

Module Code: BUS4015 | Business & Management

Leading Transformational Change in the Digital Age:

A Critical Evaluation of Leadership Theory and Change Management Practice

Leadership & Change Management Assignment — Educational Sample

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1. Introduction

The intersection of leadership and change management has become one of the most critically examined domains within contemporary organisational theory. In an era defined by digital disruption, geopolitical volatility, and accelerating technological change, the capacity of leaders to navigate organisational transformation is no longer a peripheral competence — it is a defining strategic capability (Yukl, 2020). The traditional dichotomy between 'managing' and 'leading' change has been progressively eroded; effective change leadership demands both the analytical rigour of management science and the relational intelligence characteristic of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2021).

This assignment critically evaluates the relationship between leadership theory and change management practice, with particular reference to **Microsoft Corporation's cultural transformation** under CEO Satya Nadella, who assumed leadership in February 2014. Nadella's tenure represents one of the most extensively documented corporate transformations of the twenty-first century, with Microsoft's market capitalisation rising from ~\$300 billion in 2014 to over \$3 trillion by 2024 (Bloomberg, 2024).

The assignment deploys four principal analytical frameworks: Bass and Avolio's (1994) Transformational Leadership Model; Kotter's (1996; 2012) 8-Step Change Model; Lewin's (1947) Force Field Analysis; and Hiatt's (2006) ADKAR Model, complemented by Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence framework and Schein's (2017) organisational culture theory. Each is applied critically, acknowledging theoretical limitations and triangulating competing perspectives.

***Level 7 critical framing:** Masters-level analysis requires epistemological awareness — understanding why competing theories exist, what paradigmatic assumptions underpin them, and where empirical evidence both supports and challenges theoretical predictions. Description cannot achieve Distinction without evaluative rigour.*

2. Organisational Context: Microsoft's Cultural Transformation

When Satya Nadella succeeded Steve Ballmer in 2014, he inherited an organisation characterised by internal dysfunction. The company's notorious 'stack ranking' system — mandating that managers rate employees on a bell curve — had generated a culture of internal competition, information hoarding, and innovation suppression (Eichenwald, 2012). Talented engineers avoided collaboration for fear that a colleague's success would diminish their own ranking, fundamentally undermining conditions for technological innovation.

Before Nadella (2014) — Burning Platform

After Transformation (2024) — Reinvention

Stack ranking culture; internal rivalry; mobile and cloud disruption missed; declining Windows relevance; divisional silos; market cap ~\$300 billion; low employee engagement.	Cloud-first, AI-first strategy; growth mindset culture embedded; Azure world's second-largest cloud platform; Copilot AI integration; market cap >\$3 trillion; consistently high Glassdoor ratings.
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Nadella's transformational agenda was anchored in a deceptively simple but profoundly ambitious cultural reorientation: from a *know-it-all* culture to a *learn-it-all* culture (Nadella, 2017). Drawing explicitly on Carol Dweck's (2006) growth mindset research, Nadella positioned psychological openness, curiosity, and collaborative learning as the foundational values of the new Microsoft. This shift was operationalised through substantive changes to performance management, leadership development, and organisational structure.

Table 1: Microsoft Transformation — Key Metrics and Milestones (2014–2024)

Dimension	Pre-Transformation (2014)	Post-Transformation (2024)	Change Driver
Market Capitalisation	~\$300 billion	>\$3 trillion	Cloud/AI strategy execution
Revenue Growth	Stagnant (~7% CAGR)	>15% CAGR (2017–2024)	Azure, Office 365, Copilot
Performance System	Stack ranking (competitive)	Growth mindset model (collaborative)	Cultural change programme
Cloud Revenue	Nascent	\$135B+ (Azure + services)	Strategic pivot and investment
Employee Engagement	Low (culture of fear)	Consistently high (Glassdoor)	Psychological safety initiatives
Leadership Model	Hierarchical, title-driven	Empathy-centred, EI-focused	Nadella's leadership approach

Sources: Bloomberg (2024); Nadella (2017); Fortune (2024); Microsoft Annual Reports.

