Organizational Change and Public Service Performance: A Theoretical Analysis and Mixed-Methods Research Framework Using Lewin's Three-Stage Change Model

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ABSTRACT

Public institutions are expected to improve service quality, accountability, responsiveness and efficiency while adapting to digital technologies, fiscal pressure, policy volatility and rising citizen expectations. Yet reform frequently produces uneven results because new structures and technologies are introduced without equal attention to employee readiness, leadership behaviour, institutional constraints and the reinforcement of new routines. This paper develops a broader explanation of the relationship between organizational change and public service performance using Lewin's Three-Stage Change Model as its principal analytical lens. It combined an integrative review of change-management and public-administration scholarship with a proposed sequential explanatory mixed-methods design for empirical testing in Nigerian public organizations. The analysis compared Lewin's model with Kotter's Eight-Step Process, the ADKAR model, emergent change and institutional perspectives. It argued that Lewin remains useful when unfreezing is interpreted as diagnosis and readiness-building, movement as iterative experimentation and capability development, and refreezing as provisional institutionalization rather than permanent stability. The framework proposed that change readiness, employee participation and leadership support improve reform implementation; organizational learning and employee commitment transmit these effects to performance; and resistance, bureaucratic rigidity, political interference and resource adequacy shape their strength. Public service performance is treated as multidimensional, encompassing efficiency, effectiveness, equity, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, innovation and citizen satisfaction. The paper contributes by joining behavioural, managerial and institutional explanations in one stage-based framework and by specifying a mixed-methods strategy through which the proposed relationships can be tested. It recommends readiness assessment, genuine employee voice, adaptive leadership, protected learning spaces, transparent communication, phased implementation and alignment of rules, budgets, incentives and performance measures with new practices. The central argument is that public-sector reform becomes sustainable when people can understand and influence it, leaders consistently support it, and institutions embed it without losing the capacity to adapt.

Keywords: organizational change; public service performance; Lewin; change readiness; employee participation; leadership; resistance; organizational learning; mixed methods; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Public organizations rarely operate in conditions of calm. They must respond to demographic change, constrained budgets, technological disruption, policy turnover, emergencies and public demands for services that are faster, fairer and easier to access. Unlike private firms, however, public institutions are not judged principally by profit. Their legitimacy depends on how well they create public value while observing legal mandates, procedural fairness, accountability and political oversight (Moore, 1995; OECD, 2023; United Nations, 2024). Organizational change in this setting is therefore both an administrative undertaking and a public-value question.

The difficulty is not usually a shortage of reform ideas. Governments introduce new structures, digital platforms, performance systems, financial controls and service standards, but formal adoption does not guarantee that daily behaviour will change. Public-sector reform often unfolds across multiple layers of authority, involves actors with competing interests and is constrained by rules designed to protect continuity and due process. These safeguards are important, yet they can also slow experimentation and make responsibility for implementation difficult to locate (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006; Hughes et al., 2017).

A recurring weakness is the treatment of change as a technical project rather than a social process. A new platform may be installed, a circular may be issued and staff may attend training, but the reform can still fail if employees do not understand its purpose, managers send inconsistent signals, workloads are not adjusted or the old incentives remain intact. Readiness, participation, trust, learning and reinforcement are therefore not peripheral concerns. They are mechanisms through which formal reforms become working practices (Armenakis et al., 1993; Weiner, 2009; Rafferty et al., 2013).

Lewin's Three-Stage Change Model offers a concise way to organize these mechanisms. Unfreezing concerns the loosening of existing assumptions and the creation of readiness; changing concerns movement toward new patterns through learning and action; and refreezing concerns the stabilization of those patterns in routines and systems. The model has been criticized for appearing linear and for implying that organizations eventually become static. More sympathetic interpretations locate the three stages within Lewin's wider field theory and describe refreezing as the consolidation of a new, but still revisable, equilibrium (Burnes, 2004; Cummings et al., 2016; Burnes & Bargal, 2017).

This paper broadens the original manuscript in four ways. First, it compares Lewin with Kotter, ADKAR, emergent change and institutional theory rather than presenting one model in isolation. Second, it integrates additional mechanisms, including organizational learning, employee commitment, digital capability, resource adequacy and bureaucratic flexibility. Third, it treats performance as a multidimensional public-sector outcome. Fourth, it sets out a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design that can test the framework quantitatively and explain it qualitatively in Nigerian public institutions. The paper does not report invented field results. Its contribution is theoretical integration and an empirically implementable research design.

Problem Statement

Public-sector reforms often show a gap between formal compliance and substantive change. Policies may be approved while work routines remain largely unchanged; technology may be available while adoption remains shallow; and short-term gains may disappear after leadership turnover or the withdrawal of project support. Existing studies identify leadership, communication, readiness, participation and resistance as important, but these factors are often examined separately. This fragmentation makes it difficult to explain how they interact across preparation, implementation and institutionalization, or why the same reform succeeds in one agency and stalls in another. The problem addressed here is the absence of an integrated, stage-based and context-sensitive explanation linking organizational change to sustainable public service performance, especially in bureaucratic and resource-constrained settings.

