [*sic*] as such an approach allows us to see the links between environ[-]ment [*sic*] transformation and important modifications that change thought has had over time” (Demers, 1999 : 131).

In her paper, (Demers, 1999) offers a historical account of change thought evolution since 1945 till the late 90s, at the date the paper had been written. “The glorious years after war are characterized by a tremendous growth and a great economic stability that continue till the mid-seventies” (Demers, 1999: 131). As of (Demers, 1999), “[t]he implicit change process in these theories is mainly incremental and continuous” (Demers, 1999: 132). The context shifts in the

mid-seventies due to a recession triggered mainly by the oil shock, along with new international competition (Demers, 1999: 133), prompting theories of revolutionary and episodic change (Demers, 1999: 133). The “faith in a possible comeback of stability” is undermined due to the “succession of crisis” in the late eighties (Demers, 1999: 135) and change becomes a ubiquitous phenomenon (Demers, 1999: 135) which is “conceived of as simultaneously deliberate and emergent” (Demers, 1999: 137).

In their 2018 review paper, (Autissier et al., 2018) provide as well, a historical account of the evolution of change literature since Lewin’s publications. They recognize the existence of five phases which have spanned this evolution. The Figure N° 1 below attempts to depict their reasoning by providing a historical representation of the phases based on Autissier et al.’s (2018) paper.

**Figure N° 1 Overview of approaches to change as per Autissier et al (2018).**



**Data from** (Autissier et al, 2018)

As mentioned earlier, Lewin’s contribution has kicked off modern organizational change as of (Autissier et al., 2018). The subsequent approach identified by (Autissier et al., 2018) tends to encompass instrumental interventions to bring about revolutionary change (Autissier et al., 2018: 48). As big transformations fail in the mid-1990s, Kotter advocates for a change which success stems from managers’ engagement (Autissier et al., 2018: 49). Therefore, (Autissier et al., 2018) label this phase “the managerial approach”. However, with an emerging collaborative fashion combined with the “relative success” of instrumental interventions, the “innovation imperative” along with “digital projects” challenged top down approaches and put forward “the relevance of co-construction approaches” (Autissier et al., 2018: 51). As a consequence, change management has been internalized while co-construction has been embedded in change management practices (Autissier et al., 2018: 51-52). Such practices stand for the collaborative approach.

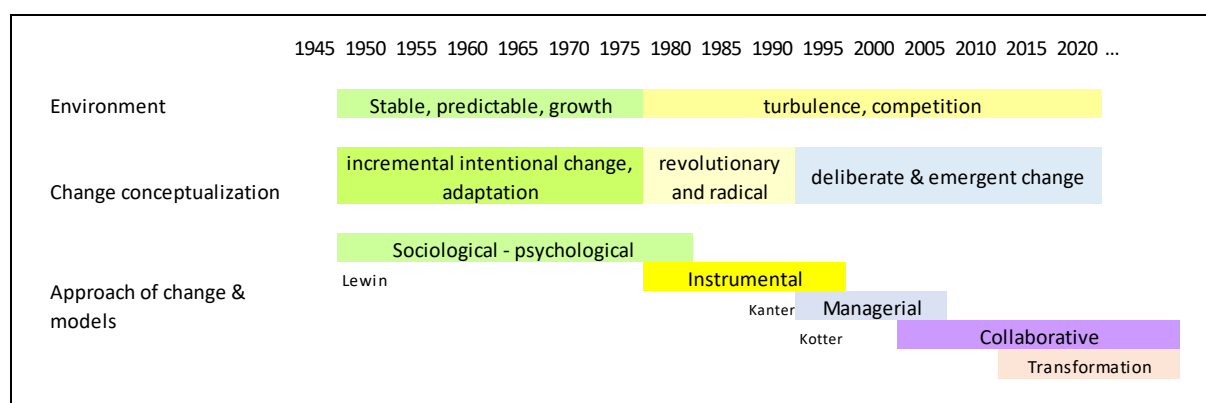
Eventually, the digital revolution prompted “exponential changes” (Autissier et al., 2018: 53). “Changes are permanent, multiple, violent and fast” (Autissier et al., 2018 : 53). It is the era of transformation.

### 1.2. The evolution of change thought: a historical synthesis

The two historical accounts of the change literature seem to overlap depending on the context and environmental demands. Either in Demers’ analysis or in Autissier et al’s review, the three first periods seem to be matching each other in both chronologies. It is to say that the context or economic environment has a very strong impact on how change is conceptualized by scholars and implemented by practitioners.

Consequently, we agree with Autissier et al’s depiction of the chronology of organizational change thought up to now and suggest a historical synthesis as sketched out in the **Figure N° 2** below. The collaborative and transformation eras, the characteristics of turbulence and competition in the environment as well as the conceptualization of change as emergent are assumed to be relevant up to now.