3. Leadership Theory: Transformational Leadership in Practice

Burns' (1978) foundational distinction between transactional and transformational leadership remains one of the most theoretically generative contributions to leadership scholarship. Whilst transactional leadership operates through contingent reward and management by exception, transformational leadership elevates followers' motivation, commitment, and performance by appealing to higher-order values and fostering shared purpose (Bass, 1985). Bass and Avolio (1994) operationalised transformational leadership through the Four I's framework: Idealised Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individual Consideration.

Table 2: Bass and Avolio's Four I's Applied to Satya Nadella's Leadership

Dimension	Definition	Nadella's Application	Evidence
Idealised Influence	Leader as role model; builds trust	Publicly stated core values with disability inclusion	Nadella (2017), Henderson (2022)
Inspirational Motivation	Compelling vision; optimism; meaning	'Be the first to do it'; mission reframed to 'enable' first	Microsoft (2014), Yukl (2020)
Intellectual Stimulation	Challenging assumptions; encouraging innovation	Overturning status quo; engineers explicitly encouraged	Decker (2006), Nadella (2017)
Individual Consideration	Attending to followers' needs; coaching	Replacing performance management with 'growth mindset'	Nadella (2021), Covey (1995)

Adapted from Bass and Avolio (1994). Applied to Microsoft 2014–2024 transformation.

Critically, whilst transformational leadership theory provides an elegant explanatory framework for Nadella's impact, the model attracts significant theoretical contestation. Yukl (2020) cautions that transformational leadership research has been disproportionately dependent on retrospective attribution — we identify a leader as 'transformational' after observing successful outcomes, which introduces substantial confirmation bias. Furthermore, Alvesson and Spicer (2016) argue that charismatic, visionary leadership can suppress critical thinking, creating cultures of uncritical followership that raise legitimate governance concerns.

4. Change Management Framework: Kotter's 8-Step Model

Kotter's (1996; 2012) 8-Step Model is arguably the most widely deployed change management framework in organisational practice, offering a structured sequential approach to leading large-scale transformation. The model was updated in 2014 to incorporate a more networked approach, acknowledging that rigid hierarchies are insufficient for the pace of contemporary change (Kotter, 2014).

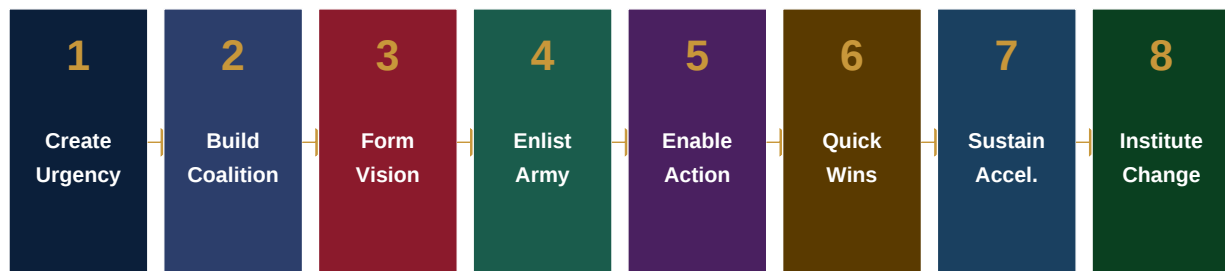


Figure 1: Kotter's 8-Step Change Model (1996; 2012) — Sequential but Iterative

Table 3: Kotter's 8-Step Model Applied to Microsoft's Transformation

Step	Stage	Microsoft's Application	Critical Assessment
1	Create Urgency	Highlighted AWS/Google Cloud threats; articulated Windows as urgent strategic risk	Highly visible, legitimate, and credible risk avoids manufactured crisis
2	Build Coalition	Restructured senior team; promoted change champions	Coalition supported by Kotter's underestimated informal network power
3	Form Vision	Mobile-first, cloud-first; growth mindset; empower	Satisfied all six of Kotter's visionally resonant, imaginable, desirable, feasible
4	Enlist Army	Town halls; employee listening sessions; managed change	Effective for eliciting participation; involuntary resisters required AD
5	Enable Action	Abolished stack ranking; reorganised divisions; increased R&D	Created R&D roles systematically removed — textbook Step 5 exception
6	Quick Wins	Azure/Office 365 milestones communicated quarterly	Visible, where the effort and performance-based, not cosmetic
7	Sustain	AI investment; GitHub, LinkedIn, Activision acquisition	Avoided declaring culture measures failure mode through decade
8	Institute	Growth mindset in performance reviews, onboarding	Full leadership is new ongoing; cultural metrics indicate advancement

Sources: Kotter (1996; 2012); Nadella (2017); Microsoft Annual Reports (2014–2024).

