

# **Change Management in the Public Sector**

Research Paper

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**Abstract**

This study explored public sector employee perceptions regarding what strategies are required to create change that achieves desired results in public sector organizations. The theoretical framework for this study is the eight step model for transforming organizations recommended by John P. Kotter in 1995. A qualitative research design was employed, involving in-depth interviews with six employees of the Canadian Public Service, to test the alignment of Kotter's eight step model with the perceptions of public sector employees. The study revealed that three of Kotter's eight steps were aligned with the perceptions of the public sector employees interviewed. These three steps were forming a powerful guiding coalition, creating a vision, and communicating the vision. Based on this alignment, further recommendations on leadership, senior/middle management, development/communication of a vision, stakeholder involvement and training were made. This study concludes with an identification of proposed future areas for research to complement the findings outlined.

## **Introduction**

The ability to change continually and successfully is considered to be essential to any organization's survival. The need for ongoing change requires an organizational ability to learn on a continual basis in a coordinated and progressive way (Zorn et al., 2000). This has been widely considered to be a significant factor in the private sector's ability to achieve and maintain a competitive advantage and, in the same manner, the public sector's ability to demonstrate continued value and relevance for citizens. Continuous learning processes with enhanced capacities for change are linked to the importance of past experiences and the transfer of knowledge as factors in organizational learning (Allen et al., 2007). Research by Diane Skinner (2004) brings these concepts together by noting the importance of "knowledge acquisition processes and the need for organizations to share knowledge and learning as a way to maintain a competitive advantage" (p. 140).

A global trend has governments shifting to become the enabler of public service rather than the provider (Thomas, 1996). This means that governments are often awarding contracts to private companies to carry out their services to employees and the public rather than the services being carried out by public servants themselves. This trend has also been characterized by the adoption of certain private sector practices and concepts. Many of these changes have been the result of increased public scrutiny with respect to the public sector. Critics have questioned the effectiveness of service delivery and the government's hold on public and national resources. As a result, there has been a shift in perceptions of the value of the public service. Government organizations have moved from a focus on traditional public administration practices to new public management, and the increased public scrutiny has forced them to engage in change initiatives aimed at adapting to the ever-changing external environment (Backoff & Nutt, 1993).

The concepts of traditional public administration and new public management will be defined later in this paper.

Organizational change is a process by which a large company or organization changes its working methods or aims. Reasons for desires to re-orient might include the need to develop and deal with new situations or markets (Beer, Einstat & Spector, 1990). Organizational change is at the core of an organization's existence because it occurs with increasing frequency and magnitude in both the public and private sectors. Given this reality, the concept of change management has emerged as key for organizations. Change management is defined as the coordination of a structured period of transition from situation A to situation B in order to achieve lasting change within an organization (Bartkus, 1997). A large number of studies focus on change management approaches used in the private sector and apply these same approaches to the public sector. However, applying private sector approaches to the public sector often does not work, as the needs and characteristics of the public sector vary significantly. The following characteristics differentiate the public from the private sector: public accountability, the need to demonstrate value for money, the meeting/managing of increased expectations regarding service delivery levels and quality to both the public and politicians. As well, the highly publicized resource allocation and critical political environment has put the public sector into a position in which adopting lasting change becomes a challenge (Thomas, 1996).

This study will aim to determine employee perceptions on what kinds of strategies are required to create change that will achieve desired results in public sector organizations. The data obtained from interview participants will be primarily validated against Kotter's (1995) eight step model for transforming organizations. As a secondary aim, this study will also seek to determine employee perceptions as to what reasons cause change initiatives to fail to achieve desired results in public sector organizations, as well as employee perceptions as to what characteristics (if any)

of public sector organizations have an impact on the effectiveness of the implementation of change in these organizations. The interview data will be primarily compared to Kotter's eight step model, as well as to the other theories contained in the literature review. This review was undertaken with the objective of validating the accuracy of employee perceptions and making recommendations for the types of strategies that could be used by public sector organizations to create change that achieves desired results.

Other concepts that will be referred to throughout this study are change management, organizational culture, public sector, organizational change, organizational learning and evaluation. These terms are defined as follows for the purpose of this study:

***Change Management:*** Change management is the coordination of a structured period of transition from situation A to situation B in order to achieve lasting change within an organization (Bartkus, 1997).

***Organizational Culture:*** Organizational culture refers to the behavior of people within an organization, with often pre-existing values, visions and norms established by the organization and its employees (Chatman & Jehn, 1994). The culture can be manipulated depending on the leadership, and these changes will influence how people interact with each other. The culture can also have a negative or positive effect on employees within an organization (Brooks & Bate, 1994).

***Public Sector:*** The public sector is the part of society controlled by national, state or provincial, and local governments (Thomas, 1996). It is funded by the public and provides services to the population (Backoff & Nutt, 1993).

***Organizational Change:*** Organizational change is a process by which a large company or organization changes its working methods or aims, for example, in order to develop and deal with new situations or markets (Beer et al., 1990).

***Evaluation:*** Evaluation is the systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, program, or policy, including its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance and fulfillment of objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability. An evaluation should provide information that is credible and useful, enabling the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision making process (Skinner, 2004).

***Organizational Learning:*** Organizational learning is the ability of an organization to learn collectively by applying new knowledge to policy and innovation processes, as well as to their implementation (Common, 2004).

### **Rationale for the Research Project**

In Canada, public sector organizations have been subject to resource reductions accompanied by demands for increased efficiency and effectiveness. These organizations are also expected to exhibit characteristics of the private sector, specifically regarding management style, the contracting culture and performance management. Public sector organizations are expected to develop new relationships and partnerships, think and act strategically, network with other agencies, manage resources effectively, redefine boundaries of systems, and govern for accountability and transparency, according to Paul G. Thomas (1996). The rise of these expectations has created challenges and the need for change. According to Thomas, governments have had to compete in an environment with many societal evolutions, which have significantly altered the way public servants function in their jobs. In these instances, governments have relied heavily upon change management practices. Globalization, free trade, the increased movement of people and goods, new attitudes among citizens who expect more from governments, changing social attitudes and new technologies (especially information and communication technologies) have all contributed to the challenges now facing politicians, executives and managers alike (Backoff & Nutt, 1993).

Change management practices can, and should be, a solution for organizations to adapt to external or internal shifts. The field of change management is increasingly becoming an important focus of study, as research demonstrates that the most common reason for the failure of change initiatives in the public and private sectors is the resistance of employees and the failure of organizations to implement change management practices effectively (Backoff & Nutt, 1993).

According to Jerry Climer (2001), the idea that organizational change can be controlled is a relatively new concept in the world of management practice. He states that “for much of history, change has been seen as some ethereal force bringing about the rise and fall of civilizations, governments, religious groups and commercial interests” (p. 2). Recently, however, due to significant work in the field of organizational change, theories stating that change is uncontrollable have been transformed in the corporate world.

The new concept of change is that it can be manipulated and controlled to an organization’s benefit. Climer (2001) states, for example:

The Information-Age is compounding the complexity of society, just like the Agrarian and Industrial age before it. There is no longer a distance involved in communication. News, thoughts, opinions and culture can reach any place on the globe in a matter of seconds. The rural Chinese farmer who got electricity two months ago and television one month ago is today challenged and threatened by a world of ideas that his predecessors couldn’t even fathom. Because of this complexity and the interconnectedness of the global community, being able to effectively manage and lead change is becoming an imperative. (p. 3)

Evidence in the field of change management reveals that a large number of change initiatives carried out in the public service fail to achieve their intended or desired results (Carnall, 1986). This study endeavours to identify the perceptions of public sector employees



regarding the strategies needed to create change that is capable of achieving desired results in public sector organizations. It will also explore their perceptions with respect to strategies that cause change initiatives to fail to achieve desired results. Finally, the study will seek to identify the characteristics of public sector organizations, as perceived by employees, that could have a negative impact on change initiatives.

Employees are essential to carrying out the business of an organization; therefore, obtaining their insights and perceptions as to how best to carry out change will be beneficial for public sector organizations. Soliciting their insights can have the side benefits of encouraging their active engagement in the well being of the organization. This study will also rely upon theories presented in the existing academic literature to validate the recommendations of employees and to provide sound recommendations in moving forward.

