

MIDDLE MANAGEMENT, SUIT UP!

Thought Leadership



Introduction

The midfield, often seen as the heart of a soccer team, plays a pivotal role. Midfielders orchestrate plays, control possessions, and link the defense to the attackers. They are the ones who enable transitions, adapt to changing situations, and set the tempo. Without a strong midfield, the team's overall performance suffers.

Similarly, within an organization, middle management acts as the bridge between top leadership and front-line employees. They interpret strategic directions, translate them into actionable plans, and ensure smooth execution. Like midfielders, they must adapt swiftly to market shifts, navigate complexities, and maintain cohesion. Just as midfielders are the unsung heroes on the soccer field, the middle layer in organizations quietly drives adaptability, resilience, and victory.

In recent years, companies spanning diverse industries have grappled with substantial resizing and restructuring, often placing middle management in the spotlight. Rather than casting blame on middle management for organizational inefficiencies and failures, we advocate for organizations to invest in and empower their middle managers for organizational long-term success as well as their own growth and development.

The Middle Layer Conundrum

In the pursuit of cost saving and operational efficiency, organizations often direct their attention toward middle management—a [corporate strategy](#) that has stood the test of time since the 1980s.

When a layoff is considered necessary, middle management often becomes the target. According to one analysis, middle managers made up [almost a third of layoffs](#) in 2023.

One rationale for cutting middle layers is to expedite decision-making and hasten organizational agility. However, this argument inadvertently perpetuates a top-down approach to decision-making. In such a model, information and decisions travel through several levels before implementation. The concentration of decision power at the top can slow down the speed of reactions to market changes, but it is not the middle management that bears the brunt. While the intention may be to streamline operations, shrinking middle managers without re-engineering the decision-making process seldom leads to improved organizational agility.

Middle managers are constantly pulled in multiple directions. Following a significant restructuring, they must swiftly adjust to new priorities, shoulder increased responsibilities with limited resources, and guide their teams through uncertainty. Consequently, they often bear the weight of [burnout](#).

A recent survey found that workers in middle management are the most exhausted employees at any level of an organization, [with 43% of them sharing that they're burned out](#). Korn Ferry coaches observe an escalating demand from middle managers for assistance with [stress](#) and well-being. They struggle with balancing meeting the expectations of senior leaders while effectively communicating and keeping front-line workers engaged amidst all these organizational changes.

The Growing Regularity of Organizational Change

The 2020s have been marked by a series of challenges that have profoundly disrupted the business world. These challenges span various domains, including ESG, social justice movements, epidemiologic crises, supply chain security, and the rise of artificial intelligence. It is not necessarily that more crises are happening overall; instead, the challenges have quickly become more widespread, diverse, and interrelated.

This constant state of flux has resulted in an increasing regularity of organizational change. A [2020 survey report](#) found that the average organization has undergone five major changes in the past three years, and nearly 75% expect to multiply the types of change initiatives they will undertake in the next three years. In another survey of 1,284 executives and project management professionals, 85% of survey respondents noted [an explosive increase in organization change projects](#) over the past five years.

Employees have correspondingly experienced frequent organizational changes. One data source reported that over 70% of [people felt their organizations were overwhelmed with change](#). A 2022 survey revealed that, on average, [employees experienced 10 enterprise changes](#). These changes could range from restructuring to achieve efficiencies, cultural transformations to unlock new ways of working, to the replacement of legacy tech systems. Today, organizational change is not only ongoing but also simultaneous.

The Importance of Change-Readiness

In the realm of change management, a pivotal concept is readiness for change. Kurt Lewin, a seminal figure in this field, laid the groundwork with his theories in the mid-20th century, profoundly shaping the understanding of organizational change. His "Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze" model, developed in the 1940s, stands as a foundational framework in organizational change studies. Although Lewin did not explicitly use the term "readiness for change," this concept is inherently present in his model, particularly in the "unfreeze" stage. This stage emphasizes the importance of preparing and priming an organization for the change process.

Following Lewin's pioneering work, various scholars and practitioners in organizational development have further elaborated and refined this concept. Among the most notable contributions is the explicit articulation of the concept of readiness for change by Armenakis et al. in 1993, and then by Bouckennooghe et al. in 2009, who specified the components of readiness for change. Its positive impact on change outcomes has also been validated through empirical research.

