

Minimizing Resistance to Organizational Change: The role of Transformational Leadership and Emotional Intelligence in enhancing Firm Performance

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Abstract

In volatile global markets, sustained organizational competitiveness demands continuous strategic adaptation and agile leadership. However, resistance to change remains a critical barrier, contributing to the failure of up to 70% of organizational initiatives and resulting in severe financial and productivity losses. This study synthesizes existing theoretical and empirical literature to investigate the combined impact of leadership behavior and emotional capability on change outcomes. The proposed conceptual design maps Transformational Leadership (TL) and Emotional Intelligence (EI) directly onto the three successive phases of Lewin's Change Model: Unfreezing, Changing, and Refreezing. Within this model, EI fosters trust and psychological safety related to organizational change, while TL inspires vision and goal alignment, creating a structured pathway for cultural transformation. The study concludes that the intersection of these leadership capacities effectively mitigates employee resistance, ensures sustainable behavioral change, and drives organizational resilience. By bridging leadership dynamics, emotional capabilities, and structured processes, this research addresses a vital gap in the change management literature. It offers a practical blueprint for enhancing long-term economic performance.

Keywords: Change leadership, Lewin's Change Model, Emotional Intelligence (EI), resistance to organizational change, transformational leadership

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Organizational change is an inevitable aspect of modern business environments, requiring strategic agility to navigate market shifts successfully. Strategy, in this context, is a deliberate pattern of decisions that outlines how organizational leaders plan to execute transitions (Ahen & Zettinig, 2015). To conceptualize this process, change management research frequently relies on Lewin's Three-Step Change Model, which divides organizational transformation into successive operational phases: Unfreezing, Changing, and Refreezing (Burnes, 2020). This model demonstrates that a successful transition requires first dismantling the status quo, then moving individuals toward new operational behaviors, and finally institutionalizing those changes in the corporate culture. Because executing these steps is inherently a social process, leaders significantly influence their followers' behaviors, attitudes, and performance throughout each phase of the transition.

Recent scholarship argues that managing change effectively through these phases requires shifting leadership development away from an exclusive focus on technical expertise toward cultivating soft skills and interpersonal competencies (Liu et al., 2023). Successful change leadership demands active engagement, connection, and trust, approaches deeply rooted in Emotional Intelligence (EI) (Zivkovic, 2024). Defined as the cognitive ability to recognize, understand, manage, and assimilate one's own and others' emotions (Mayer et al., 2004), EI allows leaders to construct an inclusive climate during periods of disruption. When paired with Transformational Leadership (TL), which underscores individualized support and employee problem-solving, emotionally intelligent leaders can inspire a sense of belonging and optimism, shaping a favorable organizational climate that enhances adaptability across all stages of Lewin's structural model.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the recognized necessity of operational evolution, over two-thirds of change initiatives fail due to pervasive employee resistance and inadequate leadership strategies (Rehman et al., 2021). Change inherently introduces uncertainty, triggering profound emotional and psychological responses from the workforce. Historically, traditional change management models have prioritized structural adjustments and top-down strategic visions while neglecting these psychological dimensions (Rosenbaum et al., 2018).

When organizations adopt a non-participatory approach that excludes employees from the planning and execution phases, workers often suppress their emotions, leading to disengagement, reduced efficiency, and heightened resistance (Caulfield & Senger, 2017). Ultimately, poor emotional regulation and low self-efficacy among the workforce are primary contributors to project failure (Ugoani, 2017), underscoring that failing to address employees' emotional responses adequately severely undermines their willingness to embrace transformative Change (Abrell-Vogel & Rowold, 2014).

1.3 Research Gap

While the independent benefits of transformational leadership and emotional intelligence are widely acknowledged in isolation (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Goleman, 2006), there remains a notable scarcity of theoretical models that detail how specific interactive leadership competencies systematically drive the change management process. The extant literature documents either the macro-structural steps of organizational transition (Burnes, 2020) or the individual psychological traits of successful executives (Zivkovic, 2024), leaving a critical divide between the mechanics of structural change and the emotional dynamics of the human capital executing them. Consequently, a pronounced empirical and theoretical gap persists regarding the combined impact of these two constructs on mitigating employee resistance (Rehman et al., 2021). Current frameworks fail to offer a multidimensional approach that explicitly maps how transformational oversight and emotional capabilities interface directly with structured, phased transition models, specifically Lewin's Three-Step Change Model, to shift workforce attitudes from active resistance to psychological readiness and openness. This study seeks to fill that existing gap in the literature.

1.4 Research Objectives

To address these critical gaps in the literature, this study systematically investigates the interactive relationship between targeted leadership capabilities and employee behaviors during periods of intense organizational transition. Primarily, the study aims to examine the combined impact of transformational leadership behaviors and emotional intelligence competencies on the broader change process, building upon the foundational calls for integrated leadership models (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Rehman et al., 2021). In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate how leaders can effectively utilize empathy and interpersonal skills to evaluate strategic challenges from the employees' perspectives, thereby transforming resistant attitudes into cooperation and mutual institutional trust (Liu et al., 2023; Zivkovic, 2024).