### **Statement of the Research Questions**

#### Research Questions

- R1. According to public sector employees, what kinds of strategies are required to create change that will achieve the desired results in public sector organizations?
- R2. How do these strategies correspond to John P. Kotter's eight-stage model for transforming organizations?

#### Sub-Research Questions

- S1. What do public sector employees perceive to be the reasons for change initiatives failing to achieve their desired results in public sector organizations?
- S2. According to employees, which (if any) characteristics of public sector organizations have an impact on the effectiveness of changes implemented in their organizations?

## **Literature Review**

The following literature review will examine existing concepts in the areas of approaches to change management, change specific to public sector organizations, organizational learning and how change is evaluated in public sector organizations.

### **Approaches to Change Management**

Robert W. Backoff and Paul C. Nutt (1993) discuss how to take into consideration the unique characteristics and needs of the public sector and the way transformational change should be carried out in these organizations. Backoff and Nutt argue that, if done effectively, transformation will steer the development of strategic leaders in the future. They prescribe three approaches for how to carry out change in a public sector organization:

- 1) Process-based – specification of process to be followed to stimulate change.
- 2) Leader-based – what leaders should do to encourage and support change (“guidance principles” that suggest how leaders should take action).
- 3) Delegation-based – how to relinquish power and authority, and empower others to encourage change.

They advance the notion that significant change in a public sector organization must be carried out through strategic leadership, strategic management and self-managed work groups (Backoff & Nutt, 1993). Their three approaches show how strategic management and strategic leadership must be tailored to meet the specific needs of public sector organizations.

Ron Coram and Bernard Burnes (2001) believe that no “one best way” (p. 96) to manage organizational change exists. They argue that no single approach is suitable for all circumstances and objectives; so they propose the following two approaches to change management: the planned approach and the emergent approach. These approaches will be examined below.

*Planned Approach to Change*

The planned approach to change operates on the principle that once change has taken place, it must be self-sustaining (Coram & Burnes, 2001). The purpose of planned change is to improve the effectiveness of the human side of the organization by focusing on the performance of groups within the organization. A key aspect of this approach is that it places an emphasis on the collaborative nature of change. All parts of the organization collaboratively diagnose the organization's problems and jointly develop a plan for specific changes to address these issues. There is a strong human aspect and democratic nature to this approach as it aims to foster grassroots change which, according to Coram and Burnes, is more sustaining.

Another model, which validates the approach of Coram and Burnes, is the Burke-Litwin model. This model illustrates an approach for incorporating organizational culture into organizational change. Wyatt Warner Burke (2008) states that cultural factors function in this model to influence leadership, with links to organizational performance, mission and strategy, and the external environment. Burke believes that cultural dynamics influence the process of organizational change and thus should be considered at the beginning stages of a change. Gail F. Latta (2009) from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln studied the implementation of a change initiative within an organization using the planned approach and also concluded that organizational culture influences the process of effecting change differently at each stage of implementation. Latta developed the OC3 Model, which delineates the interaction of organizational culture and change at each stage of implementation and illustrates how culture can inform the process of implementing organizational change.

Kurt Lewin's (1947) theory of change places much emphasis on diagnosing a system first, before intervening to change it. His change model of "unfreezing, changing and refreezing" (Lewin, p. 43) is a planned approach to change, which can be applied to change in public sector

organizations. Lewin's approach focuses on psychological processes in human change, whereby an individual or group experience a process of "unlearning" in which they have to dismantle their typical thought process around a specific issue, followed by a process of "re-learning" a different thought process surrounding the same issue (Lewin, 1996, p.167). This is Lewin's attempt at restructuring one's thoughts, perceptions, feelings and attitudes.

The planned approach to change was developed in response to top-down, rigid, hierarchical, rule-based organizations; organizations that operate in a predictable and controlled environment. Paul G. Thomas (1996) states that public sector organizations operate according to a hierarchical structure, which is ingrained in their foundation. This might suggest that a planned approach to change is appropriate for public sector organizations, given their characteristics and the characteristics of the planned approach. Coram and Burnes (2001) note that critics believe that change is a continuous, open-ended process rather than a set of "self-contained events" (p. 96). Therefore, they believe that the planned approach to change cannot be applied to other types of organizations. Tatiana E. Andreeva (2008), who studied planned approaches to change being implemented in private sector companies in Russia, concluded that organizational change initiatives often deviate from initial plans for the change. In fact some of the organizational elements targeted at achieving change become "unmanageable," while others become "uncontrollable" (p. 129). She also concluded that the principles of a planned approach to change are invalid for the private sector Russian companies she studied.

A criticism of the planned approach is that it relies on the assumption that all parties in an organization involved in the change have a willingness and interest to be involved and that agreement will always be reached (Coram & Burnes, 2001). This assumption does not apply, according to some critics, who state that the planned approach does not account for potential organizational conflict. This means that if the various parties involved in the change do not have

the willingness and interest to be involved, they cannot reach a consensus on key organizational decisions.

### *Emergent Approach to Change*

In contrast to the planned approach to change, Coram and Burnes (2001) note the emergent approach to change, which views organizational change as a continuous process of adaptation and involves aligning an organization's capabilities to the needs of an uncertain environment. Coram and Burnes also note that this approach involves making "small-medium scale incremental changes" (p. 97), based on the assumption that these changes will lead ultimately to the sustained transformation of an organization. This approach assumes that change is a cross-organizational process that takes place in an uncoordinated fashion over a period of years but comprises a series of interlocking projects. The Clerk of the Public Service, Wayne Wouters, in his Twentieth Annual Report to the Prime Minister of Canada (2012) stated that the public service must be committed to change over many years in order to achieve desired results. He stated that the public service must be more nimble and open to operating in chaotic situations if that will foster meaningful change. Asa Berger (1992) also claims that the planned approach to change, discussed above, may not allow an organization to effectively deviate from the initial goals of the change should they need to, given changes in the external environment of the organization. Thomas (1996), contrary to clerk of the Public Service, states that the public service should aim to undertake quick change initiatives in order to achieve immediate results. The theory behind Thomas' claims may emerge from a political standpoint in which results must be achieved prior to the next election. It is important to consider this point when analyzing various change approaches in the public sector. Karl E. Weick and Robert E. Quinn (1999) state that emergent change approaches are effective, as most change initiatives within public sector organizations tend to be ongoing, evolving and cumulative.

There is a perception that within public sector organizations that the role of managers is not to plan and implement changes, but rather to “create or foster an organizational structure and environment which encourages and sustains learning and risk-taking and to develop a workforce that will take responsibility for identifying the need for change and will implement it” (Coram & Burnes, 2001, p. 98). Managers are expected to be the facilitators and to develop a collective vision and purpose for their team to give them direction during a change. This approach to change outlines key organizational activities that allow all of the above mentioned elements to function successfully. Coram and Burnes state that these activities include “information-gathering about the external environment and internal objectives and capabilities; communication, analysis and discussion of the information; learning to develop new skills, identify appropriate responses and draw knowledge from their own and other’s actions and experiences” (p. 98). According to Coram and Burnes, the planned and emergent approaches to change are “situational approaches” (p. 99), which are only applied to particular situations in an organization. They acknowledge that these two approaches do not cover the broad spectrum of change situations that an organization encounters.

Michael Beer and Nitin Nohria (2000) identified two theories of change, which they labeled as *Theory E* and *Theory O*. Theory E change has the objective of maximizing shareholder value. The organization applies this theory to situations in which its performance has weakened to a point that shareholders are demanding a rapid change to improve the organization’s financial performance. According to Beer and Nohria, circumstances of low organizational performance call for a “hard approach” (p. 133), based on the need for downsizing and probably involving extensive use of financial incentives. This could mean eliminating positions and creating financial incentives for employees to improve performance. These two factors have an interdependent effect in that employees may improve performance and productivity for fear of

their position being eliminated. A financial incentive may help improve the situation as well. Criticisms against Theory E, on the other hand, state that it focuses on increasing shareholder value and achieving short term financial gains while ignoring organizational culture and human capabilities (Beer & Nohria, 2000). This criticism highlights the short term gains for the organization, as well as the potential long term gains they may sacrifice. Kotter (1995) places a large importance on organizational culture and human capabilities in his theories, and he believes that these capabilities are the vital to the long term success of any organization, particularly in the public sector.