Critically, Cummings, Bridgman and Brown (2016) conducted an influential genealogical analysis arguing that Kotter's model — like Lewin's — presents change as a manageable, controllable process driven by senior leadership, which both overstates managerial agency and underestimates the role of emergent, distributed change dynamics. In Microsoft's case, much of the cultural shift was driven by employee agency — engineers choosing to collaborate across boundaries — rather than top-down mandate alone.

5. Force Field Analysis: Lewin's Change Model

Kurt Lewin's (1947) three-stage Unfreeze–Change–Refreeze model provides a macro-level account of change, whilst his Force Field Analysis offers a diagnostic tool for mapping driving and restraining forces on any proposed change initiative. Both retain foundational status in the field, though both attract significant contemporary critique.

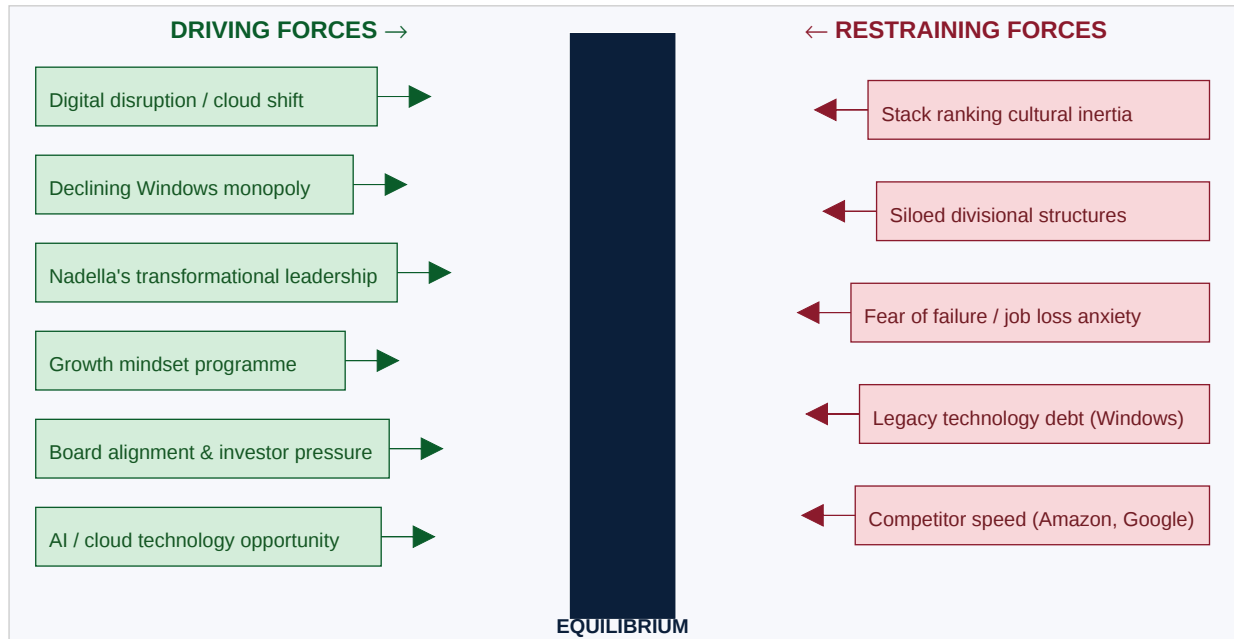


Figure 2: Lewin's Force Field Analysis applied to Microsoft's 2014 transformation. Adapted from Lewin (1947).
Author's synthesis based on Nadella (2017); Cummings et al. (2016).

