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From Change Readiness to Change Absorption Capacity: A Process Model of Sensemaking, Middle-Manager Translation, and the Institutionalization of Organizational Change

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Abstract

Organizational change research has developed rich accounts of readiness, recipient responses, sensemaking, managerial agency, and implementation, yet these constructs are often connected as if favorable initial orientations naturally culminate in durable organizational change. This article develops a theoretical process model that shifts the analytical end point from change readiness to change absorption capacity. Change absorption capacity is proposed as an organization-level process capability through which change is repeatedly interpreted, translated across hierarchical locations, adapted to local work, coordinated into distributed routines, and stabilized sufficiently to persist beyond the initiating episode. The model treats middle managers as translational actors rather than passive conduits and positions local adaptation as potentially productive, deflective, or preserving of prior practice. It further argues that institutionalization depends on recursive feedback: enacted consequences reshape subsequent interpretations, managerial translations, and routine performances. Readiness therefore remains important but is recast as an antecedent condition whose influence depends on downstream process continuity. The model also specifies breakdown pathways in which semantic fragmentation, translation overload, incompatible local adaptations, weak routine coupling, or competing change initiatives interrupt absorption. By linking recipient-level interpretation to organizational routine stabilization without collapsing levels of analysis, the article contributes a processual account of how change may become organizationally reproducible. The framework is theoretical rather than empirically validated; its propositions require longitudinal, multilevel, and comparative testing, and its applicability is expected to vary with change type, organizational structure, temporal pressure, and institutional context.

Keywords: Organizational change, Change readiness, Sensemaking, Middle managers, Organizational routines, Institutionalization

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Introduction

Organizational change is frequently theorized through antecedent conditions that make implementation more likely: credible leadership, participation, coherent communication, perceived appropriateness, and favorable recipient responses. Integrative work usefully shows that these conditions matter, but also that change unfolds through multiple practices rather than through a single intervention or attitude [1]. More recent synthesis similarly finds a heterogeneous intervention literature in which consequences depend on what managers do, how recipients respond, and the context in which interventions are enacted [2]. This creates a theoretical problem. An organization may mobilize support for a change without developing a durable capacity to carry the change through interpretation, translation, adaptation, routine formation, and stabilization.



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Recipient responses are not passive reflections of a managerial message. They involve appraisal and affect, may change over time, and can generate different behavioral responses to the same change event [3]. Accordingly, this article proposes a shift in analytical end point. Readiness is treated as an antecedent state; change absorption capacity is proposed as an organization-level process capability through which a change becomes interpretable, locally workable, distributed across interdependent activity, and sufficiently stabilized to remain reproducible. The argument is not that readiness is unimportant, nor that absorption guarantees successful outcomes. Rather, it addresses the under-theorized transition between being prepared to change and making new practice organizationally durable.

Why change readiness is an insufficient end state

Readiness is valuable because change cannot readily proceed when recipients regard it as unintelligible, inappropriate, or unmanageable. Yet an end-state interpretation of readiness obscures at least three problems. First, favorable evaluations occur before many implementation contingencies become visible. Second, readiness can be observed at one level while the work of change unfolds across several levels. Third, an initially supportive orientation says little about whether revised practices will survive competing priorities, staff turnover, local exceptions, or subsequent reinterpretation.

Sensemaking scholarship reinforces this distinction. Developing sensemaking capability can help organizational actors interpret strategic change, but interpretation remains an activity that must be renewed as circumstances evolve [4]. Readiness should therefore be conceptualized as enabling but non-sufficient: it may increase the possibility of engagement without specifying how meaning is translated into interdependent action. The theoretical gap is not another antecedent of willingness. It is a process explanation of how change travels through an organization and acquires enough coherence, adaptability, and repetition to become durable without assuming that durability follows automatically from initial commitment.

From readiness to organizational absorption

This article defines proposed change absorption capacity as the organizational capability to sustain a change through recurrent interpretation, hierarchical translation, situated adaptation, coordination across interdependencies, and stabilization in routines. The construct differs from readiness in temporal location and explanatory task. Readiness concerns orientation toward prospective or emerging change; absorption concerns what happens after actors encounter the practical ambiguities of enactment. It is therefore expressed not by favorable attitudes alone but by whether new meanings can be converted into workable patterns across organizational locations.