Theory O has the objective of improving an organization's performance by developing the organizational culture and its human capabilities and promoting organizational learning (Beer & Nohria, 2000). Nigel Leppitt (2006) states that Theory O focuses on organizational capability and emphasizes the importance of human relations in an organization. It also focuses on integrating individual needs of employees with the organization's goals. The criticisms against Theory O note that it focuses too much on the human capabilities and culture of an organization while failing to acknowledge core organizational activities, which deliver on shareholder value. Michael C. Jensen (1998) claimed in his study that there are clear distinctions between Theory E and O and concluded that Theory O is not a viable approach to change that will achieve shareholder value because of its focus on the internal humanistic aspects of an organization and the lack of priority it puts on achieving shareholder value. In light of the criticisms of both Theory E and O, it may be that combining approaches to change may be the best way for an organization to proceed. Beer and Nohria promote using both Theory E and O in collaboration in order to achieve optimum change results, rather than searching for a universal approach to change.

Dexter Dunphy and Doug Stace (1991) applied both Theory E and O in an organizational setting and noted that the organizations that used a combination of both theories as a change approach maintained medium to high performance results throughout a change period and beyond. They claimed that both Theory E and O, when viewed separately as approaches to change, can be effective, but they concluded that an integrative model (using both theories) yields more desirable results.

Marie McHugh, Geraldine O'Brien, and Joop Ramondt (1999) state that an approach to change based on task alignment, starting at the periphery and moving steadily towards the corporate core, may be the most effective way to achieve enduring organizational change. On this basis, they advocate for Theory E rather than O, stating that Theory O focuses heavily on human connections and relations, which do not result in maximized value for the organization.

Leroy White (2000) advances the notion that traditional change models, such as the planned and emergent approaches, are too static and not successful in changing the whole operating system of a public sector organization. White believes that public sector organizations must take a systems approach and perspective to managing change. This approach sees an organization as a complex set of interacting parts, responding to its environment and being responded to in return. To adopt this approach, an organization must have the ability to go beyond the view of the individual parts of the organization to address the entire organizational system and its complexity. A typical challenge to successful change occurs when the individual parts of an organization only see the change in their own way rather than from the view of the entire organization.

According to White (2000), a systems approach should address this deficiency. Systems' thinking advocates for approaches to change management which "involve unfreezing, changing and then re-freezing the desired state and business process re-engineering" (Lewin, 1947, p. 165).



This means to unfreeze the current state, make the changes required for the desired state and then refreeze the desired state. These processes can only be successful if they are led by a team with the authority and power to carry out change and that can effectively communicate the need to the entire organization. McHugh et al. (1999) state that the weakness of a system's approach is that it is more effective for internal organizational change, rather than for addressing constantly changing and unpredictable external environments. In addition, they state that it does not allow for genuine participation, rendering it unable to address issues that involve stakeholders. This point is somewhat problematic, as it reveals that this approach does not allow for genuine participation and implies that internal organizational change does not require participation. This is contradictory to the data collected from the interview subjects, which will be discussed later.

White (2000), however, fails to account for change that involves responding to a shifting external environment, which includes stakeholders. This lack of accountability is problematic since stakeholders are a key foundational aspect of an organization, and the fact that this approach does not take this into consideration throughout a full system change brings into question the validity of the approach. It is not truly an approach that changes the "whole system" of the organization.

### **Change Specific to the Public Sector**

White (2000) states that the emergence of new policies and institutions in the public sector are typically a response to changes in the wider environment. The changes in the wider environment results in a large number of institutions dealing with citizens and communities in a number of different ways. This change in approach has brought about a variety of challenges to the public sector, forcing them to further reform and change. The direction of the reform focuses on coordination, partnership and joint accountability. White claims that public sector organizations are required to expand and direct their change efforts to generate new needs and

opportunities. They are required to review and revise their ways of working by introducing new systems and adopting new ways of working together.

Ebrahim Soltani, Pei-Chun Lai and Vahid Mahmoudi (2007), state that public sector organizations have been subject to increasing demands for greater financial accountability, efficiency and effectiveness over the last decade. These demands and the necessity to match services more closely to citizens has resulted in the need for management in public sector organizations to place more of an importance on the practical approaches and tools for change, in order to achieve desired results. Soltani et al. state that tools and approaches have been developed in the field of change management to, first, initiate and manage change and second, to control and direct change caused by unplanned events. The driver for the development of these tools and approaches is the organization's desire to improve quality, address workforce concerns and to enhance flexibility by changing organizational structures, processes, people and culture.

Soltani et al. (2007) suggest that the similarities in the various change initiatives carried out in the public sector are that they focus on the hard (structure and systems) and the soft (corporate culture) aspects of the organization, with the objective of improving performance and employee well-being. They also suggest that there are two levels of changes. The first, fundamental/transformational, focuses on overarching issues such as mission, strategy, culture, leadership and external environment. The second level, which is transitional/transactional, focuses on how to accomplish tasks on a daily basis and deals with issues relating to organizational structure, management practices, employee motivation and work unit climate. They claim that every change initiative carried out in an organization should reflect the status of both the fundamental/transformation level as well as the transitional/transactional level.

There is evidence in the field of change management that a large number of change initiatives in the public sector involve a top-down approach. A second approach, also prevalent,

views change in terms of its component parts. Most public sector organizations find themselves in situations where they are undertaking a number of projects as part of their change effort (McHugh et al., 1999). However, as McHugh et al. (1999) point out, the key to a successful change effort is not attending to each component in isolation, but rather connecting and balancing all of its parts.

In the public sector, change is viewed as tumultuous and continuous, to the point that organizations and their employees cannot absorb the impacts of one set of changes before another set is imposed on them (Thomas, 1996). Thomas argues that the pace, scope and depth of changes in the public sector require a “re-visitation of the models in which bureaucracies have been built upon in the past” (p. 6). This refers to examining the structures underpinning the public sector and determining what characteristics of the structures can act as barriers. Thomas claims that when analyzing change in the public sector, there needs to be some consideration given to the fact that the change is more about politics than about management. This requires the acknowledgement that these two domains are separate and management approaches should not be mistaken for solutions to political problems. Thomas also notes that many models for organizational change originate with the experiences of private firms, and they often ignore the complexities of managing change in the public sector. In addition, fundamental organizational change, as described by Thomas, does not state exactly what relationships exist between the following factors: environmental conditions, organizational strategies, leadership styles, structural arrangements, organizational cultures, communications patterns and the role of power and conflict within public organizations. Accounting for the dependencies among these factors is crucial to effectively analyse a change within a public sector organization, as it will provide a broader picture of the change and will facilitate the determination of areas of weakness. Thomas concludes that the single most important factor involved with the process of organizational

change in the public sector is the capacity to manage conflict. The concept of “New Public Management” (Thomas, p.11) focuses specifically on how to manage conflict, as good management is deemed to be the gateway to successful organizational change. The concept of new public management draws mainly from management techniques and practices that characterize the private sector. This approach is increasingly seen as a global phenomenon, which seeks to shift the emphasis from traditional public administration to new public management (Larbi, 1999). Traditional public administration, contrary to new public management, is based on the nature of bureaucracy. Max Weber (1968) emphasized control from top to bottom in the form of a hierarchy. He focused on a system of control in which policy is set at the top and carried out through many offices, with each manager and officer reporting to one superior. The bureaucratic system is based on a set of rules and regulations flowing from public law which is looked at as a system of control which is rational and legal. The role of the worker in this system is firmly subordinate to the political superior. Weber described the role of the public servant and the importance of hierarchical control in a bureaucratic system in the following way: “To take a stand, to be passionate is the politician’s element indeed, exactly the opposite, principle of responsible from that of the civil servant. The honor of the civil servant is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities. Without this moral discipline and self-denial, in the highest sense, the whole apparatus would fall to pieces” (p. 204). This observation illustrates the truly hierarchical nature that is present in traditional public administration.

The key elements of new public management include various forms of decentralizing management within public services; increasing use of markets and competition in the provision of public services; and increasing emphasis on performance, outputs and customer orientation

(Larbi, 1999). New public management is driven by a combination of economic, social, political and technological factors. According to the United Nations, a common denominator among countries now adopting new public management practices and theories has been the experience of economic and fiscal crises which triggered the quest for efficiency and for ways to cut the cost of delivering public services. New public management encompasses a wide range of perspectives that are intended to overcome the inefficiencies in traditional public administration. Robert Behn (2001) defines new public management as “the entire collection of tactics and strategies that seek to enhance the performance of the public sector” (p. 43). He is referring to the large, rigid structures of the traditional public administration systems which are, at this time, too cumbersome for an environment characterized by instant communication and an economy based on information and its manipulation rather than on “industrial production”.