Furthermore, this research evaluates how specific emotional intelligence capabilities, namely the recognition, understanding, management, and assimilation of emotions (Mayer et al., 2004), can be leveraged as tactical tools to mitigate negative employee responses and combat low self-efficacy during periods of systemic uncertainty (Abrell-Vogel & Rowold, 2014; Caulfield & Senger, 2017). Ultimately, the study aims to synthesize these variables into an integrated, employee-centered framework that directly maps individualized motivation and proactive emotional regulation onto the structured phases of Lewin's change model, thereby establishing a practical blueprint for breaking down psychological barriers, stabilizing cultural adoption, and enhancing the overall success rates of organizational initiatives (Burnes, 2020; Rosenbaum et al., 2018).

2. Resistance to Change

Organizational change is the process of transformation in the structure, attitudes, and policies of organizational units (Hamidianpour et al., 2016; Mayfield, 2014). Organizational members experience change in different ways; some gladly welcome it and actively participate, while others avoid and resist it as much as possible. According to Jawad et al. (2021), change disrupts standard organizational patterns and almost always requires people involved to change their behavior. As a result, organizational members rarely embrace change outright; instead, they usually resist it. Resistance to change is an individual's disposition and a natural behavioral response to addressing the threat of change to organizational members. It comprises cognitive, behavioral, and affective components that can lead to a failure to accept change and to a tendency to maintain the status quo. The authors further argued that resistance is the primary barrier to the successful implementation of change.

According to Hamidianpour et al. (2016), resistance to change has four main dimensions. The first dimension is routine-seeking, which refers to the extent to which a person seeks a stable, routine environment to maintain the status quo. The emotional reaction is the second dimension, which entails recognizing that change is an emotionally driven

decision. It is the extent of stress and discomfort people experience in response to change. The third dimension is cognitive rigidity, represented by an unwillingness to consider alternative perspectives and ideas in the face of change. Lastly, the dimension of short-term focus refers to the degree to which organizational members affected by the change prioritize short-term incompatibilities over the long-term interests and benefits of the change, moving closer to accepting change.

Mathews and Linski (2016) propounded a holistic model of resistance to change that challenges the traditional formulations and depicts employees' resistance as a manifestation of the disruption of their Primary Human Goods (PHG). Primary Human Goods refer to the intrinsic needs or life goals that humans seek to fulfill their physical, physiological, and social needs. Humans pursue PHG and prioritize it according to what they perceive as contributing to a fulfilling life. When organizational leaders face resistance to change, it is imperative to employ a dialogic approach to understand the employee's priority PHG and how the change could have negatively impacted their priorities. For change to succeed, individual employees must understand the narratives within their social environment and how these narratives shape their experiences. In concurrence, Chrusciel and Field (2006) posit that leaders must convey a sense of inclusion, support, and belonging to employees to achieve success in planning and implementing change.

2.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Burns (1978) introduced the concept of **transformational leadership** as a dynamic in which the leader focuses on followers' concerns and developmental needs, helping them gain new perspectives and inspiring them to achieve their goals. Transformational leaders are development-oriented; they score high on individual consideration, as their primary focus is identifying learning opportunities tailored to each employee's needs, promoting continuous growth, and subsequently empowering employees. Burns viewed transformational leaders as **agents of change** who inspire followers through a compelling vision and shared commitment to the common good. He emphasized that transformational leadership is rooted in **mutual stimulation and elevation**, where leaders and followers **"raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality."** Transformational leaders thus not only achieve results but also foster **personal growth, ethical development, and a sense of purpose** among their followers.

The organization's members' ability to adapt and renew themselves is crucial to the organization's survival in today's dynamic work environment. However, the drive for change often fails as leaders underestimate the role of individuals in the change process. Leadership is integral to change, as it involves the process of influence, particularly non-coercive influence. Baškarada et al. (2017) argued that, among the several leadership theories proposed to achieve positive organizational outcomes, transformational leadership theory stands out as highly beneficial for driving organizational change. This theory focuses on a leader's charismatic traits and their ability to be attentive to individual employees' needs, while helping them develop problem-solving skills that foster higher performance. Perceptions of ideal leadership behaviors from a follower-centric perspective are associated with transformational leadership, leading to improved change outcomes (Svendsen & Joensson, 2016).

Researchers have argued that Transformational leadership is an essential leadership behavior for managing change, as it enhances followers' self-efficacy and commitment to organizational change. Khatri et al. (2012) contended that new leadership theories, notably charismatic, visionary, and transformational leadership theories, have emerged. Unlike conventional leadership theories, which emphasize rational processes, this genre focuses on values and emotions and is applicable in modern organizations. The focus of these new leadership theories and their potent influences on subordinates aligns with the shift from a bureaucratic to a hierarchical, team-based structure. Furthermore, they define charisma as a profound emotional appeal and a strong connection to the followers' values and feelings. Charismatic leaders are keenly aware of their social environment and possess exceptional social interaction skills. Charismatic leaders have excellent interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence.