Absorption is also deliberately processual rather than a stock of resources. It may strengthen as actors learn how a change interacts with existing work, or weaken when translations diverge, local adaptations become incompatible, and routinization fails. Its organization-level designation does not imply that every component exists at that level. Individual interpretation, managerial translation, team adaptation, and organization-wide patterning are distinct activities whose linkage is the theoretical object.

Table 1 makes this state-versus-capacity distinction explicit; the absorption column represents the proposed synthesis rather than an established measurement model.

Table 1. Readiness signals preparedness; proposed absorption capacity explains organizational persistence

Discriminating dimension	Change readiness	Proposed change absorption capacity	Why the distinction matters theoretically
Temporal position	Before and around initiation	During repeated enactment and stabilization	Separates preparedness from persistence
Primary analytical object	Orientation toward change	Cross-level process capability	Prevents attitude-to-organization inference
Core mechanism	Appraisal, willingness, perceived feasibility	Interpretation, translation, adaptation, coordination	Specifies downstream change work
Middle managers	Influence readiness and response	Translate intent into locally actionable meaning	Makes hierarchy a process linkage
Local adaptation	Primarily an implementation condition	Constitutive but potentially divergent	Allows variation without equating it with failure
Routinization	Not required for readiness	Required for reproducible enactment	Distinguishes uptake from durability
Persistence criterion	Support may remain favorable	Practice survives recurrent use and ordinary disturbance	Introduces a temporal test
Failure signature	Low support, reluctance, resistance	Fragmentation, decoupling, incompatible routines	Broadens failure beyond attitudes

Sensemaking during change initiation

Change initiation creates an interpretive problem before it creates a stable behavioral one. Actors ask what is changing, why it matters, how it relates to prior commitments, and what consequences follow for their work. A temporal narrative perspective shows that sensemaking connects interpretations of past, present, and future rather than merely decoding a current managerial message [5]. Change meanings can therefore be revised as anticipated futures become more or less plausible.

Language is central to this process because categories, labels, narratives, and conversations help actors construct what the change is and what action it warrants [6]. Affect can also shape the sensemaking trajectory; evidence from an extreme organizational incident shows that emotional experience and meaning construction can unfold together rather than as separable stages [7]. Collective sensemaking is additionally implicated in power: some interpretations acquire legitimacy while others become marginalized, making apparently shared meaning neither neutral nor necessarily consensual [8].

For the proposed model, initiation is consequently a provisional interpretive settlement. It supplies enough shared direction for action to begin, but it remains revisable. Absorption depends less on achieving one definitive meaning than on maintaining sufficient interpretive coherence while allowing later experience to correct, elaborate, or contest the initial account.

Middle managers as translational actors

Middle managers occupy an analytically important location because they encounter both strategic claims about what change should accomplish and operational knowledge about what existing work permits. Contemporary scholarship portrays their contribution as heterogeneous rather than reducible to resistance or implementation compliance [9]. In digital transformation, for example, middle-manager roles vary with transformation demands and with how managers position themselves between strategic and operational domains [10]. This supports treating translation as situated organizational work rather than simple message transmission.

Translation also involves identity and authority. Open-strategy research shows that middle managers may struggle over their subject positions when participation changes who is entitled to shape strategy [11]. During implementation, managers can inhabit partially shared and partially separate realities, generating different interpretations of the same strategic initiative [12]. The proposed model therefore treats middle-manager translation as a conversion mechanism: strategic intent is rendered into priorities, explanations, sequencing decisions, exceptions, and local expectations.

Translation can preserve coherence, but it can also narrow, amplify, or redirect the change. Its theoretical importance lies precisely in this dual capacity. Change absorption requires enough translational alignment to connect organizational units while retaining sufficient discretion for local workability. Middle managers are thus neither inherently enabling nor obstructive; their significance derives from occupying a position at which abstract change claims are repeatedly converted into situated action.

Local adaptation and meaning reconstruction

Translation becomes consequential when actors confront local tasks, relationships, technologies, and constraints. At this point, adaptation is not merely deviation from an original blueprint; it can be the means through which abstract change becomes actionable. Yet adaptation is not inherently change-supportive. Research on translation of a management concept shows that local micro-tactics can translate a new idea in ways that maintain existing practices rather than transform them [13]. This establishes an important boundary for an absorption account: visible implementation activity may coexist with substantive continuity.