On the subject of barriers that inhibit change within public sector organizations, the absence of continuous training to meet the requirements of the change initiative within an organization is another barrier to its success, according to Soltani et al. (2007). An integral part of improving an organizational change initiative is training that is conducted objectively, systematically and continuously in order to set in motion a cycle of improvement. This training system is often built into the change initiative. Soltani et al. also note that training can be an “important lever in prompting cultural changes” (p.264) which is also necessary to achieve success.

Another barrier is ineffective communication regarding the change. This refers to poor vertical and horizontal communication across the organization. Soltani et al. (2007) argue that the ability of any change initiative to improve an organization’s capability is completely dependent on the communication system which it employs. Initiating any organizational change requires the dissemination of information to all implicated parties. Kotter (1996) offers that communications

must be simplified during an organizational change. All aspects of the change must be explained in a granular format while addressing all details of the change. Elving (2005) notes that poor communication, coupled with an overload of information can leave employees feeling bombarded, which results in less efficiency. The benefit of having an effective communication system is that it is an opportunity to have supervisors and employees talking positively about the change initiative. It progresses the change, helps to clarify existing attitudes towards the change initiative and it sets the basis for any required corrective-action and “error-cause-removal steps” (Soltani et al., p. 264). Soltani et al. also claim that communication systems are still the most neglected aspect of change initiatives within public sector organizations. Neglecting this aspect results in confusion, loss of interest, and eventually a decline in the change initiative due to a lack of guidance.

Soltani et al. (2007) indicated that their studies revealed that, during change initiatives that were not achieving their desired results, middle managers felt that senior management was uncertain about the strategic importance of the change. One of their studies revealed that the lack of success of change initiatives relates to the lack of awareness of senior management with respect to the nature of the change, its contribution and its likely outcome. Senior management commitment is critical to the success of the change initiative. Elving (2005) states that a common problem that occurs in change initiatives focused on the top layers of the organization is that senior management does not acknowledge that the lower levels of the organization will experience a change, as well, as a result of changes occurring at the top. It is often emphasized that nothing will change for lower level employees because changes are required at the managerial level. This conclusion, however, underestimates the residual effect of the change initiative at all levels of the organization and explains how senior management can break trust between themselves and employees and how they can violate their expectations. There needs to

be mutual support between senior management and its employees—trust that can be built through communication, training, development opportunities, effective creation and management of expectations and remuneration and rewards (Soltani et al., 2007).

The relationship between senior management and middle management is also a factor during a change initiative. Elving (2005) claims that middle managers often resist change as they are forced to balance the needs and demands of senior management as well as the needs of their employees who must be nurtured in order to maintain an acceptable level of productivity throughout a change. The role of middle managers must be considered as they are required to communicate the changes to the workforce and in turn report on the success of the change initiative to the senior management.

Soltani et al. (2007) confirm that the majority of obstacles during a change initiative originate at the middle manager level due to contradictions between middle and senior management and they note that middle management has the power to negatively or positively affect employee commitment. This suggests that the link between senior and middle management is integral during a change initiative. Delegating authority to the lowest possible level during a change initiative is a good way to ensure that the organization's middle management layer is on side with the change and does not contradict it with their behavior or attitudes. This will empower them and may help to subside some of their fears or concerns.

### **Organizational Learning**

Organizational learning in the public sector is considered to be a key driver in improving the change and renewal of the public sector (Barrette, Lemyre, Corneil, & Beaugard, 2012). Facing change from all directions, organizations are turning to concepts of organizational learning to navigate and manage these changes. Given that the public sector does not operate and strive for profits but instead for production of value for citizens, the operating environment is

much different. The public sector operates in a highly political environment at times, which consists of a high level of supervision, control and accountability. In a 2007 report, the Government of Canada recognized the importance of organizational learning in creating an effective and efficient public service. However, the report also noted the lack of research specific to the public sector, a deficiency that poses a significant limitation to renewal (Government of Canada, 2007).

Researchers in the field view organizational learning as a multi-level process that affects the evolution of organizational knowledge and practice (Barrette et al., 2012). This process involves collectively applying new knowledge to policy, process and its implementation. George P. Huber (1991) provides an operational definition of organizational learning based on a four-phase approach: “knowledge-sharing, which implies knowledge acquisition; information dissemination; information interpretation; and organizational memory” (p. 94). This approach provides a practical understanding of organizational learning, which can be applied in any organization. It focuses on the preservation and sharing of knowledge for practical purposes.

Another view is from Bente Elkjaer (1999), who claims that social learning theory has contributed to the field of organizational learning because he considers organizational learning to be a “relational activity, and not an individual thinking process” (p. 139). The interactions among employees and how they develop as part of an organization are emphasized by Elkjaer, as well as the factors that facilitate this type of collective learning. This view focuses more on the culture of the organization, as created by the interactions between employees, and how this can lead to enhanced organizational learning. Interactions between employees can be positive or negative, thus impacting the organizations ability to effectively learn as it moves forward.

Another perspective on organizational learning is the constructivist perspective, which views learning as the result of individuals taking part in activities that lead them to develop and



share their knowledge through social exchanges (Barrette et al., 2012). An organization subscribing to this perspective regards interaction as essential to organizational learning. This perspective is aligned with Elkjaer's notion as well in that it focuses on the interactions and exchanges between employees within an organization. The nature of the social exchanges discussed by Barrette et al. must be considered in order to effectively assess the ability of an organization to learn.

Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (1978) are also interested in the individual and group interactions within an organization. They present the theories of single and double loop learning as it pertains to organizational learning. These two types of organizational learning theories are defined based on an error and correction process. Single loop learning is classified as an error being detected and a corrective strategy being applied to address it, all within the confines of the organizations' structure, policies and norms. Double loop learning on the other hand, refers to an error being detected and then corrected using a strategy that involves a modification of the organizations structure, policies and norms. It allows for the setting of new priorities and the reconstruction of the components that build an organization's structure and culture. In double loop learning, the foundational aspects of the organization are questioned and tested.

Argyris (1974) also explored how organizations could increase their capacity for double loop learning, as he believed that this type of learning is what was required for organizations to adapt accordingly to rapidly changing circumstances.

Peter M. Senge (2006) believes that organizational learning is ongoing. He states that the problems an organization faces at a point in time are due to the solutions it implemented at a prior point in time. An organization that implements solutions that shift its problems from one part of the system to another are not actually solving the initial problem which presented itself. This is not in line with the principles of a learning organization. In line with Argyris and Schon, Senge

recommends learning to understand the structures within which an organization functions as a first step towards effective organizational learning. It is the first step towards “freeing ourselves from previously unseen forces and ultimately mastering the ability to work with them and change them” (Senge, p. 93). This statement refers to being able to fully understand the conditions within the functioning of an organization in order to achieve your change objectives. This also supports Argyris’ notion of developing an organization’s ability for double loop learning in order to sustain its long term ability to change and adapt.

### **Evaluation of Change Initiatives**

With any project or initiative, the evaluation stage is crucial in order to obtain best practices and lessons learned for future projects. No difference exists when it comes to change initiatives. Denise Skinner (2004) notes that an integral part of effective change and effective learning is the reflection on experience and the evaluation of process and outcomes in order to enable productive progression to the next stage. The literature in the field of change management, reviewed in this study, acknowledges that evaluation plays an active role in determining the success of a change initiative. Skinner states that evaluation provides information to an organization that can enable its members to “improve management decision making; create new insights and mutual understanding; lead to wider acceptance and commitment to change initiatives; develop further innovation; and provide opportunities for reflection prior to undertaking further change” (p. 140).

Failure to evaluate past experiences allows valuable knowledge to be lost and renders the organization in a position of repeating past and often unsuccessful actions, hoping for new results. The mysterious trend, according to Skinner (2004), is that many organizations that are “providing and promoting the prescriptions for organizational success recognize the need for evaluation in the context of the need for continual learning and change” (p. 136); however, they

do not incorporate the knowledge into organizational practices. The consequence is what Skinner calls “broken learning cycles” (p. 136) in which errors are repeated and knowledge is lost.