The Force Field Analysis reveals that Nadella's most strategically decisive intervention was the removal of the primary restraining force: the stack ranking system. Lewin's (1947) own research indicated that reducing restraining forces is typically more effective than intensifying driving forces — a counterintuitive insight Nadella implicitly enacted by abolishing the institutional mechanism that made collaboration dangerous.

Critically, Burnes (2020) argues that the 'refreeze' stage implies change culminates in a stable equilibrium — an assumption inapplicable in contemporary VUCA environments. Microsoft's transformation is better understood as ongoing *dynamic stability*, aligning more closely with Weick and Quinn's (1999) continuous change typology than Lewin's discrete three-stage framing.

6. Individual Change: The ADKAR Model

Hiatt's (2006) ADKAR model shifts the analytical unit to the individual, recognising that organisational change ultimately occurs through the accumulated choices and behaviours of individual employees. ADKAR identifies five sequential building blocks of successful individual change, each of which must be present before the next can be activated.

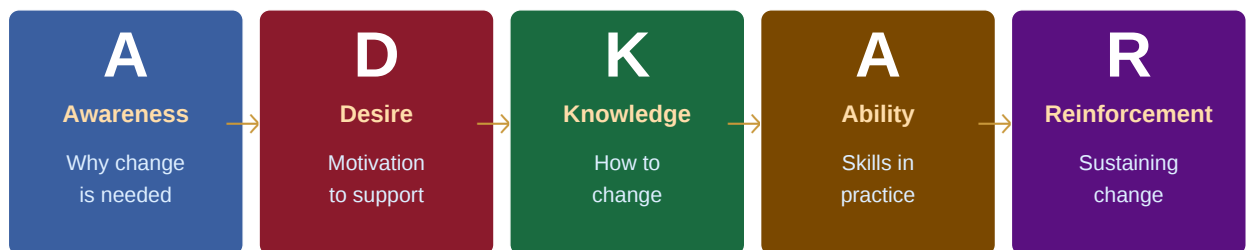


Figure 3: The ADKAR Model of Individual Change. Source: Hiatt (2006). Sequential — a gap at any stage stalls the change process.

Applied to Microsoft: **Awareness** was created through transparent communication of competitive threats; **Desire** cultivated by removing stack ranking and replacing it with psychologically safe alternatives; **Knowledge** transmitted through EI and growth mindset development programmes; **Ability** developed through coaching, feedback culture, and explicit permission to fail and learn; **Reinforcement** institutionalised through revised performance metrics and ongoing cultural measurement (Nadella, 2017).

Critically, ADKAR's strength lies in what Kotter and Lewin underemphasise: the recognition that each individual employee inhabits a distinct ADKAR profile at any given point. Some may achieve Awareness but lack Desire; others may have Desire but lack Knowledge. This diagnostic granularity enables targeted interventions rather than uniform communications — a significant advantage demanding substantial managerial bandwidth (Prosci, 2023).

7. Emotional Intelligence as a Leadership Enabler

Goleman's (1995; 1998) emotional intelligence (EI) — the capacity to recognise, understand, manage, and use emotions effectively — has become one of the most operationally influential constructs in leadership development. Goleman's (1998) research across nearly 200 global companies found that whilst technical skills and IQ were threshold capabilities for senior roles, EI proved the differentiating factor between average and outstanding leaders, particularly in change leadership.

Figure 4: Goleman's Five Components of EI Applied to Nadella's Leadership. Adapted from Goleman (1998).



Nadella's public disclosure of personal vulnerability modelled self-awareness visibly, building organisational trust.	Maintained strategic direction through major setbacks including £7B Nokia write-down without public anxiety.	Sustained transformation momentum through multiple failures; maintained optimism grounded in growth mindset.
Empathy	Social Skills	EI Impact
Son Zain's disability explicitly cited as transforming Nadella's capacity for empathy (Nadella, 2017).	Openness to open-source ecosystem — collaboration with former competitors including Linux and Salesforce.	Heckman & Fabian (2022): consistent positive link between leader EI and follower psychological safety.