Barth-Farkas and Vera (2014) argued that transformational leaders attend to followers' concerns and developmental needs, guide them to view problems from new perspectives, and inspire them to achieve their goals. Transformational leaders are development-oriented, scoring high on individual consideration, as their primary focus is on identifying learning opportunities tailored to each employee's needs, promoting continuous growth, and subsequently empowering employees, thereby bolstering self-efficacy and fostering positive reactions to change. In concurrence, Svendsen and Joensson (2016) contended that transformational leadership drives organizational change by focusing on employees' welfare, developing their problem-solving skills, and positively impacting their reaction to change.

Svendsen and Joensson (2016) and Taylor et al. (2014) suggest that transformational leadership attitudes and behaviors are associated with organization-level performance. They established that the management style of the top leaders impacts the relationship between organizational performance and change strategy. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that transformational leadership is positively associated with leader effectiveness, follower satisfaction with leaders, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job performance (Li & Mohamed, 2024; Zakaria, 2023). Through its

four dimensions, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders have demonstrated a positive relationship with innovation.

Idealized influence emphasizes trust, values, and ethics. Inspirational motivation involves leaders providing meaning and challenge to followers' work and using inspiring messages to evoke emotions. There is adequate information on the outcomes of transformational leadership; however, it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of what motivates leaders to engage in these behaviors (Guay, 2013).

According to Ismail et al. (2010) and Vito et al. (2014), transformational leaders may encourage behavioral change by involving employees in the change process and allowing them to express their thoughts and ideas. This element or dimension of transformational leadership theory is known as individualized consideration. The authors asserted that individualized consideration refers to leaders who consider followers' needs, abilities, and goals and provide coaching and mentoring. Such leaders empower their followers by creating learning opportunities tailored to each employee's individual needs and by promoting continuous growth.

The second dimension of intellectual stimulation focuses on problem-solving and creativity in the workplace. Intellectual stimulation challenges old assumptions, beliefs, and traditions, and encourages new ways of thinking. A transformational leader enhances creativity and innovation. During the change process, transformational leaders may foster a new worldview and innovative ideas among employees, potentially strengthening the ideas employees generate (Ismail et al., 2010).

Transformational leaders also inspire employees to engage in personal and organizational development, fostering and enhancing their motivation to achieve organizational goals through idealized influence and inspirational motivation. Idealized influence represents a leader who communicates their values and beliefs, emphasizes teamwork, and appreciates the ethical implications of their decisions. Organizational followers view a leader as an individual with whom they can identify. Inspirational motivation reflects how effectively a leader can sell their vision to followers and is achieved by appealing to personal and organizational goals, challenging employees, and augmenting their efforts (Ismail et al., 2010; Vito et al., 2014).

Further research can enhance transformational leadership theory by examining whether there are variations or deviations from the norm. Researchers continue to advocate for further investigation into the contextual antecedents of transformational leadership. The incomplete picture of forecasts for transformational leadership makes it difficult for organizations seeking to hire or develop effective leaders to determine whether their prospective candidates are likely to exhibit transformational leadership behavior. For a transformational leader to reach their full potential, the right fit is as important as the traits they bring. Transformational leadership theory posits that the effectiveness of leaders' accomplishments depends on both the leader and the situation. It is, therefore, a function of the person and environment (situation). Subsequently, the person-environment (P-E) fit theory suggests that, in addition to leaders and the environment, the match between them is also crucial in the transformational leadership process. However, the relationship between P-E fit and transformational leadership has yet to be examined (Guay, 2013).

2.2 Emotional Intelligence Theory

Emotional intelligence is the awareness of one's own and others' emotions that informs and guides decisions and actions. According to Mayer et al. (2004), emotional intelligence comprises four key elements: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. The existing literature suggests that emotionally intelligent individuals are more adaptable to environmental changes and more likely to recover from a negative state. During organizational change, such individuals are less likely to resist it and to maintain a positive attitude throughout its implementation. Leaders who can influence followers' emotions are more successful at reducing individual employees' reactance than leaders who lack emotional intelligence competence (Nesterkin, 2013; Ugoani, 2017). Research findings indicate that Emotional intelligence and transformational leadership are connected. Halliwell et al. (2021) and Li and Mohamed (2024) argue that a supportive and emotionally astute leadership approach fosters employee satisfaction, which, in turn, can enhance job performance.

2.3 Lewin's Change Model

Lewin's theory of change is one of the foundational theories that helps organizational members to understand and implement change successfully (Burnes, 2004). Burnes uses the analogy of an ice cube to describe Lewin's change model, which has three key stages. If you want to reshape an ice cube into a different shape, such as a cone, the first step is to thaw the ice to enhance its malleability and responsiveness to change, which aligns with the unfreezing phase. The second step is to shape the iced water into your desired form, corresponding to the actual change that occurs during the second stage of Lewin's model. Lastly, one needs to solidify this new shape, which is the refreezing phase.