Sensemaking and action also interact. Research on strategic change indicates that substantive actions can shape how organizational members interpret change, while those interpretations orient subsequent action [14]. Local enactment thus generates new information about feasibility, identity, coordination costs, and unintended consequences. The proposed model calls this meaning reconstruction: actors update what the change means in light of what happens when they attempt to perform it.

Productive adaptation consequently requires a balance. Too little discretion can make change unworkable in heterogeneous settings; too much unconnected discretion can dissolve common direction. Absorption depends on whether locally reconstructed meanings remain connectable across units, not on whether every site reproduces an identical practice.

From local translation to distributed change routines

For local adaptations to become organizationally consequential, they must enter patterns of interdependent action. Routine research demonstrates that repetitive work is not simply inert repetition. Regulatory actions within routines can reconcile competing goals and permit continued performance under tension [15]. Recent work on routine clusters likewise shows that flexibility can depend on patterned coordination among interdependent routines rather than on isolated routines changing independently [16]. This shifts attention from adoption events toward the way multiple performances become mutually workable.

Distributed change routines are proposed here as recurring, recognizable patterns through which translated change is enacted across roles and organizational locations. They can accommodate local variation provided that variation does not break critical interdependencies. Routine dynamics also draw attention to the capacity of recurring patterns to reproduce broader social arrangements, including inequalities, meaning that stabilization should not be equated with desirability [17]. A change can therefore be absorbed while still reproducing problematic structures or generating undesirable consequences.

The model consequently separates reproducibility from normative or performance success. The process question is whether adaptations become coordinated enough to recur without continuous exceptional effort. When they do not, implementation remains episodic: individuals may support the change, and managers may explain it effectively, yet the organization has not absorbed it into distributed practice.

Institutionalization and the stabilization of new practices

Institutionalization occurs when new practice becomes sufficiently expected, supported by roles or artifacts, and recurrent that enactment no longer depends entirely on the initiating intervention. Longitudinal research on care routines shows how self-reinforcing processes can shape both the emergence and persistence of action patterns over time [18]. Evidence on institutional maintenance likewise illustrates how organizational routines and artifacts can reinforce established arrangements [19]. These studies do not establish a general law of change stabilization, but they demonstrate why persistence requires mechanisms beyond initial acceptance.

In the proposed model, stabilization is therefore an achieved and revisable condition rather than a terminal stage. Repetition can increase coordination and predictability, while artifacts, role expectations, and accumulated local knowledge can reduce the effort required for reenactment. At the same time, stabilization may preserve distorted translations, lock in accommodations that weaken original intent, or become vulnerable when supporting actors and artifacts disappear.

Change absorption capacity culminates not in immobility but in reproducible practice that can withstand ordinary variation while remaining open to correction. Institutionalization is successful in the narrow process sense when change no longer requires continual relaunch to be enacted. Whether the stabilized practice is effective, equitable, strategically desirable, or superior to the displaced arrangement remains a separate empirical question. This distinction prevents institutional persistence from being mistaken for change quality and prepares the model for the recursive mechanisms, propositions, breakdown trajectories, and boundary conditions developed next.

The change absorption capacity process model

The proposed process model defines change absorption capacity as an organization-level capability that emerges from the linkage of distinct activities rather than from the presence of any single favorable condition. Research distinguishing change initiation from change execution shows that top and middle managers can occupy different role configurations across a change process, cautioning against treating hierarchical participation as unitary [20]. Strategic-change research likewise shows that temporal assumptions alter how change processes are conceived and studied, including whether attention is directed to calendar duration, events, sequences, or life-cycle patterns [21]. These insights support a process architecture but do not establish the new construct proposed here.

The model contains five recursively connected process conditions: interpretability, translational continuity, adaptive fit, routine coupling, and institutional reinforcement. Sensemaking produces a provisional interpretation sufficiently coherent for action. Middle-manager translation converts broad intent into locally actionable priorities. Local adaptation tests and reconstructs that meaning against situated constraints. Distributed routines couple locally workable performances across interdependent roles. Institutional reinforcement makes selected practices more reproducible through expectations, roles, artifacts, and recurrent use. Change absorption capacity is therefore not the sum of readiness and implementation activity. It is the proposed capacity to preserve enough continuity across these transitions that change can remain recognizable while being altered by enactment. Weakness at any transition can interrupt absorption without implying that the preceding condition was absent.