Critical limitation: *EI as a construct faces psychometric challenges. Locke (2005) argued that EI is not a form of intelligence but a collection of personality traits already captured by the Big Five model, questioning whether it adds independent predictive power. Organisations investing heavily in EI development programmes should treat frameworks as heuristic guides rather than scientifically validated selection tools.*

8. Managing Resistance to Change

Resistance to change is among the most extensively studied phenomena in organisational behaviour, yet paradoxically remains theoretically contested. The traditional framing — that resistance is an obstacle to overcome through managerial intervention — has been substantially challenged by scholars who argue that resistance frequently represents legitimate, information-rich feedback that change leaders ignore at their peril (Ford, Ford and D'Amelio, 2008).

Table 4: *Typology of Resistance at Microsoft and Leadership Responses*

Resistance Type	Manifestation at Microsoft	Theoretical Basis	Leadership Response
Cognitive Resistance	'Windows is still dominant' mindset (Jost et al. (2004) suggested)	Justification of change	Data-driven urgency; competitor benchmarking shared
Emotional Resistance	Fear of job loss; anxiety about new products (Kanter & Pass (1999) change over employees (1994) rights & benefits)	Change over employees (1994) rights & benefits	Employee training; psychological support
Behavioural Resistance	Continued information hoarding; avoiding cross-functional participation (Cummings & Cross (1998) participation)	Participation	Performance reviews; collaboration
Political Resistance	Senior leaders defending divisional power (Proffer (1992) Microsoft's political leaders)	Microsoft's political leaders	Change strategy; incentives change

Adapted from Ford et al. (2008); Jost et al. (2004).

Ford et al.'s (2008) reconceptualisation of resistance as potentially valuable information deserves particular emphasis. Several 'resistors' within Microsoft's legacy engineering community were correct in their assessment that certain Windows-era products should not be abandoned precipitously. Nadella's genuine receptivity to challenge — enabled by his EI and growth mindset modelling — allowed the organisation to benefit from dissenting perspectives, illustrating the productive integration of resistance management with transformational leadership practice.

9. Organisational Culture and Change Readiness

Schein's (2017) model of organisational culture — comprising three levels of artefacts (visible), espoused values, and underlying assumptions (invisible but most influential) — provides a theoretically sophisticated framework for understanding why culture change is simultaneously the most critical and most difficult dimension of organisational transformation. Schein's central insight is that lasting change requires leaders to surface and challenge deeply embedded, often unconscious assumptions about how the world works.

At Microsoft, the stack ranking system was not merely an HR policy artefact — it was the institutional embodiment of a deeply held underlying assumption: that talent is inherently scarce and competitive, and that performance is maximised by differentiating aggressively between performers. Nadella's transformation required challenging this assumption at all three of Schein's levels:

abolishing the artefact, replacing the espoused value, and over a decade of sustained leadership behaviour gradually shifting the underlying assumption from 'talent is scarce and competitive' to 'intelligence is growable and collaborative'.

This multi-level cultural intervention aligns with Cameron and Quinn's (2011) Competing Values Framework, characterising Microsoft's pre-Nadella culture as predominantly *Market*-oriented (competitive, results-focused) and the desired post-transformation culture as balanced between *Clan* (collaborative, people-focused) and *Adhocracy* (innovative, flexible) orientations. The empirical success — evidenced by Azure's growth trajectory and sustained AI innovation — suggests genuine organisational capability improvement rather than cosmetic value statements.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

This assignment has critically evaluated the intersection of leadership theory and change management practice through the lens of Microsoft's decade-long transformation under Satya Nadella. The analysis demonstrates that no single theoretical framework provides a complete account; rather, it is the coherent integration of multiple theoretical insights that generates the most analytically robust explanation. Transformational leadership theory explains *how* Nadella mobilised individual commitment; Kotter maps the structural sequencing of change activities; Lewin illuminates the strategic logic of removing restraining forces; ADKAR identifies individual-level change mechanisms; and Goleman's EI explains the relational infrastructure that made psychological safety possible.