A research study conducted by Skinner (2004) in two public sector organizations in the United Kingdom explored the reality of evaluation in the context of change, with the objective of identifying barriers to evaluation and the factors that created them. This study revealed that two distinct types of barriers to evaluation exist. First, there are primary barriers, which act against an evaluation being taken. These barriers are rooted in contextual factors embedded in the organization’s history and culture. By contextual barriers, Skinner means the background against which the change initiative takes place. Secondary barriers are barriers that arise during an evaluation process. These barriers result from the choices and decisions made during the evaluation process itself and therefore only become evident and significant once the decision to evaluate has been made. Skinner argues that the combination of primary and secondary barriers offers a comprehensive explanation as to why the evaluation stage of many change initiatives in the public sector has been omitted.

Mark Hughes (2011) claims that the evaluation of organizational change initiatives is affected by the competing perceptions of the change that exist within the organization and external to the organization. In evaluating change there are challenges in collecting accurate data and the conclusions derived from this data can be problematic at times because they may be a result of the “epistemological and ontological position” (Hughes, p.459) of the evaluators. These factors are often not considered in the evaluation of change initiatives. It is very difficult to evaluate an organizational change initiative in isolation from the other initiatives that may be taking place in the organization. This is often a mistake of organizational change evaluations in that they attempt to evaluate the single change initiative that has taken place when, realistically, it is very difficult to isolate this change, according to Hughes.

Sherry Devereaux Ferguson (1999) outlines some common approaches to evaluating communication products and services which can be applied to evaluating change initiatives. One of those approaches is using audits as a method for measuring and evaluating the outcomes of an initiative and they often use a “ranking scale” (Ferguson, p. 60) as a measuring tool. As it pertains to audits of change initiatives, Leppitt (2006) notes that these can be effective as they provide the organization with a driver for a cultural change that can build a new and positive way of working within an organization.

Ferguson (1999) also notes methodologies such as surveys, interviews and observation to be used to evaluate the processes within organizations and the efficiency of their operations in carrying out their mandate. These methodologies allow the evaluator to measure the “change in levels of awareness, knowledge, acceptance, attitudes, relationships or behaviours” (Ferguson, p. 63) within an organization. This approach to evaluation is particularly relevant for change initiatives as they can identify the state of the organization, as it relates to the factors noted by Ferguson, prior to the change and following the change which will reveal the discrepancy between them. Thus, depicting the effect of the change on the organization, with respect to the factors noted.

The literature review has examined approaches to change management, change specific to public sector organizations, organizational learning in public sector organizations, how change is evaluated in public sector organizations and effective and ineffective change strategies. This review is intended to form the basis of this study by providing its situational context and foundation for the data collected.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the eight step model to transforming an organization as recommended by Kotter (1995) for organizations. This model is depicted as follows by Kotter:

*Step 1: Not establishing a great enough sense of urgency;*

*Step 2: Forming a powerful guiding coalition;*

*Step 3: Creating a vision;*

*Step 4: Communicating the vision;*

*Step 5: Empowering others to act on the vision;*

*Step 6: Planning for and creating short term wins;*

*Step 7: Consolidating improvements and producing still more change;*

*Step 8: Institutionalizing new approaches.*

The data gathered from interview participants will be analyzed in order to test the alignment of Kotter's eight step model to the perceptions of public sector employees as to what strategies are required to create change that achieves desired results in public sector organizations. Based on these findings, strategies for public sector organizations to use in creating change that achieves their desired results will be recommended.

Kotter developed this eight step model after noting the eight most common ineffective strategies that organizations use in change initiatives--strategies that impede success. These strategies are explored below in order to provide additional context for the model.

The first ineffective strategy is not establishing a significant sense of urgency (Kotter, 1995). One reason for failure in doing this is that organizations and those leading change often underestimate how hard it can be to drive employees out of their comfort zone. They overestimate how successful they have been in increasing urgency, and they sometimes lack

patience. Eagerness may take over and cause executives to speed through the first phase of establishing urgency and move directly to the change itself. Executives often become fixated on the possible negative consequences of the change, which renders them paralyzed in their decision-making. They become consumed with worries that their senior managers will become defensive, morale will decrease and the change will spin out of control, creating a crisis within the organization. Having a senior management who are paralyzed is often the result of having an abundance of managers, but not enough leaders. The purpose of phase one, according to Kotter, is to “make the status quo seem more dangerous than launching into the unknown” (p. 60).

The second ineffective strategy is not creating a powerful enough guiding coalition members (Kotter, 1995). Successful change occurs when the lead coalition guiding the change, continuously grows in number throughout the initiative. A minimum mass needs to be established at the outset in order to make productive progress. A successful guiding coalition may consist of only three to five people during the first year of a change, but it the group should grow to between 20 to 50 people in order to achieve progress. “No matter how capable the head of the change is, strong line leadership is the only way to achieve power” (Kotter, p. 62). This line by Kotter emphasizes the need for a team of individuals to implement the change across the organization in order to achieve success.

The third ineffective strategy is not developing a vision for the change (Kotter, 1995). In successful change initiatives, the guiding coalition driving the change establishes a picture of the organization they want to achieve following the change. This vision must be easy to communicate to employees and must fit well beyond the five year mark. The vision clarifies the direction in which the organization needs to move. It may take up to 12 months to develop a solid vision, and the vision should be accompanied by a strategy to achieve it. Without a vision, a change initiative within a public sector organization can turn into a list of confusing side projects

that direct the organization in the wrong way or cause it to stagnate. An example, provided by Kotter, suggests that a change initiative that lacks a clear vision may contain an abundance of plans, protocols, directives and strategies but ultimately confuse employees because the forward-looking idea is absent.

The fourth ineffective strategy is under communicating the vision (Kotter, 1995). This error is two-fold in nature. One source of the ineffectiveness is the lack of newsletters, speeches and pamphlets that state and explain the vision. The second source of ineffectiveness pertains to senior management behaving in ways that are contradictory to the vision they are communicating. The result is increasing cynicism amongst employees and a decreasing belief in the communication being disseminated by senior management. This undermines the change initiative even if other senior managers are behaving in a way that is consistent with the vision. According to Kotter, "Transformation is impossible unless hundreds or thousands of people are willing to help, often to the point of making short-term sacrifices. Employees will not make sacrifices, even if they are unhappy with the status quo, unless they believe that useful change is possible. Without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured" (Kotter, p. 63). Kotter continues on to note that this point in a change initiative can be difficult if the short term sacrifice includes downsizing positions. This was an interesting point made by Kotter that did not have any follow up. It would have been valuable to expand on this point further and offer practical recommendations for carrying out change successfully in an environment that requires downsizing and what type of an impact this has on an organizational change.

The fifth ineffective strategy is not removing obstacles to the new vision (Kotter, 1995). Significant organizational change requires the removal of obstacles in order to achieve objectives.

Kotter notes that obstacles can be real and require effort to remove. An example of such an obstacle could be the organizational structure in which employees are operating. Employees could have narrowly defined job descriptions that undermine the change, but they are in place to increase productivity. At times the performance management system, which managers are utilizing to evaluate employee performance, may render the employee in a position to favour their own personal interest rather than the new change. Another major obstacle could be managers who make demands of employees that are not aligned with the overall effort and vision of the change initiative. This behaviour leaves the employee feeling confused, disgruntled, distrustful of senior management, and reluctant to accept the change.

The sixth ineffective strategy is not systematically planning for and creating short term gains (Kotter, 1995). Given that a successful change initiative requires a lengthy period of time, it is important for the organization to create short term goals that can be reached and celebrated in order to build and maintain momentum throughout the initiative. Kotter states that employees “won’t go on the long march unless they see compelling evidence within 12 to 24 months that the journey is producing expected results. Without short-term wins, too many people give up or actively join the ranks of those people who have been resisting change” (Kotter, p. 65). Kotter also notes that when employees discover that successful organizational change can take a long time, urgency levels may drop resulting in a resistance to change.