Recursive feedback and reinterpretation across change stages

The process is recursive because enactment changes what actors subsequently understand the change to be. The integration of organizing and sensemaking emphasizes movement between action and meaning rather than a one-way sequence from cognition to behavior [22]. Communication also shapes organizational attention by influencing which issues, initiatives, and alternatives actors notice and engage during strategic change [23]. Together, these literatures support feedback between interpretation and action while leaving the specific cross-stage architecture proposed here open to empirical test.

Three feedback movements are central. Performance feedback from local enactment can revise initial interpretations; coordination feedback can reveal incompatible translations across units; and stabilization feedback can normalize some practices while making others less salient. Feedback may therefore be corrective, amplifying, or erosive. Corrective feedback

reconnects local adaptation with shared direction. Amplifying feedback strengthens a workable pattern through repeated use. Erosive feedback progressively separates local meanings and routines until a nominally common change becomes several incompatible practices. The model thus treats reinterpretation as a normal mechanism of absorption, not evidence that implementation has deviated from a fixed original meaning.

Figure 1 visualizes these recursively linked relationships and distinguishes literature-supported component relationships from the article's proposed integrative pathways.

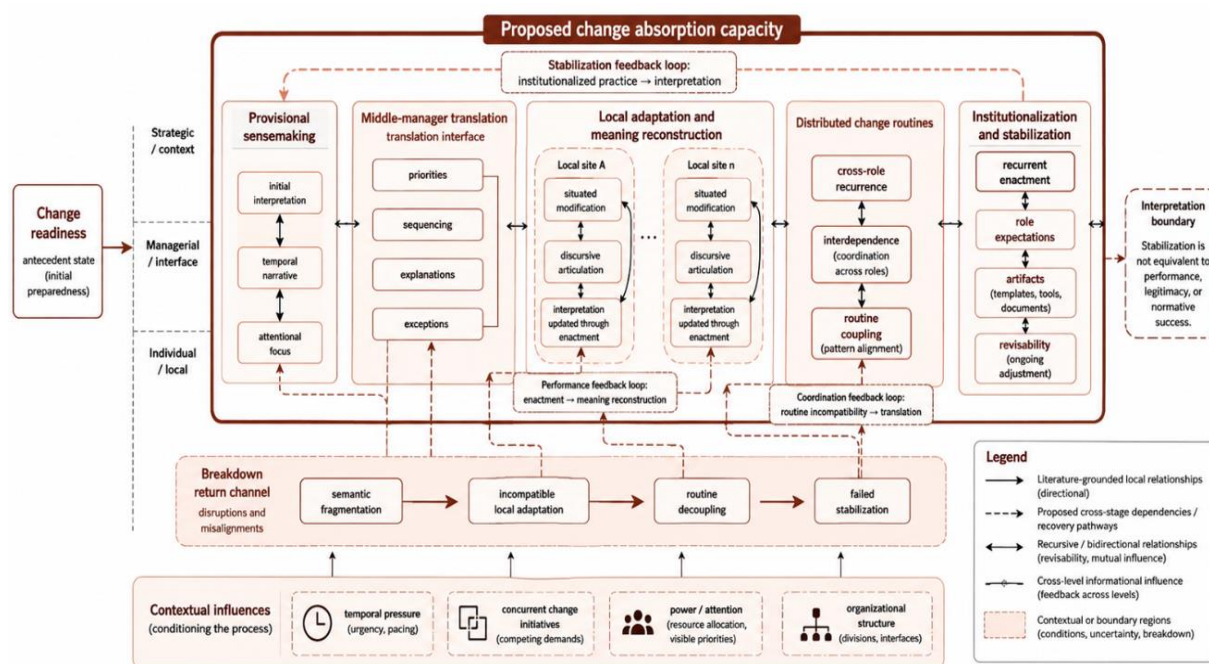


Figure 1. Recursive translation and local reinterpretation stabilize change through distributed routines

Propositions on change absorption

The model yields propositions about process continuity rather than predictions of universal change success. First, readiness should contribute more strongly to persistent enactment when interpretive coherence survives translation into local work. Second, translation should support absorption when it combines directional continuity with discretion sufficient for situated adaptation. Third, local variation should be compatible with absorption when interdependent routines remain coupled despite differences in surface practice. Fourth, observable feedback should increase the possibility of correcting translation or coordination problems before they become stabilized.