Ogochi (2018) argued that in the first stage of unfreezing, there is the appreciation that the organization needs to

transition from the current situation to a new state. Organizational members need to re-examine the organization's fundamentals and find inspiration or a reason for change. By communicating the need for change, change leaders can gain buy-in and reduce resistance to this transition. The change phase is where the organization transitions. Effective communication is essential in this phase to ensure the change is successful. Refreezing, the last phase of Lewin's change model, occurs after the change is executed. The organizational leaders assess the effectiveness of the change and take the necessary steps to ensure that members are confident in the new process and can sustain it (Githinji, 2023).

Rosenbawn et al. (2018) propose the theory of planned organizational change, which categorizes change in terms of type (continuous or stepped), in the context of power (emergent versus planned), according to its origin within the organization (top-down or bottom-up), and lastly, in terms of size and impact within the organization. Additionally, they argued that Lewin's change model remains relevant to organizational change management (OCM). The model is an integrative approach to managing change in group dynamics and organization as a whole, viewing change as a process of constant motion in one direction, from the current stage to the end stage, and is maintained by social forces that drive and resist the flow, through its three phases of unfreezing, change, and refreezing. During the unfreezing phase, group members recognize the need for change through organizational learning and desire to implement the change. In the change process, the shift from old to new policies, structures, culture, attitudes, and values actually occurs and is then supported and reinforced in the refreezing phase.

Although Lewin's Three-Step Change Model provides a foundational framework for institutional transitions, its utility in contemporary settings is constrained by significant theoretical limitations. First, the model operates on the premise that organizations transition predictably between static equilibrium states (Burnes, 2020). In modern business environments, characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), conceptualizing change as a temporary disruption between states of stability fails to capture the continuous, chaotic nature of contemporary institutional evolution (Child, 2015). Furthermore, the framework incorporates a mechanistic bias that excludes the complex psychological dynamics of the workforce (Rosenbaum et al., 2018). While outlining the structural phases, the model offers scant theoretical explanation of how employees' emotions, anxieties, and cognitive capacities affect the progress of transitions. During the unfreezing phase, for instance, the model outlines a top-down dismantling of inertia but lacks provisions for managing the resulting psychological distress or employees' defensive mechanisms (Abrell-Vogel & Rowold, 2014). Consequently, the model's design fails to adequately account for deep-seated psychological resistance, a primary driver of implementation failure.

In concurrence, Cummings et al. (2016) posited that the framework exhibits a teleological bias by design, operating on the premise that organizational change follows a predictable, linear trajectory toward success. In practice, transitions are highly iterative and prone to regression, political infighting, and fluctuating morale. Because Lewin's model contains no internal mechanisms to diagnose or remediate trust deficits and emotional exhaustion mid-transition, relying solely on its structural mechanics leaves a critical theoretical gap regarding the interpersonal interventions necessary to sustain employee commitment.

3. Theoretical and Empirical Review of Literature

Ugoani (2017) postulated that global competition compels organizations to develop effective strategies to achieve their goals. Implementing such strategies fosters change. Effective organizational change requires a supportive structure and culture, as well as the development of specific competencies, such as emotional intelligence. Despite this, many organizational changes face resistance because they fail to involve employees in the implementation process. Further, he argues that employees do not resist change management but rather the way it is implemented. Therefore, the organization's leadership has a high responsibility to anticipate and address any possible concerns employees may have about the change before implementation. In concurrence, Castillo and Del-Valle (2017) and Nesterkin (2013) posited that the ability to use emotions to enhance thought processes facilitates a better understanding of one's own emotions (self-awareness) and that this competence helps improve attitudes and behavior to achieve personal growth and, subsequently, organizational goals. Emotional intelligence facilitates employees' affective commitment to organizational values and goals. It enables employees to remain motivated and committed to the organizational vision and values, rather than being driven by financial and social factors. It therefore serves as a mediator between organizational commitment and certain organizational behaviors, thereby promoting the acceptability of change.

Transformational leaders help articulate a vision and motivate employees to achieve their goals. Successfully driving change relies on leaders who understand their strengths, work to expand them, and can build strong, diverse teams, offering leadership in the political, human resource, symbolic, and structural frames of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The success of organizational change interventions relies heavily on the support and commitment of employees who implement the change. Organizational leaders should strive to understand employees' schemas and expectations regarding change to minimize negative reactance and resistance.

According to Magsaysay and Hechanova (2017), the follower-centric approach of implicit leadership theory recognizes that change is a social interaction process, and effective leadership should entail generating employee engagement and commitment by identifying their perceptions of change. Transformational leadership theory adopts an implicit leadership approach, emphasizing a participatory style that also considers followers' emotions. This approach can reduce resistance to change and enhance the effectiveness of organizational change. Emotionally intelligent leaders are better able to influence their followers to re-evaluate their emotions about change. Emotionally intelligent followers, on the other hand, are less resistant to change, as they can manage their anxiety and frustration to cultivate positive emotions (Li & Mohamed, 2024; Magsaysay & Hechanova, 2017).