The seventh ineffective strategy is declaring victory too soon in the process (Kotter, 1995). When an organization declares victory too soon in a change initiative by celebrating short term wins, this can often spiral out of control and give the organization the illusion that they have reached their final goal, when in reality they have not. Successful change sees senior management using the momentum of short term wins to address larger issues as the change initiative progresses. These managers must examine systems and structures within the



organization that are not consistent with the vision of the change, and they must make the necessary amendments. They must focus on the development of their employees and look for ways of building new skill sets and refining their existing skills. In addition, they understand that successful change takes years and they ensure that their employees are aware of this. The eighth ineffective strategy is not making changes in the organization's culture. Change must be institutionalized in the culture of an organization, according to Kotter. Additional information on the institutionalization of change was not provided by Kotter, thus leaving this strategy somewhat vague and incomplete. This point will be taken into consideration when analyzing the results of this study.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

In order to answer the research questions of this study, a qualitative research design will be utilized. The focus of the qualitative research design will be to gather and interpret data based on an interpretive social science approach suggested by John W. Creswell (2009). This study will analyze comprehensive principles and ideas related to change management and will generate theories on what employees perceive are effective change strategies in the public sector. Examples from public sector organizations around the world will be provided, but the recommendations made by the research are intended to be used by the Canadian public sector only.

This research study employed a purposive sampling technique (Creswell, 2009), which is a nonprobability sampling strategy that will allow the researcher to compare the experiences of six employees of the Canadian Public Service to the change management approaches and strategies referred to in the literature review. Based on these findings, the researcher will make recommendations on which change strategies are effective to use in public sector organizations.

Additionally, opportunities for further research will be identified. This strategy is most appropriate, as only information directly related to the outlined objectives will be selected and analyzed. Despite the subjective format of the strategy, the researcher will ensure to maintain validity, accuracy and consistency when analyzing the content and will present the material in a candid fashion. Overall, this strategy will enrich the body of findings and produce in-depth, comprehensive information in order to meet the research objectives.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

In order to achieve the objective of this study, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews as the main data collection method. The in-depth interviews provided rich information derived from descriptions and explanations of events that occurred within a specific subject's environment (Eid, 2011). The researcher will examine the interview data against the approaches and strategies referred to in the literature review. The relationship between the information contained in the literature review and the perspectives drawn from the interviews will result in either complementary or contradictory insights. The following paragraphs will further illustrate the data collection method and the sampling strategy.

### ***Criteria for Participant Selection***

The participants were selected based on their level and the number of years of service in the Canadian Public Service. The researcher selected participants who were at six different working levels in the Canadian Public Service in order to gain a variety of perspectives, rather than all the perspectives of those in management positions or all the perspectives of those in administrative positions. The selected participants occupied the following positions: Director General, Senior Director, Manager, Senior Policy Analyst, Program Officer and Junior Program Officer. The other criterion for selecting participants was that they were required to have at least five years of service in the Canadian Public Service in order to be able to provide useful

responses that were based on their knowledge of the Canadian Public Service. The researcher chose five years of service as a criterion; five years is an adequate amount of time to be able to formulate informed opinions of change in the Canadian Public Service. There are typically more change initiatives that occur once an election is held in Canada, which is typically every five years. Thus, the participants sampled had been employees of the Canadian Public Service for at least five years.

#### *Recruitment of Participants*

The researcher recruited subjects via email in order to provide them with adequate time and privacy to make their decision regarding participating in the study. This ensured that no coercive tactics were used to recruit subjects. Six employees of the Canadian Public Service were interviewed. Ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Ottawa was granted prior to the recruitment of interview subjects. The subjects were required to read and sign an official University of Ottawa ethical consent form in order to participate in the study.

The interviews were conducted in person at the convenience of the interview subject. Five questions (see annex) were asked, and subjects were provided with the questions prior to the interview. The interview questions addressed the research questions and objectives of this study. The researcher reviewed the subject's responses and followed-up with any clarifications or discrepancies in person. Any information provided by the interview subjects that fell outside the parameters of the outlined questions was utilized as added insight for the purpose of this study. As well, the subjects understood that the researcher could ask probing questions to gain a deeper understanding of their response. The interview questions were open-ended to allow for maximum latitude to explore issues of direct relevance. The names of the interviewees will not be disclosed in order to guarantee their anonymity and confidentiality.

## **Findings**

The following section details the findings and analysis of the interviews conducted by the researcher. The researcher transcribed the responses of the participants electronically as they were providing them. The responses were recorded in the order in which they were provided, and it was noted which participant provided which responses. Following this, the researcher prepared the data for analysis by organizing and coding the responses of participants according to the interview questions that were asked. For example, all of the responses to question number one were grouped together. This coding technique is the process of organizing material into “chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). With all responses coded, the researcher proceeded to use a generic form of analysis in which themes are extracted from the responses (Creswell). Four themes/categories were generated from the interview data, and the results of the interviews conducted were grouped according to these themes/categories noted below. This technique was chosen by the researcher in order to provide a clear and concise analysis of the data. The themes/categories are as follows: strategies to create effective change, strategies that create ineffective change, characteristics of the public sector that are barriers to change, and strategies to overcome the identified barriers.

### **Strategies to Create Effective Change**

There was a strong feeling among four interview subjects that the first step in any change in the public sector should be identifying who will be leading the change. There should be a clear understanding that this leader is accountable for the change from start to finish. They may be required to work closely with other senior managers in the organization and may have shared responsibilities, but ultimately they are accountable for the change. The leaders must be chosen based on their experience, personality and expertise. They should then outline the context of the change. The context of the change refers to what the change is about in the current organizational

context and also refers to what it is not about. Part of this task may be conducting a needs analysis of the organization to justify the change. From the onset, there must be clear objectives for the change, as well as clearly defined and measurable outcomes. These objectives and outcomes must be situated in a business and management context to avoid blurring the lines between business and management. In addition, clear milestones should be identified and created at the onset. According to four interview subjects, these milestones take the change from objectives to outcomes. There was also consensus among five subjects that these efforts should be driven by the top layer of the organization; in other words, senior management should be setting the stage for the change and developing its foundational elements. There was the feeling among two interview subjects that “top-down change can be successful through using a command and control approach”.

Another important aspect of the planning stage is the outlining of responsibilities related to the implementation of the change, according to the subjects. “The organization must outline what needs to change and how it must change in order to fulfill the larger objectives.” Three interview subjects recommended that implementation of the change should not commence until all of the planning and foundational documents have been developed and agreed upon. An example of this type of foundational document would be a strategic plan outlining the components noted above.

The planning stage should have a clear start and end date, and the implementation stage should have the same and should commence following the completion of the planning stage. Three interview subjects raised the importance of building flexibility into the planning stage and foundational documents in order to allow for changes or dependencies that may arise throughout the change initiative. In addition, one subject noted that senior management should not embark on a change unless their organization is resourced to do so. If they do not have adequate

resources from the start, this deficiency could derail the change and render it in a position in which it is driven by resources rather than by objectives.

The implementation of a change should involve consultations with all parties involved, according to all six interview subjects. There should be complete “buy-in” from all of those involved, as stated by one subject. This “buy-in” can occur through intimidation or consensus, depending on the nature of change that is taking place. Engagement and communication from the onset of the initiative is essential to achieving “buy-in” or agreement that the change should occur. Mechanisms for communicating and engaging should be built into the process from the start. Having informal conversations and dealings with those involved in the change has a positive impact on a change initiative, as positive relationships are formed and can be the basis of achieving “buy-in”. There should, additionally, be a system in place that provides incentives and encouragement for buying in to the change and repercussions for not, according to one interview subject.

There should be immediate and constant communication with employees regarding the change and its components, and employees should be provided with an opportunity to ask questions and “vent” about the change, according to the participants. If this possibility exists, it provides employees with an outlet and then encourages them to move on rather than being paralyzed on the negative aspects of the change. In addition, “holding learning and awareness sessions regarding the change and the organization’s new state should be offered in order to educate employees and to help address their fears” according to one interview subject. Employees must be seen as “human people” rather than “human resources” in order for the organization to cater to their needs, according to two subjects.

### **Strategies that Create Ineffective Change**

Interview subjects generally noted that the following strategies create unsuccessful change in public sector organizations. Firstly, engagement of employees without clear objectives is ineffective. Five interview subjects recommended engaging those involved in the change with clear parameters for the engagement and an articulation of what the objectives of the engagement are. It was also stated by one subject “that falsely engaging employees can be problematic as well, as it creates a false sense of trust”. It was recommended by two subjects not to send general email messages to all employees and label this practice as engagement. Communication to all employees is not engagement. Communication must be direct and must acknowledge the negative aspects of the change, regardless of what they are. This helps to build trusting relationships.