A fifth proposition concerns interference. Evidence from concurrent change initiatives shows that interferences can generate inconsistencies that undermine implementation [24]. A sixth concerns situated managerial work: street-level managers can make practical modifications and discursive articulations that preserve a viable working order during reform, while such work is context-bounded and does not itself demonstrate reform success [25]. The proposed model extends these observations by arguing that interference and situational adaptation affect absorption through their consequences for cross-unit coherence, routine coupling, and recursive correction.

Table 2 converts these propositions into future-testable process dependencies rather than treating them as established effects.

Table 2. Propositions linking recursive translation to change absorption and institutionalization

Proposition	Process location	Initiating condition	Translation/adaptation mechanism	Recursive feedback	Expected institutionalization consequence	Breakdown condition	Future empirical indicator
P1 proposed	Readiness–sensemaking	Favorable initial orientation	Meaning remains interpretable	Enactment updates interpretation	Persistent engagement becomes possible	Meaning fragments	Repeated meaning alignment
P2 proposed	Translation	Strategic intent reaches local managers	Direction plus bounded discretion	Local issues return upward	Greater cross-unit continuity	Translation becomes inconsistent	Traceable translation revisions
P3 proposed	Local adaptation	Local constraints emerge	Workable variation	Adaptation consequence	Compatible local enactments recur	Variations become incompatible	Cross-unit routine compatibility

				s are compared			
P4 proposed	Routine coupling	Interdependent practices repeat	Coordination across roles	Performance exposes misfit	Reproducible distributed routines	Decoupling persists	Recurrence across interdependencies
P5 proposed	Institutionalization	Practices gain repetition	Roles and artifacts reinforce enactment	Exceptions trigger correction	Stabilization without complete rigidity	Reinforcement locks in distortion	Persistence plus revisability
P6 proposed	Change portfolio	Multiple initiatives overlap	Priorities and meanings are reconciled	Interference becomes visible	Absorption can continue	Contradictions remain unresolved	Recorded cross-initiative conflicts

Breakdown pathways and failed institutionalization

Absorption can fail through several pathways that are analytically different from low readiness. Boundary work by middle managers can both obstruct and facilitate boundary crossing, showing that organizational interfaces are actively constructed rather than neutral transmission points [26]. Temporal work further indicates that actors attempt to influence, sustain, or redirect temporal assumptions and patterns that shape strategic action [27]. Breakdown may therefore arise because meanings, boundaries, and timing become misaligned even when the change remains formally endorsed.

Power creates another pathway. Collective sensemaking can reproduce common sense, generate new sense, or render alternatives nonsensical through discursive practices [28]. Attention can also fail systemically: crisis theorizing shows how breakdowns in structures that shape attention can trigger attempts to transform those structures [29]. Finally, middle-managerial deviance under structural strain can involve rescoping, reconfiguring, or replacing norms rather than simple compliance or resistance [30]. Such responses may deepen fragmentation, but they may also reopen an otherwise blocked change trajectory.

The proposed model therefore distinguishes breakdown, lock-in, and recovery. Failed institutionalization occurs when incompatible meanings or routines persist without an effective correction pathway; lock-in occurs when a distorted enactment becomes self-reinforcing; recovery occurs when feedback reopens translation, adaptation, or coordination.

Figure 2 contrasts these competing trajectories.