Implicit change leadership theory (ICLT) is an emergent leadership model that recognizes effective leadership from the follower's perspective, enabling organizations to manage change effectively. This follower-centric model aims to understand followers' schemas and perceptions of how change should be handled, and to develop a leadership model that enhances the success of organizational change. The assumption underlying this model is that the success of organizational change depends on followers' commitment, thereby calling on organizational leaders to ensure a participatory approach to implementing Change (Magsaysay & Hechanova, 2017).

In today's globalized world, volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) present significant challenges to businesses while simultaneously driving innovation. To remain competitive, organizations must adapt to change, despite the complexities of the transformation process. Effective change leadership is essential for achieving organizational success (Mason, Griffin, & Parker, 2014). Research highlights leadership style as a critical factor in both organizational success and change management. A leader's behavior plays a pivotal role in navigating change effectively (Korakis & Polakis, 2025).

Rao (2015) defines change leadership as the ability to drive transformation by managing resistance and persuading stakeholders to embrace change. The author emphasizes that successful change leadership requires a clear vision, open and transparent communication, and active attention to employees' concerns and emotions throughout the process. Several leadership theories examine effective change management, with ambidextrous and transformational leadership emerging as key approaches to driving successful organizational change.

In concurrence with other scholars on the role of emotions and behavior change in shaping organizational Change, Mason et al. (2014) propounded the theory of intentional change. The Intentional Change Theory provides a framework for understanding the correlation between changes in psychological attributes and behavioral change. The authors argued that there is a relationship between individual behavior and characteristics, and the environment. To foster change in response to environmental factors, one must modify one's behavior, a process that can be facilitated through training. This model also posits a relationship between self-efficacy and organizational performance. Intentional change theory explains how positive affect enhances change. The authors argue that positive emotions not only support trusting relationships, innovation, and cognition but also bring out the best in individuals.

Table 1 summarizes empirical studies linking leadership studies with Lewin's Change Model. The studies' findings also highlight the economic outcomes of the change process in different industries, using different methodologies.

Table 1. Summary of Empirical Studies linking Leadership Studies with Lewin's Change Model

Author(s)/Year	Leadership Style/Change Framework	Firm-Level Economic Outcome(s)	Context/Sample	Study Design and Method	Key Empirical Findings
Wang et al. (2011).	Transformational leadership	Organizational performance, financial performance	Cross-industry firms	Meta-analysis (113 studies)	Transformational leadership is strongly and positively associated with firm-level performance outcomes.
Avolio, W. & Weber (2009)	Transformational leadership	Firm performance, productivity	Multiple organizations	Quantitative	Transformational leadership positively influences firm performance through enhanced collective efficacy and motivation.

Miao et al. (2016)	Emotionally intelligent leadership		Organizational performance, productivity	Service and manufacturing firms	Meta-analysis	Leaders' emotional intelligence significantly predicts organizational performance via improved leader-follower relationships.
O'Boyle et al. (2011).	Emotional intelligence leadership	in	Financial performance, operational efficiency	Mixed industries	Meta-analysis	Emotional intelligence explains incremental variance in firm performance beyond cognitive ability and personality.
Burnes (2004)	Lewin's Model	Change	Organizational performance	Cross-sector organizations	Empirical synthesis	Structured change processes aligned with Lewin's model led to improved organizational performance.
Higgs & Rowland (2005).	Transformational & change leadership (Lewin-aligned)		Financial and operational performance	Large organizations	Mixed-methods	Aligning leadership behaviors with Lewin's phases results in superior firm-level performance.
Fernandez & Rainey (2006).	Leadership in Planned Change (Lewin-informed)		Organizational effectiveness	Public and private organizations	Empirical review	Leadership that supports Change readiness improves implementation success and organizational outcomes.

The systematic review identified several empirical studies that examined the relationships between transformational and emotionally intelligent leadership styles and firm-level economic outcomes, as well as studies that applied Lewin's Change Model to organizational performance (Table 1). Across studies, transformational leadership consistently demonstrated a positive impact on financial performance, productivity, and innovation outcomes (Avolio & Weber, 2009; Wang et al., 2011). In a quantitative study across multiple organizations, Avolio and Weber asserted that transformational leadership positively influences firm performance by enhancing efficacy and motivation, aligning closely with the transformational leadership dimensions of idealized influence and inspirational motivation. Another meta-analysis by Wang et al., based on data from 133 cross-industry firms, supported the assertion that transformational leadership is positively associated with firm-level performance outcomes. Higgs & Rowland's (2005) mixed-methods study in large organizations supported the premise that aligning leadership behaviors, such as those grounded in transformational leadership theory, with Lewin's phases results in superior organizational performance.

Similarly, emotionally intelligent leadership was shown to enhance firm-level outcomes by improving leader-member relationships, decision-making quality, and operational efficiency. Miao et al. (2016) and O'Boyle et al. (2011) argued that performance variance is primarily driven by interpersonal and psychological mechanisms, specifically emotional intelligence, motivation, and relationship quality. O'Boyle et al. explicitly noted that emotional intelligence explains incremental variance in firm performance even after controlling for cognitive ability and personality. This offers a highly granular, statistically controlled argument for soft leadership skills.