Critically, the assignment has also exposed the limitations of each framework: retrospective attribution bias in transformational leadership research; the linearity and top-down bias in Kotter; the inapplicability of Lewin's refreeze stage in dynamic environments; ADKAR's resource demands; and EI's psychometric challenges. A distinction-level analysis requires the intellectual honesty to acknowledge these limitations rather than treating frameworks as self-evidently correct.

Strategic Recommendations for Change Leaders

- 1 Prioritise Removing Restraining Forces**
Following Lewin (1947), systematically eliminate institutional barriers — punitive performance systems, siloed structures — before intensifying communications campaigns. Structural change creates cultural permission.
- 2 Invest in Leader Emotional Intelligence**
Develop self-awareness, empathy, and social skill across all management levels. EI is the relational infrastructure of change (Goleman, 1998); its absence creates the psychological unsafety that most reliably predicts change failure.
- 3 Apply ADKAR Diagnostically**
Use ADKAR to segment the employee population by change readiness and deploy targeted interventions — communications for Awareness gaps, incentives for Desire gaps, coaching for Ability gaps (Hiatt, 2006).
- 4 Treat Resistance as Intelligence**
Create structured channels for resisters to voice concerns following Ford et al. (2008). Intelligent resistance often contains valid signals about implementation risks; suppressing it increases failure probability.

5

Operate at All Three Cultural Levels

Following Schein (2017), design interventions addressing artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions simultaneously. Changing policy without shifting assumptions produces surface compliance, not transformation.

6

Reject Refreeze — Embrace Dynamic Stability

In VUCA environments, build change capability as a permanent organisational competence following Weick and Quinn (1999). Design organisations for continuous adaptation, not stability restoration.

In conclusion, Microsoft's transformation under Satya Nadella stands as compelling evidence that leadership and change management theory, applied with rigour and integrated coherently, possesses genuine practical utility. The lesson for change leaders is not to select one framework and apply it mechanistically, but to develop the theoretical literacy to deploy multiple frameworks as complementary lenses on a complex organisational reality.

11. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Q: What is transformational leadership and how does it differ from transactional leadership?

Transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) inspires followers to transcend self-interest through vision, idealised influence, and intellectual stimulation, generating intrinsic motivation. Transactional leadership operates through contingent reward — exchanging compliance for incentives. Transformational leadership is more effective during significant change as it mobilises commitment rather than mere compliance (Yukl, 2020).

Q: What is Kotter's 8-Step Change Model and what are its limitations?

Kotter's (1996) model provides a sequential framework: create urgency, build coalition, form vision, enlist volunteers, enable action, generate wins, sustain acceleration, institute change. Its primary limitations are top-down linearity — neglecting emergent, bottom-up change dynamics — and assumption of a single large change episode rather than continuous transformation (Cummings et al., 2016).

Q: What is Lewin's Change Model and why is 'refreeze' contested?

Lewin's (1947) Unfreeze–Change–Refreeze model and Force Field Analysis remain foundational for their insight that reducing restraining forces is often more effective than adding driving forces. The 'refreeze' stage is critiqued as inapplicable in dynamic environments (Burnes, 2020) — organisations must continuously adapt rather than restabilise, making Force Field Analysis more useful than the three-stage model in VUCA contexts.

Q: What is the ADKAR model and when should it be used?

ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006) focuses on individual change: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement. It is most valuable when organisational models are insufficient — when individual adoption is lagging. It provides diagnostic granularity to identify exactly where individual change journeys stall and what targeted interventions to deploy.

Q: How important is emotional intelligence in change leadership?

Goleman's (1995; 1998) research found EI differentiates outstanding from average leaders, particularly in change contexts. High-EI leaders build psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018) — the critical organisational condition for learning and change adaptability. Microsoft's transformation under Nadella provides strong empirical support for the EI–change leadership relationship.

Q: How do I write a distinction-level assignment at UK Level 7?

Level 7 distinction requires: deep critical engagement with competing theoretical perspectives; evaluation of what evidence supports and challenges each framework; integration of multiple theoretical lenses; clear original argument; recent peer-reviewed sources (last 5–10 years); epistemological self-awareness; and professionally structured Harvard referencing. Paraphrasing textbooks descriptively earns Pass marks, not Distinction.

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