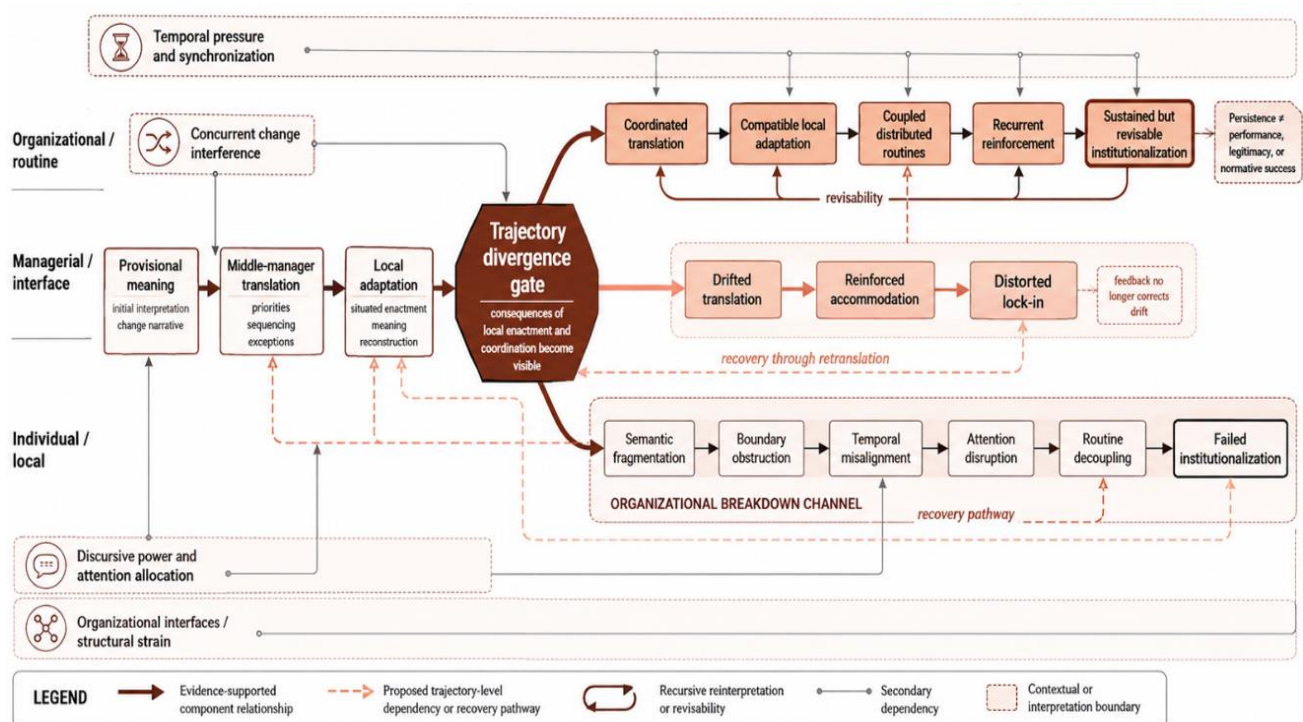


Figure 2. Competing feedback pathways divide sustained institutionalization and organizational breakdown

Temporal and organizational boundary conditions

Change absorption capacity should not be expected to operate identically across settings. Time matters because strategic change can be organized through different temporal conceptions, sequences, pacing logics, and deadlines [21]. Temporal work

also means that actors may actively accelerate, defer, synchronize, or reinterpret timing rather than merely experience an externally fixed schedule [27]. Absorption may therefore be harder when local learning cycles are slower than mandated rollout, or when units operate with incompatible temporal rhythms.

Organizational structure creates a second boundary. Highly interdependent changes require more cross-unit routine coupling than modular changes whose local adaptations can remain relatively independent. Concurrent initiatives add another condition because interference can create inconsistent demands even when each initiative is intelligible in isolation [24]. Institutional context also matters: regulated, professional, public, project-based, or digitally transforming organizations distribute discretion, authority, and accountability differently.

These are theoretical boundary conditions, not validated moderators of the proposed construct. The model also remains explicitly multilevel. Individual sensemaking cannot be treated as organization-level absorption; team adaptation cannot establish institutionalization; and persistence in one unit cannot establish organization-wide capacity. Cross-level inference requires evidence that translations, routines, and reinforcement actually connect these levels over time.

Contributions to organizational change theory

The model makes four linked theoretical contributions. First, it relocates readiness from an implied destination to an antecedent state. The question becomes not only whether actors are prepared to change, but whether an organization can continue converting provisional support into reproducible practice. Second, it specifies a cross-level linkage problem. Research on change roles shows that initiation and execution can be distributed across hierarchical actors [20]; the proposed construct theorizes how those differentiated activities may become connected rather than presuming alignment.