On the subject of leadership, four interview subjects stated that having a change leader who is not in a senior enough position can jeopardize the momentum of the change in a negative way, as they are unable to make decisions efficiently and effectively. Having to constantly go to their superiors for decision-making, approvals and direction can stall a change initiative. In addition, having a leader that “over-visions” the change can also be problematic, especially when there is an “under-acting” of implementation. This can break trust between the leader and their employees and can damage a change.

It was recommended by three subjects to avoid having all decisions made by senior management. Some decisions should be made by those at the lower levels, as they deal with the results of the change on a daily basis.

Regarding implementation of the change, three subjects noted that rolling out a change strategy with all components changing at once is not effective, as it does not account for dependencies throughout the process. Having an over-abundance of processes and restrictions to

accomplish simple tasks related to the change initiative can also stall implementation and can leave employees feeling discouraged. Another problematic issue, according to one interview subject, is “when an organization does not encourage its employees to be self-learners and to take their own initiative to navigate through the change”. One interview subject noted that micro-managing and being too prescriptive can be detrimental to employees throughout the change because it does not empower them. In addition, an organization that does not build on the best practices of changes being implemented in other similar organizations will likely not succeed at efficiently implementing their change agenda.

From a structural perspective, one interview subject noted that the organization should not have narrowly defined job descriptions, as this prevents employees from being flexible and creative during a change. This stunts the innovation and growth of the organization, which can be detrimental to the change. In addition, throughout implementation of the change, three interview subjects noted that the organization should implement a structure that provides for the delegation of authority to the lowest possible level in order to avoid obstacles during the change process that may stall it further.

### **Characteristics of the Public Sector that are Barriers to Change**

According to the interview subjects, the following characteristics of the public sector, in general, act as barriers to successfully implementing change. First, the bureaucratic nature of the public sector, which encompasses the hierarchical structures in place for obtaining approval for miniscule actions and monetary endeavors, can be a barrier to successfully implementing change. As expressed by one interview subject, “a bureaucracy does not have the nimbleness to respond to changes in reality”. The constant focus on policies, procedures and values and ethics in the public sector makes it very difficult to implement change in a timely and effective matter, as the focus is not always on achieving efficiencies; rather it is on adhering to the policies in place. The



rigid policies can cause an organization to question everything throughout a change and can hinder it from being pragmatic in its change actions. One interview subject noted that it is important to have policies and procedures in place; however, there should be mechanisms built into these regulations to allow organizations to deviate from them in certain situations. These mechanisms should provide for timely and expedient action, or this can defeat their purpose.

One interview subject stated that the public sector has a desire to create stability, which can work against change initiatives that bring about a defined period of instability. The desire to create stability can stunt innovation. Another subject claimed that the public sector encourages its employees to be “free thinkers,” which welcomes them to challenge any initiative that is put forth. Encouraging this challenge function can be an obstacle during change, especially if the challenges are not productive.

The “inability of public sector organizations to promptly remove the human obstacles in a change initiative is a barrier to change”, according to another interview subject. The time consuming and labour intensive nature of labour relations in the public sector results in organizations not being able to effectively manage their workforce during a change. Another aspect of this problem, as noted by one interview subject, is that there are no incentives for non-executive employees to buy into a change process or excel at their position. The nature of the public sector is that there are no repercussions for employees who are not productive, and there are no rewards for those who are highly productive. This lack of incentive and encouragement can be a barrier to implementing change, as employees may see the change as pointless.

The other characteristic of the public sector that may act as a barrier to change, according to three interview subjects, is the balancing of the political and public environments. The lines between the political and public arm of the public sector can sometimes be blurred, causing the public arm to be overly concerned with managing political perceptions.

In addition, the changing government culture does not make change easy. Realistically speaking, change takes a long time; and the culture and time limitations in government do not make that easy. The long approval processes negatively contribute to this as well, according to three interview subjects.

### **Strategies to Overcome the Identified Barriers**

There were conflicting responses from interview subjects regarding how to overcome the barriers to change, which are a result of the characteristics of the public sector. Two subjects noted that these change barriers can be overcome by “having a clear articulation of the change process and its benefits” from a public sector wide perspective. Communication is the key to overcoming these barriers as it can “clarify misunderstandings and manage perceptions”. Communication throughout a change should not be generic in that it should be tailored to the various audiences within the organization. This allows each audience to own the change and adapt it to their own reality.

Two other subjects noted that these obstacles can be overcome with good leaders who demonstrate good leadership. Leaders must be revolutionary and driven by the objectives of the change and not by the personalities of those in the organization. They must not change mid-way through the change process; nor should they leave the organization immediately following the change, as their departure jeopardizes their credibility with their employees, which can translate into resistance against the change. Leaders must not manage their people but must instead lead them by tuning into their feelings and their vision for the organization. These respondents felt that the public sector does not focus on its people, who are reduced to positions and “boxes” on an organization chart.

One interview subjects noted that overcoming the cultural barrier of the public sector can take a long time, and the only way to do this is through solid leadership and effective

communication. Another interview subject mentioned that it may not be possible to overcome these barriers and that organizations should accept that this is the nature of the public sector and change initiatives should be designed accordingly.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

To conclude, the findings and their corresponding analysis have led to the conclusion that the eight step model for transforming an organization by Kotter (1995) is aligned with the perceptions of public sector employees on three of the eight steps. Those three steps were the following: forming a powerful guiding coalition, creating a vision, and communicating the vision. Based on this alignment, the following recommended strategies have been made to guide public sector organizations in carrying out change that achieves their desired results.

First, change requires leadership. The senior management of an organization was identified as having the authority to steer a change initiative in any direction possible. With this, they also have been identified as having the power to cause a change initiative to fail. The following recommendations are for the senior management of a public sector organization to consider when carrying out a change. Firstly, a priority for senior management should be to establish a change champion for the change. A change champion is someone who is ultimately accountable for the change, even if it is an organization-wide change. Senior management must ensure that the change champion is not someone who will be leaving the organization shortly after the change is complete. This is aligned with Kotter's (1995) second step of the eight step model to transforming an organization, which is to have a powerful guiding coalition to lead the change effort. He states, "No matter how capable the head of the change is, strong line leadership is the only way to achieve power" (Kotter, p.62). This idea is reinforced by Backoff and Nutt's (1993) leader-based approach to change, which focuses on what leaders should do to encourage and support change.

At the onset of the change, senior management should develop a vision for the organization. This is aligned with Kotter's (1995) third step of his model, which is creating a vision. In successful change initiatives, the guiding coalition who is driving the change establishes a picture of the organization they want to achieve following the change. This vision must be easy to communicate to employees and must clarify the direction in which the organization needs to move. According to Kotter, a change initiative that lacks a vision can turn into a list of confusing side projects that direct the organization in the wrong way or cause it to stagnate. The vision is recommended to be all-encompassing, with have the strength to gain consensus even when the details of the change are unknown. It must bind employees together and give them the willingness to enact it. They must examine systems and structures within the organization that are not consistent with the vision of the change and amend them to make them consistent.

Another recommendation is to cultivate the relationship between the senior and middle management of an organization. Senior management must recognize that middle management is their gateway to employees. Middle management has the power to undermine or confirm a change in an organization. They are the layer between employees and senior management, and they are in a position to make a change come to fruition or to fail. Senior management has the vision for the change, and employees must put this vision into action with the support, guidance and leadership of middle management. For these reasons, it is recommended that the relationship between senior and middle management in an organization be based on mutual trust. There must be an understanding between both layers of management regarding the goals, objectives and vision for the change. Senior management must work to get buy-in from middle management in order to confirm the implementation of the change. A change initiative can fail if there is inconsistency between the behaviours and communication of senior and middle management. If

middle management's behaviour is contradictory to senior management's vision of the change, employees will be confused and end up disgruntled and unmotivated. As part of Coram and Burnes' (2001) emergent approach to change, they note that the role of managers within an organization is not to plan and implement changes, but rather to "create or foster an organizational structure and environment which encourages and sustains learning and risk-taking and to develop a workforce that will take responsibility for identifying the need for change and will implement it" (Coram & Burnes, p. 98). This comment reinforces that senior and middle management need to both understand their roles and also how they impact each other.