Despite its significance, organizations often fall short in fostering change-readiness. Almost one-third of all U.S. [workers state being cynical](#) when it comes to changes with 29% reporting they believed management had a hidden agenda, 31% believing that their motives and intentions were different from what they said, and 29% suspecting that management tried to cover up the real reasons for the changes. Within this context of increasing cynicism, [employees' willingness to support enterprise change has collapsed](#) to only 43% in 2022, compared to 74% in 2016.

Reimagine the Role of Middle Management

Unlike traditional organizational changes, which are meticulously planned and initiated by top executives, today's organizational changes often unfold unplanned and from the bottom up. It emerges in response to constantly evolving business situations, without predefined objectives or action plans. Continuous transformation demands a positive environment and an embracing and supportive workforce, in other words, a change-ready organization.

Middle management can play a key role in nurturing a change-ready organization. Unlike senior executives, middle managers are closer to the ground, allowing them to assess and respond swiftly to shifting customer needs. They can connect their leaders and employee activities to the organizational purpose, making their work feel more meaningful. Wielding influence over team attitudes and behaviors, middle management can aid their teams in navigating the challenges and opportunities of change. True organizational transformation can occur only with their involvement.

Empirical research underscores the impact of middle managers on employee reactions toward change initiatives. Australia management scholar Mariano Heyden led a research team that surveyed 1,795 employees across 468 organizations undergoing substantive organizational changes. The research revealed that changes initiated by middle managers garnered higher levels of employee support compared to those initiated solely by top managers. Numerous case studies have documented the important role of middle managers in successful organizational change.

Organizations and senior leaders must reimagine the pivotal role of middle management. Rather than eliminating them or confining them to administrative and routine tasks, companies should reassess their responsibilities. By gaining a deeper understanding of their value, organizations can then develop, coach, and inspire middle managers to fully realize their potential as catalysts for organizational transformation.

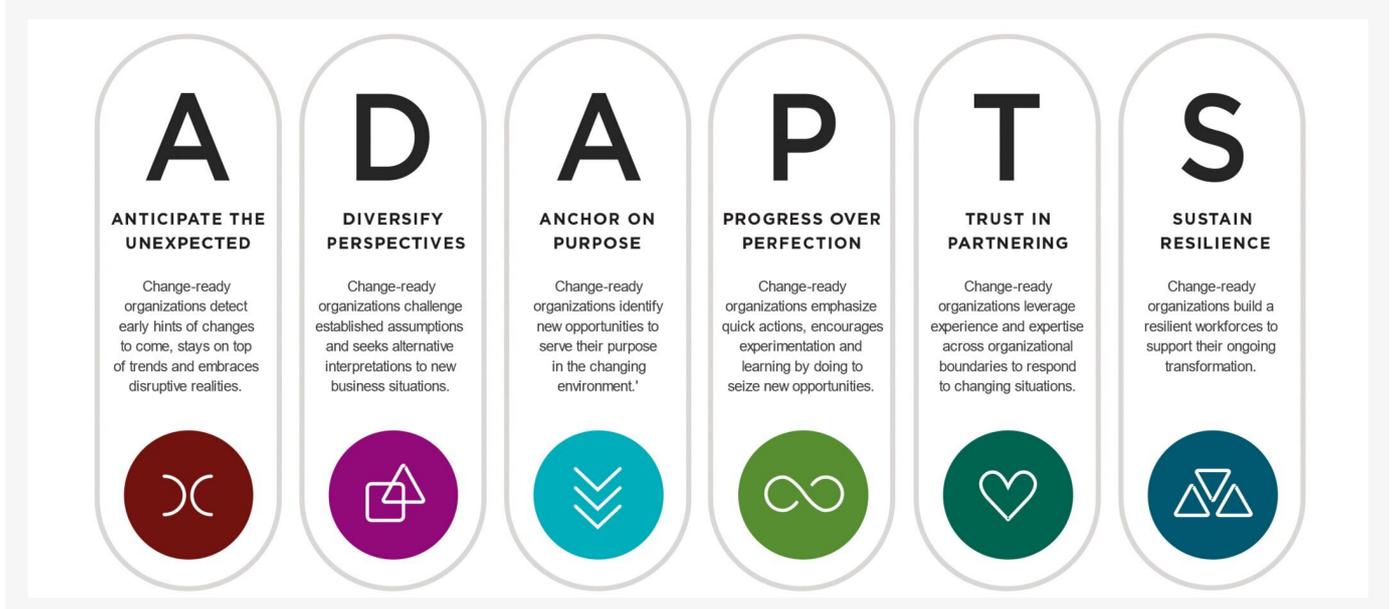
Empower Middle Managers with a Consistent Framework

Middle managers play a pivotal role in shaping employees' interpretation and attitude toward change. To ensure change-readiness becomes ingrained into the culture and fabric of an organization, a framework or methodology should be in place that provides middle managers with a common set of language to communicate and plan for the emergent needs of change.