Empirical applications of Lewin's Change Model further highlighted that structured change processes across the three phases of unfreezing, change, and refreezing lead to sustained performance gains and successful implementation of organizational Change (Burnes, 2004; Higgs & Rowland, 2005). Burnes viewed performance improvements as the result of orderly, structured, and planned processes inherent to Lewin's framework. Frameworks aligned strictly with Lewin's traditional model (often categorized as "planned change" in older literature) have historically presumed a highly managed, top-down approach to dismantling inertia during the unfreezing phase.

Collectively, the studies' evidence indicated that transformational and emotionally intelligent leadership behaviors not only directly enhance firm-level economic outcomes but also facilitate successful organizational change when aligned with Lewin's model, reinforcing the importance of integrated leadership and change practices for sustainable

performance (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). Additionally, Fernandez and Rainey, along with Higgs & Rowland (2005), emphasized building change readiness and flexibly adapting leadership behaviors to employees' anxieties and concerns. In contrast, the work of Burnes (2004) and Fernandez and Rainey relies on empirical reviews and syntheses that offer macro-level systemic insights into organizational effectiveness but cannot isolate the precise statistical variance attributable to a particular leadership trait versus external market factors.

3.2 Synthesis and Conceptual Framework

At the core of transformational leadership lies emotional intelligence. Research suggests an intricate connection between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership. This study is grounded in the integration of Lewin's Change Model, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Emotional Intelligence Theory to explain the human and behavioral dynamics that influence successful organizational change. Lewin's (1947) three-stage model of unfreeze, change, and refreeze provides the foundational process through which transformation unfolds. The model emphasizes the need to first create readiness for change by challenging existing assumptions, then implement new behaviors and methods, and finally stabilize the changes within the organizational culture (Burnes, 2004).

While Lewin's framework offers a systematic approach to managing planned change, it does not explicitly account for the role of leadership and emotional factors that drive or inhibit readiness for and adoption of change. To address this gap, the present framework integrates Transformational Leadership (TL) as the behavioral mechanism that facilitates Change (Zakaria, 2023). Transformational leaders inspire followers to transcend self-interest for the collective good by articulating a compelling vision, stimulating intellectual engagement, and providing individualized support (Halliwell et al., 2021; Kumar, 2014). Within Lewin's model, transformational leadership behaviors are particularly critical during the *unfreezing* and *change* stages, where followers may experience uncertainty or resistance. By communicating purpose, modeling desired behaviors, and fostering trust, transformational leaders create the psychological safety and commitment necessary for successful transformation.

This framework further introduces Emotional Intelligence (EI) as a moderating variable that enhances the effectiveness of transformational leadership. Emotional intelligence, defined as the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and utilize emotions constructively (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), equips leaders with the emotional awareness and regulation skills required to navigate the affective dimensions of change. Leaders with high emotional intelligence are better able to recognize employee concerns, manage resistance empathetically, and sustain motivation throughout the change process (Kumar, 2014). Thus, emotional intelligence strengthens the link between transformational leadership and the successful execution of Lewin's three-stage process by enabling emotionally attuned communication and relational influence.

Table 2. Integrated Conceptual Framework

Emotional Intelligence Dimensions	Interaction with Transformational Leadership Dimensions	Application to Lewin's Three-step Model
Self-Awareness	Recognizing how a leader's emotions impact their <i>Idealized Influence</i> .	Unfreezing: Detecting personal biases before articulating a vision to the team.
Self-Management	Controlling impulsive feelings to maintain <i>Inspirational Motivation</i> under stress.	Changing: Acting as a "stabilizer" when the transition becomes chaotic.
Social Awareness	Using empathy to deliver <i>Individualized Consideration</i> .	Unfreezing/Changing: Diagnosing the root causes of employee resistance (e.g., fear vs. anger).
Relationship Management	The execution of <i>Intellectual Stimulation</i> and team connection.	Refreezing: Rebuilding trust and reinforcing new norms to prevent reversion.

Table 2 depicts the integration of leadership styles with Lewin's change model. In this conceptual model, Lewin's change model, Transformational Leadership, and Emotional Intelligence are the independent variables driving change. Emotional Intelligence (EQ) dictates how effectively a leader moves through Lewin's stages. As the moderator, a high-EQ person changes the strength and direction of a relationship, enhancing the impact of transformational leadership and making the movement through Lewin's stages more permanent. On the other hand, even a visionary leader will struggle with Lewin's model because they will fail to manage the people-related friction that occurs during the

transition (Hsu et al., 2022; Lewin, 1947).