The following recommendations concern those who are working on implementation of the change. Those involved must acknowledge from the onset that the current structure is not functioning well and thus requires the change. This acknowledgement should lead to a change in behaviour throughout the implementation phase. The desired behaviour and attitudes should already be visible among those working to implement the change. It is recommended that a shared assessment of the organization's issues, challenges and opportunities be developed in order to create a foundational level of trust and communication between those involved. By jointly diagnosing the business issues of the organization, the group will mobilize commitment amongst themselves. This recommendation is aligned with the systems theory approach to change White (2000), as outlined in the literature review section of this study. The systems approach advocates for collective activities that look beyond the individual parts of an organization.

Following the diagnosis of the issues, it is recommended that a strategy to implement the change be developed to permit planned and unplanned outcomes to present themselves. Senge (2006) notes that flexibility must be fostered because it helps organizations better respond to spontaneous events, situations and unexpected opportunities, which ultimately allow it to build

on these opportunities throughout the change. In addition, the change may result in unanticipated outcomes, as well as anticipated outcomes. It is strongly recommended that all of these outcomes be welcomed and allowed in order to truly realize the potential of the change initiative, and Senge advocates the same notion.

Given the data collected and the literature reviewed, it is recommended that communication be viewed as integral to any organizational change. It is recommended that the vision and objectives for the change be clearly communicated to the organization at the onset of the change. This recommendation is aligned with Kotter's (1995) fourth step of his eight step model for transforming an organization, which is to communicate the vision as widely as possible. Communication is recommended to be consistent and frequent. Key messages, developed for the initiative, can act as parameters for communication in order to avoid language that may cause confusion. It is recommended that a communication system for the change initiative should have two essential components. One component should contain the general information about the change and the other component should allow for regular meetings to be held between employees and their managers/supervisors. According to Kotter, the latter component should include all conventional communication methods such as seminars, departmental meetings and print products. Forums should be created at all levels of the organization to communicate and share information about the change. It is recommended to use these forums as a way to engage all those involved in the change.

Another recommendation is that all stakeholders involved in carrying out the mandate of the organization should be involved in the change process. In some change situations, the purpose of the change is to strengthen partnerships with stakeholders and build new relationships. White (2000) states that engaging stakeholders democratizes organizational operations and culture and improves efficiencies and effectiveness. Given this, the recommended approach is to involve

stakeholders and partners in improving the organization's accountability to the public and to develop a stronger focus on clients. These actions will enhance the organization's ability to adapt to change. In order to drive change, it is suggested that organization, collectively with their stakeholders and partners, define effective service, manage multiple perspectives to operations, address conflicting values, and ensure the establishment of an accountable governance structure. It is recommended that an adequate level of effort should be placed on carrying out successful change through exploring the dynamics and boundaries between different public sector organizations (stakeholders and partners) and by utilizing initiatives that span across this network of different organizations.

White (2000) states that the whole systems approach brings a large number of people who represent a community of interest around a specific issue for a prolonged period of time with the purpose of creating a space and opportunity for the people affected by the change to play an active part in planning for the change. A change process that incorporates a participative approach with the widest set of stakeholders can be beneficial because it presents the opportunity for a wide range of perspectives from those whom the change will affect, resulting in increased buy-in (Kotter, 1995). This approach, according to Kotter, allows for cross-organizational boundaries to be broken down, for all employees to be engaged in different issues and for multiple perspectives to work together. It also reinforces the idea that all parts of the change are connected to each other in some way and allows all participants to see that they are interconnected and that their individual actions impact the whole organization. A recommended action for engaging stakeholders, according to one interview participant, is encouraging self-organization. Encouraging stakeholders to self-organize amongst themselves, with the leader providing high level guidance, allows all those involved to own the change from their perspective.

The final recommendation concerns training of employees. As evident in the literature review and the findings sections of this paper, successful change takes a long time. In the public sector, the data collected revealed that time is limited. Organizations do not want to take a long time to implement change because of the perception it creates. The public can perceive it negatively if a public sector organization takes several years to implement a change (Thomas, 1996). The current environment in the public sector encourages doing more with less; so public perception surrounding a change that takes many years may not be viewed favourably. Rather it may be viewed in the light that public funds are not being used efficiently. In addition, the data collected revealed that resources are limited as well. Given these two limitations of time and resources within the public sector, this puts an additional emphasis on the importance of training those who are currently in the organization. It is recommended that a learning system be created and built into every change initiative. It can be very beneficial to develop this learning system collaboratively with those who will be participating in it and realizing its benefits. This system should fit into the cycle of the change and should not be positioned at the end of the change process. The training program offered should evolve as the change evolves. The absence of continuous training to meet the requirements of the change initiative within an organization is a barrier to the success of change initiatives according to Soltani et al. (2007). Training is referred to as an integral part of improving an organizational change initiative and researchers argue that it must be performed objectively, systematically and continuously in the form of a cycle of improvement which is built into the change initiative.

After analyzing the data gathered and comparing the findings with the literature, the above noted recommendations are made for public sector organizations to consider when carrying out change in their organizations.



**Limitations**

It is important to consider the following limitations for this research study in order to account for discrepancies among the information provided and the conclusions formed and to be aware of them when using the results to make generalizations.

Firstly, the interview sample used was not representative. This study relied upon interviews with seven employees of the Canadian Public Service, and therefore the findings cannot be generalized to the public sector as a whole in Canada. Secondly, the interview subjects had varied backgrounds and may have experienced different types of change in different ways in their careers. Their answers are based on their experiences, which can be of a broad range within the public sector. Thirdly, the interview subjects are all employees at different levels within their organization, which could have caused them to answer their questions from the specific context of their position rather than from a holistic perspective. Lastly, the interview subjects were all part of one public sector organization, which does not create a fulsome and diverse sample. In order to obtain findings that are able to be generalized, the researcher should interview a larger number of participants from various organizations across the public sector in question. It is also recommended that interview subjects be at the same level in order to provide a richer data set. All of the above mentioned limitations should be taken in account when considering the conclusions and recommendations of this study.

**Future Areas for Research**

After conducting this study on employee perceptions on how to create change in the public sector that achieves desired results, it has become evident that other areas of research are worth exploring in order to complement the conclusion and recommendations presented. This includes exploring the validity of the identified barriers which exist in the public sector. By testing the validity of the identified barriers which exist in the public sector, it will shed light on how to better overcome these barriers and create change that will achieve an organization's desired results. It is also valuable to understand whether these barriers are structural or created for other reasons in order to understand their context. The dynamics of strategic leadership versus strategic management in the public sector is another area that is recommended for future research as it would provide insight into how to best lead and manage a change in the public sector. This study came across the following definition of the concepts of strategic management and strategic leadership: strategic management is defined as a set of actions and decisions that determines the long term performance of an organization; while strategic leadership is defined as the process used by a leader to affect the achievement of a desirable and clearly understood vision by influencing the organizational culture, allocating resources, directing through policies and directives, and building consensus within a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous global environment which is marked by opportunities and threats (Backoff & Nutt, 1993). The difference between strategic leadership and management is an ongoing study that is worth further exploring, as it will provide clarity on the roles and responsibilities of managers in public sector organizations and validating the definitions provided may be a useful starting point for this research. Achieving clarity on roles and responsibilities will facilitate the effectiveness of change strategies being carried out.

Another area worth researching is the changing demographic within the public sector and how this affects change management. The demographics in the public sector in Canada are shifting as many public servants are nearing retirement and their positions will soon be filled by public servants who are much younger in age. It would prove to be valuable to study what type of effect the demographic shift could have on change management in public sector organizations. In addition, the Canadian Public Service has recently launched the Blueprint 2020 exercise, which is an initiative to modernize the public service for the year 2020 in order to render it applicable for the demographic of that time. It would be useful to study this initiative to shed light on the effects of demographics on change initiatives over time.

### **Conclusion**

This research study has shed light on the perceptions of employees in the Canadian public sector with respect to what strategies are required to create change that achieves desired results in public sector organizations. It has tested the eight step model for transforming an organization by Kotter (1995) against the perceptions of the interview subjects and revealed that perceptions were aligned with three out of the eight steps. Based on this alignment, further recommendations were made for the consideration of public sector organizations. Conclusions in relation to the research question and sub-questions have been generated and can only be applied in other instances, while considering the limitations of this study and the future areas of research.

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## **ANNEX**

### **Contents:**

1. Approval from University of Ottawa Research and Ethics Board
2. Interview Subject Consent Forms
3. Interview Guide
4. Interview Subject Recruitment Email
5. Interview Subject Response Raw Data