One important finding from the studies of change management is that successful organizational change rarely results solely from individual leaders; instead, it emerges through a network of leaders who perform a wide spectrum of activities. A common framework aligns different activities and creates a shared understanding among organizational members about how they will act together upon evolving business needs.

The [Change-Ready Leadership \(CRL\)](#) is specifically designed to empower middle management in driving ongoing organizational transformation. Built on Korn Ferry's [Self-Disruptive Leadership](#) model and supplemented with comprehensive research of scientific literature, the CRL identifies six organizing principles collectively referred to as ADAPTS (Figure 1).

Figure 1
The ADAPTS principles.



These principles enable middle managers to work in a coordinated way, fostering an environment where the organization and employees can effectively anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and thrive amidst continuous disruptions.

Ultimately, change-readiness is reflected in the extent to which a set of connected policies and procedures exist in an organization that encourages and supports employee pro-activity, experimentation, learning and growth. Middle managers make sure these policies and procedures are communicated and applied toward achieving their intended objectives. When they are able to do so, an organization possesses a competitive advantage over competitors as more adaptive and agile in this highly volatile business environment.

Emphasize the Shift of Mindsets

Organizational transformation is not just about changing what people do, but also why they do it and how they feel about it. Successful organizational transformation requires a corresponding shift in the mindset. A mindset is a set of beliefs or assumptions that shape how people make sense of the world. It influences how people think, feel, and react in any given situation.

A significant obstacle to organizational transformation lies in routinization and organizational complacency. Organizational complacency manifests as a state of mind where members within an organization become content with the status quo, ceasing to actively pursue improvement or innovation. It represents a form of resistance to change that can impede an organization's growth and overall performance.

This phenomenon occurs when an organization attains a certain level of success and subsequently becomes overly confident in its ability to sustain it. And practices that have contributed to past achievements, end up gradually embedding themselves into the collective mindset of organizational members. These practices evolve into behavioral norms, shaping the way things are done.

But familiarity can lead to complacency, where individuals take for granted how to respond to market shifts, even when the business landscape has changed. While such an attitude may have served well in a stable business environment, in today's dynamic world, an addiction to predictability becomes a recipe for failure.

Mindsets have a remarkable ability to endure within organizations, even after the structures and systems they originally supported have been explicitly dismantled. Despite concerted efforts to introduce observable changes, individuals tend to revert to their habitual patterns of thought and behavior if these mindsets remain unaddressed. To navigate the ever-evolving business landscape successfully, organizations must surface, question, and transform implicitly held beliefs and assumptions. By adopting fresh and diverse perspectives, they can adapt effectively to the continuously shifting business environment.

The CRL model recognizes the impact of mindset on organizational transformation. Each component of ADAPTS is scrutinized for potential hindering or enabling mindsets. These six organizing principles form the bedrock of adaptive organizations, with each principle representing a mindset in action. The CRL model provides a framework and a common set of languages for organizations and leaders to engage in meaningful discussions and collaboratively address their collective mindsets, thereby driving successful organizational transformation.

Conclusion

The Change-Ready Leader framework represents an important advancement in leadership development, addressing the critical need for adaptability and resilience in the face of ongoing organizational disruptions. Built upon the foundation of self-disruptive leadership model and enriched by thorough desk research, this new approach to leadership highlights the indispensable roles of mindset shifts, middle management, and a unified framework in fostering environments that thrive on change.

As businesses continue to face unpredictable conditions, the CRL emerges as a comprehensive guide for navigating organizational transformation. ADAPTS provides a roadmap for middle managers to anticipate and adeptly manage the challenges posed by disruption, turning threats into opportunities for growth and success.

In the ever-evolving game of organizational agility, middle managers are our midfielders. Their absence would leave a void, like a soccer team without a strong midfield. As we navigate challenges ahead, let us recognize and empower these vital many—the midfielders of our corporate world.

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About Korn Ferry

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