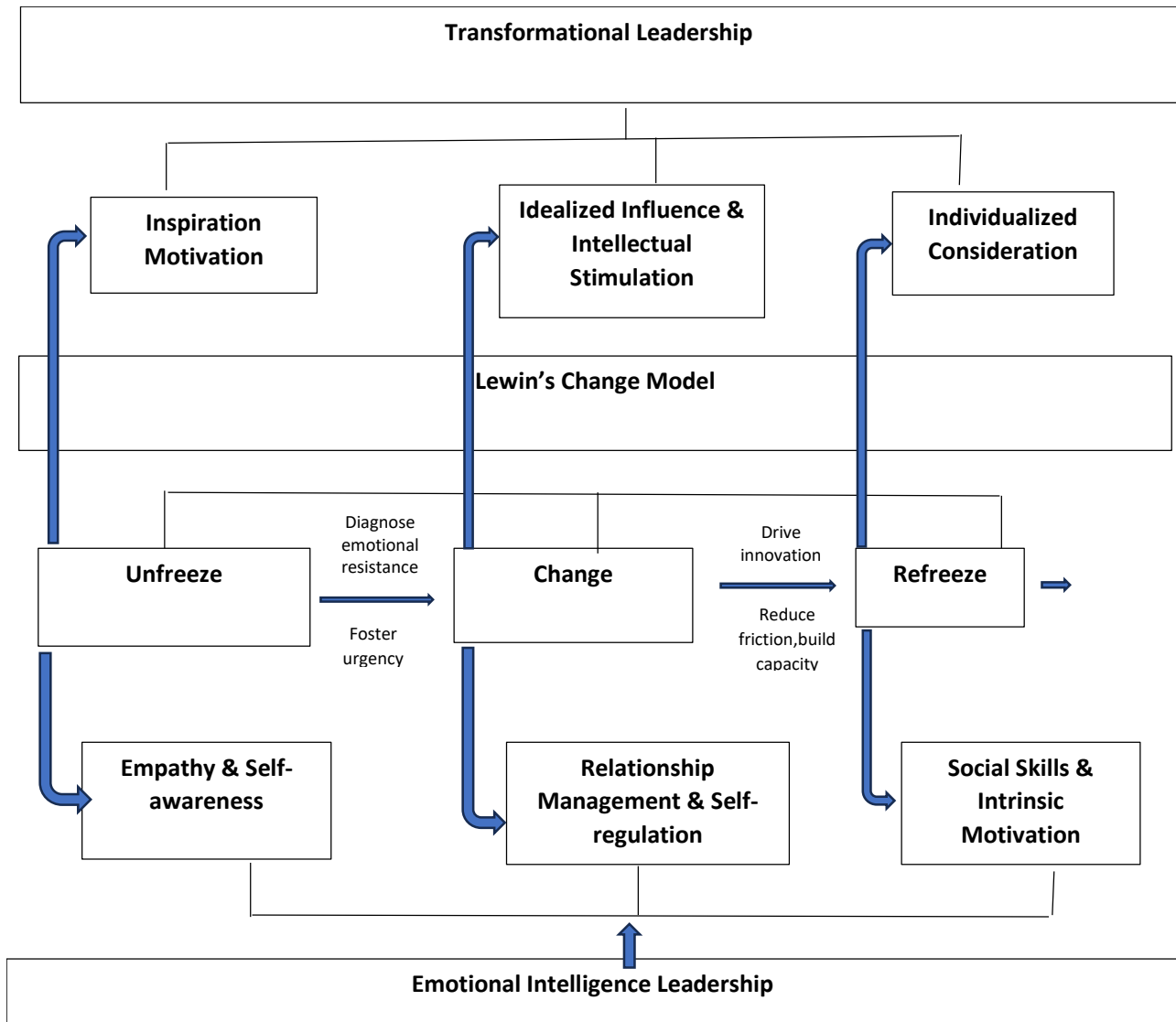


Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Framework: Transformational & Emotional Intelligence Leadership in Lewin's Change Model

Note. The conceptual diagram presents an original synthesis based on Lewin's (1947) three-stage model of change, Burns's (1978) transformational leadership model, and Mayer et al.'s (2004) emotional intelligence dimensions.

Conceptually, the framework in *Figure 1* illustrates that emotional intelligence enables transformational leadership, which, in turn, drives effective organizational change through Lewin's three-stage process. Specifically, emotionally intelligent leaders enact transformational behaviors that facilitate unfreezing through empathy and vision, support movement during the change phase through intellectual stimulation and encouragement, and reinforce stability during refreezing through individualized consideration and reinforcement of new norms. The interaction of these constructs underscores that sustainable change is not merely procedural but profoundly emotional and relational. The proposed framework, therefore, highlights the synergistic role of emotional intelligence and transformational leadership in translating planned change into enduring organizational transformation (Naznin, 2024).

Additionally, the conceptual framework maps organizational change as a dynamic, regulated process rather than a static linear progression. Lewin's Change Model establishes the structural process through the three phases of Unfreezing, Changing, and Refreezing. However, navigating these structural phases requires a behavioral catalyst.

Transformational Leadership serves as the mediator, translating the strategic steps of Lewin's model into meaningful, vision-driven actions that directly target employee buy-in. Crucially, this mediating relationship is not uniform; its efficacy is contingent upon Emotional Intelligence (EI), which functions as the regulator (moderator). High EI enables leaders to accurately perceive, understand, and manage emotions during the volatile phases of unfreezing and change, thereby optimizing their transformational behaviors to align with the workforce's psychological state. When transformational leadership is successfully deployed and regulated by EI, it directly reduces resistance to change, thereby serving as the primary conduit for enhanced organizational performance (Zakaria, 2023).