Third, the model integrates meaning and action recursively. Sensemaking theory supports a movement between organizing and meaning [22], while attention research shows that communication affects which strategic issues receive engagement [23]. The contribution is to connect these mechanisms to translation, local adaptation, routine coupling, and stabilization in a single proposed process architecture.

Fourth, the model separates persistence from success. Coordinated routine patterns can be flexible [16], yet persistence can also reproduce undesirable arrangements. Change absorption capacity therefore concerns organizational reproducibility and revisability, not whether the absorbed change improves performance or deserves normative endorsement. This distinction limits the construct's claims while making failure theoretically visible: breakdown can occur after readiness, and stabilization can occur without producing a desirable outcome.

Implications for change leadership

The model implies a different object of leadership attention. Leaders should not infer durable change from favorable launch responses alone. More informative signals are whether managers can translate intent without losing its organizing logic, whether local adaptations remain mutually compatible, whether recurrent work exposes contradictions, and whether feedback can reopen an interpretation before misalignment hardens.

This does not imply tighter standardization. Situational work can be necessary to maintain viable local operations during reform [25], and boundary work can alternately enable or restrict cross-unit connection [26]. Leadership therefore involves governing the conditions under which discretion is exercised: clarifying non-negotiable interdependencies while leaving room for local reconstruction. It also requires attention to the portfolio of simultaneous changes because unresolved interference can undermine implementation [24]. These implications remain theory-derived rather than evidence that a particular leadership intervention will increase absorption.

Research agenda

Empirical development should begin by testing whether change absorption capacity is distinguishable from readiness, implementation climate, change commitment, dynamic capabilities, and routine persistence. Longitudinal designs should observe the same change across initiation, translation, adaptation, routine formation, and stabilization rather than infer process from a single survey wave. Strategic-change research already demonstrates why temporal design choices alter what can be learned about change [21].

Multilevel studies should combine recipient interpretations, managerial translations, team practices, cross-unit dependencies, and organization-level persistence. Comparative case research could examine whether similar readiness states lead to different absorption trajectories and whether different local adaptations converge on compatible routines. Sequence analysis, process tracing, repeated qualitative observation, digital trace data, and process mining could test recursive ordering without presuming a linear stage model.

Research should also target disconfirmation. Studies should seek cases in which high readiness is followed by failed institutionalization, low initial readiness by later absorption, and apparent stabilization by harmful lock-in. Crisis and attention research suggests particular value in examining breakdown and recovery episodes [29]. No threshold for "high" absorption should be assumed before construct development and validation.

Limitations

The model is a theoretical synthesis and has not been empirically validated as a distinct capability. Its component literatures use different constructs, units, methods, sectors, and temporal horizons, so their integration does not establish the proposed cross-stage mechanisms. Evidence that routines persist [18] or that material adaptations support institutional maintenance [19] cannot, by itself, demonstrate change absorption capacity.

The model also privileges internal organizational processes. External stakeholders, field-level institutions, interorganizational dependencies, labor relations, and technological infrastructures may materially shape whether practices stabilize. Its emphasis on middle managers may understate senior leaders, frontline professionals, informal leaders, or algorithmic systems that perform translation work. Finally, “institutionalization” is used narrowly to denote durable organizational reproduction, not societal legitimacy or normative desirability. The process vocabulary may suggest ordered stages even though recursion is central; future research should test alternative sequences, skipped transitions, parallel pathways, and changes that remain deliberately temporary.

Conclusion

Change readiness explains an important beginning, but it cannot by itself explain organizational persistence. This article proposes change absorption capacity as a process capability linking provisional sensemaking, middle-manager translation, local adaptation, distributed routines, and revisable institutionalization. Its central claim is temporal and relational: change becomes absorbable when continuity can be maintained across these transitions while feedback remains capable of revising meanings and practices.

The model also makes failure endogenous. Fragmentation, interference, boundary obstruction, desynchronization, attention breakdown, and distorted lock-in can interrupt or redirect absorption after an apparently favorable start. Absorption therefore should not be equated with compliance, performance, or normative success. The framework remains a theoretical proposition requiring longitudinal, multilevel, comparative validation across change types and organizational contexts.

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