**Figure N° 2 A synthesis of Autissier et al's (2018) and Demers' (1999) historical accounts of the evolution of organizational change thought**



**Data from** (Autissier et al, 2018) and (Demers, 1999)

A further reading of such a chronology of change thought may suggest that change has always been ubiquitous in organizational life. However, the way it was dealt with seems to differ depending on the context and environmental demands and constraints. While things seemed to be under control since the end of World War II till the mid seventies, as the environment was stable and predictable, change was thought to be incremental and intentional. Turbulence seems to have changed change conceptualization. First it was assumed to be manageable with

revolutionary interventions reminiscent of Autissier et al's instrumental phase. But it might soon have become less manageable on a directed fashion and more of a collective endeavor starting with the managerial phase till nowadays collaborative and transformative phases, during all of which change seems to be conceived of as an emergent endeavor.

## **2. Some debates of the organizational change literature**

As of the synthetic figure above, one can think of two questions beneath the surface of the precedent change history, which could count among debates addressed by the literature of organizational change. The first one is associated with the "position or place" of change in the course of organizational life. While it seemed to have been considered as episodic or even a disruptive event in the early periods, it seems somewhat of a ubiquity from the late eighties on. The second question addresses the way change is implemented. Should it be planned or emergent? Similarly, it seems that planned change was maybe quite obvious in the earlier periods subsequent to World War II while it has become emergent in the late eighties. The sections below will address these questions with further detail.

### **2.1. Change in the organizational life: an event or a ubiquity?**

(Burnes, 2004) offers an interesting analysis with respect to "perspectives on the nature of change in organizations" (Burnes, 2004: 990). He asserts that,

[u]p to the late 1970s, the incremental model of change dominated. Advocates of this view see change as being a process whereby individual parts of an organization deal incrementally and separately with one problem and one goal at a time. By managers responding to pressures in their local internal and external environments in this way, over time, their organizations become transformed (Cyert and March, 1963; Hedberg et al., 1976; Lindblom, 1959; Quinn, 1980, 1982) (Burnes, 2004: 990).

This view of change as being an incremental process leading to the organizational transformation matches Demers' (1999) conclusions about the change process and conceptualization in the first period she identified in her historical analysis.

(Burnes, 2004) notices the rise of two additional alternative perspectives in the eighties :

- "the punctuated equilibrium model": is a model where revolutionary substantial change intersperses "relatively long periods of stability (equilibrium periods)" as of Romanelli & Tushman (Burnes, 2004: 990)

- “the continuous transformation model”: states “that, in order to survive, organizations must develop the ability to change themselves continuously in a fundamental manner.”(Burnes, 2004: 991)

(Demers, 1999) has previously argued that the conceptualization of change as a revolutionary substantial transformation spanned the second period she identified in change history while emergent continuous change dominated the third period she put forward.

One note which deserves mentioning here lies in Burnes’s (2004) reflection regarding these perspectives.

“One of the problems with all three perspectives on change – incrementalism, punctuated equilibrium and continuous change – is that all three are present in organizational life and none appear dominant. Indeed, **Burnes (2000)** even questions whether these are separate and competing theories, or merely different ways of looking at the same phenomenon: change. “(Burnes, 2004: 991-992).

Other reflections on the issue, such as (Weick & Quinn’s, 1999), seem to depict the debate as one of episodic vs continuous change.

## **2.2. The implementation of change: planned vs emergent?**

As of (Burnes, 2004a), the “two dominant” approaches to classifying organizational change consist of “the planned and emergent” dichotomy (Burnes, 2004a: 887).

(Van de Ven, 2021) defines planned change as “consciously conceived and implemented by knowledgeable actors”(Poole & van de Ven, 2021: 3). The planned approach initiated by Lewin’s contribution spanned the period “[f]rom the 1950s until the early 1980s”, according to (Burnes, 2004a: 887). In the same vein, (Van de Ven, 2021) explains:

Burke (2021) points out that scholarship on organization change emerged during the 1950's with the founding of the field of Organizational Development (OD). It was based on an action research model developed initially by Lewin (1948) that involved groups of participants working with consultants or organizational researchers ‘to solve immediate, practical problems *and also* to make a scholarly contribution based on the outcome. OD scholars advanced a number of process models of planned change, including Lewin (1948), Weisbord (1976), Nadler and Tushman (1977), Tichy (1983), Beer et al. (1990), Burke and Litwin, (1992), and Kotter (1996). These models commonly consist of a prescribed set of stages (e.g., Lewin's unfreeze, change, and refreeze), and steps for undertaking a planned change process. These

models became popular and widely used by practitioners even to today (Van de Ven, 2021: 438).

The author adds that a top-down approach is typical of planned change models as he ascertains that “these planned change models are typically driven by top-level managers often with external consul[-]tants [*sic*]” (Van de Ven, 2021: 439).

(Burnes, 2004a) recalls Weick’s (2000) statement that “the main critics of planned change tend to assemble under the banner of emergent change” (Burnes, 2004a: 889). The author cites Weick’s (2000, p. 237) definition of emergent change as “ongoing accommodations, adaptations, and alterations that produce fundamental change without *a priori* intentions to do so” (Burnes, 2004a: 889).