4. Implications for Theory, Practice, and Future Research

4.1 For Theory

This research study advances organizational change theory by integrating Lewin's Change Model with dimensions of Transformational Leadership Theory and Emotional Intelligence, positioning leadership behavior as a mediating and moderating mechanism that translates human factors into economic and performance outcomes. The study reframes Lewin's three-step model through a financial lens, where emotional readiness and leadership agility influence the efficiency and sustainability of change, thereby reducing transaction costs associated with resistance, turnover, and low morale (Burnes, 2004). The Integration of Emotional Intelligence into Lewin's Change Model introduces a behavioral economics perspective, suggesting that rational and emotional factors jointly drive organizational adaptation. A transformational leadership approach that leverages emotional intelligence is crucial for driving successful organizational Change (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By emphasizing Transformational Leadership as the behavioral anchor of Lewin's model, this paper contributes to a micro-foundational understanding of how leadership behavior enhances productivity, organizational competitiveness, and innovation. The study connects classical change management with contemporary performance-based models, proposing a multidimensional framework that aligns human dynamics with measurable organizational outcomes, employee commitment, organizational resilience, and profitability (Hakro et al., 2024).

4.2 For Practice

This study has implications for practice that organizations can adopt to minimize resistance to change. Integrating emotional intelligence into leadership training enhances effectiveness, directly impacting organizational efficiency, employee productivity, and retention (Hussain et al., 2018). Change is a necessary yet costly undertaking; therefore, organizations must implement it successfully. Applying the Lewin, Transformational Leadership, and Emotional Intelligence frameworks helps firms manage transitions cost-effectively, minimizing the productivity dip that often accompanies change processes.

Another implication for practice is that the proposed integrative model could be considered a human capital investment, in the sense that institutionalizing emotional intelligence within leadership enables organizations to achieve higher returns on investment by reducing resistance, improving employee morale, and sustaining innovation in the face of Change (Hussain et al., 2018).

The study contributes to a greater understanding of leadership dynamics and provides valuable insights for organizations to cultivate a positive work environment that fosters adaptability (Zakaria, 2023). The implication for policymakers is that the model demonstrates the economic value of investing in leadership skills as a strategy for gaining a competitive edge. The last implication for practice is that the integrative model is beneficial in the post-change phase, which aligns with the unfreezing stage of Lewin's change model, as it enhances long-term stability, employee engagement, and financial resilience (Jiménez et al., 2018).

4.3 For Future Research

The recommendations and implications for future research include: Researchers can consider conducting comparative studies to reveal how economic and cultural contexts moderate the relationship between leadership, emotional intelligence, and successful change outcomes. Other gaps in research and areas for further research include merging Lewin's framework with insights from behavioral economics to highlight how cognitive ability and emotions influence the change process within organizations (Ogochi, 2018). Lastly, further research could adopt a longitudinal design to capture the long-term economic impact of emotionally intelligent leadership on creativity, innovation, employee welfare, and firm growth (Zakaria, 2023).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, navigating the fluid demands and complex challenges of a changing, contemporary environment requires an intentional shift away from isolated management practices toward a more creative, integrated leadership approach. Because true organizational change is primarily strategic rather than operational, its successful implementation demands a fundamental shift in core organizational functions, processes, and human dynamics.

Employees serve as the vital architecture of this transition; thus, cultivating an organizational climate rooted in empathy, inclusion, support, and respect is essential to fostering a deep sense of belonging and optimism (Maamari & Majdalani, 2017; Nesterkin, 2013). By ensuring that emotional friction does not derail strategic objectives, leaders leverage transformational behaviors, particularly idealized influence, to dismantle status quo inertia during Lewin's "unfreezing" stage and permanently anchor behaviors during the "refreezing" stage (Harms & Credé, 2010; Slater et al., 2016). Throughout these disruptive intervals, inspiring and intellectually stimulating practices remain highly beneficial for maintaining alignment and momentum (Li & Mohamed, 2024).

Emotional intelligence profoundly optimizes this strategic momentum. Rather than operating in isolation, emotional intelligence plays a critical role by moderating the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational change. Emotionally intelligent leaders expertly manage the intense emotions associated with structural disruption, thereby minimizing employee resistance and directly sharpening the core transformational dimensions of intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, idealized influence, and inspirational motivation (Bass, 1985; Li & Mohamed, 2024; Zakaria, 2023). This intersection of emotional moderation and transformational drive ultimately enables leaders to utilize appreciative inquiry as a deficit-free philosophy that seeks the best in people and creates shared, positive goals (Bordia, Restubog, Jimmieson, & Irmer, 2011; Kim, 2015) and by fostering systemic trust, heightened self- and other-awareness, and a constructive architectural alignment, this integrated paradigm enables the organization to bypass emotional resistance and achieve its long-term objectives.

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