### **2.3. Towards an “entangled view” of organizational change as of Van de Ven 2021**

In his essay on organizational change, recently published in the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, (Van de Ven, 2021) recognizes that: “[w]hile planned-episodic and unplanned-continuous change may appear to be opposing views of organizational change, they are entangled in one-another, and provide a rich agenda of future scholarship on processes of organizational change and innovation” (Van de Ven, 2021: 436).

### **3. Renown models of organizational change in practice**

The following sections elaborate on two famous models of organizational change. The first one is Lewin’s model of change, considering that “Lewin undoubtedly had an enormous impact on the field of change”(Burnes, 2004: 995). The second one is Kotter’s model of change that (Appelbaum, Habashy, Malo, & Shafiq., 2012) describe as “one of the eminent change management models”(Appelbaum et al., 2012: 765).

#### **3.1. Lewin’s model**

Lewin’s famous 3-step model is

often cited as Lewin's key contribution to organizational change. However, it needs to be recognized that when he developed his 3-Step model Lewin was not thinking only of organizational issues. Nor did he intend it to be seen separately from the other three elements which comprise his Planned approach to change (i.e. Field Theory, Group Dynamics and Action Research). Rather Lewin saw the four concepts as forming an integrated approach to analysing, understanding and bringing about change at the group, organizational and societal levels (Burnes, 2004: 985).



With that important note said, let's describe the model. As mentioned, the model comprises three steps. The first step “[u]nfreezing” is intended to disrupt the extant “quasi-stationary equilibrium” that is “supported by a complex field of driving and restraining forces” for the sake of embracing a “new behavior” by unlearning the “old” one (Burnes, 2004: 985).

The second step entails “[m]oving”, which “occurs when the forces pressing for change are greater than those resisting change (Lewin, 1944a, 1946a)”(Burnes, 2020: 50). As of (Burnes, 2004), Action Research, which is conceived of as the “iterative approach of research, action and more research” is what “enables groups and individuals to move from a less acceptable to a more acceptable set of behaviours” (Burnes, 2004: 986).

The final step consists of “[r]efreezing” which “seeks to stabilize the group at a new quasi-stationary equilibrium in order to ensure that the new behaviours are relatively safe from regression”(Burnes, 2004: 986).

One could be tempted to represent such a model in a linear fashion. (Burnes, 2020) provides a “conventional representation” of the model adapted from Cummings and Worley (2015, p. 23) as three subsequent steps (Burnes, 2020: 48) (for further details, see Burnes’ 2020 paper, p. 48). Nevertheless, (Burnes, 2020) contends that “[i]t is the conventional representation of Lewin’s model that is simplistic” (Burnes, 2020: 49). Instead, he suggests another representation in his “Figure 4” which “illustrates the iterative nature of the three processes, the core purpose of each process, and the key underlying elements of the entire model”(Burnes, 2020: 49).

(Burnes, 2020) elaborates on the “origins” of the model (Burnes, 2020: 32) and one could get back to this reference as well as his 2004 paper to gain a more comprehensive and deep understanding of Lewin’s contribution and his famous model.

### 3.2. Kotter’s model

Besides Lewin’s model, Kotter’s change model is very famous in practice as the following quote demonstrates:

Although Kotter’s model of change management lacks rigorous fundamentals, it became an instantaneous success at the time it was advocated and it remains a key reference in the field of change management. In 1997, *Leading Change* (Kotter, 1996) became a business bestseller. It subsequently became the best-selling book ever of its kind. Hundreds of researchers refer to one or other of Kotter’s publications on change management. This book has been cited over 4,000 times in Google Scholar. The model

is also presented to this day in academic textbooks such as Langton et al. (2010). (Appelbaum et al., 2012: 765).

Kotter's model entails 8 steps advised to implement organizational change (Appelbaum et al., 2012: 765). These steps as cited by (Appelbaum et al., 2012) are as follows:

**Figure N° 3 Kotter's 8 steps model as of Appelbaum et al (2012) - Data from (Appelbaum et al, 2012) pp. 765-766**

<b>Kotter's 8 steps model as of Appelbaum et al (2012)</b>	
1	"establish a sense of urgency about the need to achieve change"
2	"create a guiding coalition"
3	"develop a vision and strategy "
4	" communicate the change vision"
5	"empower broad-based action"
6	"generate short-term wins"
7	"consolidate gains and produce more change "
8	"anchor new approaches in the corporate culture"

**Data from authors**

### **Conclusion**

This paper attempts to synthesize in a one-stop reading the chronology of organizational change theory and thought combined with the seemingly main debates and models that characterized this literature. It puts forward many stages in the development of the organizational change thought typically depending on the outsider environment and macroeconomic demands which seem to have shaped the way theories emerge. It also unveils two debates around which the literature might be articulated and describes two of the most prominent models for implementing organizational change.

Nevertheless, this synthesis best stands as a narrative subjective review that stems inductively from various readings on the theme and discipline of organizational change. It does not claim to be comprehensive nor integrative. Hopefully, it would have been a brief and relevant

introduction to the study of the field be it for a novice researcher or anyone curious about the literature of organizational change.

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