Aim, Objectives and Research Questions

The aim is to develop and propose an empirical test of an integrated framework explaining how organizational change affects public service performance through Lewin's Three-Stage Change Model.

- examine how change readiness, employee participation, leadership support and resistance management operate across Lewin's three stages;
- compare Lewin with complementary change and institutional perspectives;
- explain the mediating roles of employee commitment and organizational learning;

- assess how bureaucratic rigidity, political interference, digital capability and resource adequacy condition change outcomes;
- propose a mixed-methods design for testing the framework in Nigerian public organizations; and
- derive practical recommendations for sustainable, citizen-centred reform.

1. How do readiness, participation and leadership support influence the implementation of public-sector change?
2. How do employee commitment and organizational learning connect change processes to public service performance?
3. How does resistance alter the relationship between change implementation and performance?
4. Under what institutional and resource conditions are reforms sustained?
5. How does Lewin compare with Kotter, ADKAR, emergent change and institutional explanations in public-sector settings?

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Organizational Change in Public Institutions

Organizational change is an alteration in structures, strategies, technologies, cultures, capabilities or routines that changes how work is coordinated and delivered. Planned change follows an explicit programme, whereas emergent change develops through local adaptation and continuing adjustment (Todnem By, 2005). Public institutions experience both. Legislation, budgets and executive directives commonly initiate planned reform, but implementation is inevitably reshaped by professional judgement, frontline discretion, political negotiation and feedback from service users.

Change also varies in depth. Developmental change improves an existing process; transitional change replaces one arrangement with another; and transformational change alters identity, values and relationships. Digital government illustrates why these categories overlap. Moving a paper form online may be developmental, integrating records across agencies may be transitional, and redesigning services around citizen journeys may be transformational. Digital transformation is therefore organizational rather than merely technological because it affects skills, authority, data practices and the relationship between state and citizen (Mergel et al., 2019; Welby & Tan, 2022).

Public Service Performance

Public service performance is the extent to which an institution fulfils its mandate and creates public value using resources responsibly. A credible assessment should distinguish outputs from outcomes and avoid reducing performance to efficiency alone. Faster processing can be desirable, but not if it weakens equity, legality or access. This paper therefore treats performance as a multidimensional construct comprising efficiency, effectiveness, service quality, responsiveness, equity, transparency, accountability, innovation, employee productivity, institutional resilience and citizen satisfaction (Moore, 1995; Boyne, 2002; OECD, 2023).

Core Explanatory Constructs

Change readiness: a shared resolve to implement change and a shared belief in collective capability. It includes perceived need, appropriateness, management support, personal value and efficacy (Armenakis et al., 1993; Weiner, 2009).

Employee participation: meaningful influence over decisions, design and implementation. Participation improves the informational quality of reform and can strengthen ownership, but symbolic consultation may intensify cynicism (Lines, 2004).

Leadership support: visible sponsorship, coherent communication, resource provision, barrier removal, ethical example and persistence beyond the announcement stage. In public organizations, leadership must also build coalitions across political and administrative boundaries (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006).

Resistance to change: a cognitive, emotional or behavioural response to perceived loss, uncertainty, unfairness or impractical design. Resistance may obstruct implementation, but it can also reveal risk, weak communication and unintended consequences (Ford et al., 2008; Oreg et al., 2011).

Organizational learning: the creation, sharing and retention of knowledge through experimentation, reflection and adjustment. Learning explains how pilot experience becomes institutional capability (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

Employee commitment to change: the willingness to support a change because it is valued, obligatory or costly to resist. Affective commitment is especially important because compliance alone rarely sustains discretionary effort (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002).

Lewin's Three-Stage Change Model

Lewin's Three-Stage Change Model is one of the earliest and most influential theories of organizational change. Developed by the German-American social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1947, the model explains how organizations and individuals move from an existing way of working to a desired future state. The model is based on the idea that successful change requires preparation, implementation, and reinforcement to ensure that new practices become part of the organization's normal operations. Lewin proposed that organizational change occurs through three interconnected stages:

Unfreezing

Unfreezing involves diagnosing the present field of forces, questioning taken-for-granted routines and developing readiness for a credible alternative. In public institutions, this includes stakeholder mapping, baseline performance assessment, consultation, a clear account of the public problem, attention to procedural fairness and an honest discussion of likely costs. The aim is not to manufacture anxiety, but to create informed dissatisfaction with an inadequate status quo while establishing confidence that change is feasible.

Changing or Movement

Movement is the practical transition from current to desired patterns. It requires experimentation, training, role clarification, coaching, resource adjustment and feedback. Because implementation reveals problems that plans cannot anticipate, movement should be iterative. Pilot projects, cross-functional teams and protected learning spaces can help public organizations test new arrangements without compromising service continuity.

Refreezing as Adaptive Institutionalization

Refreezing means embedding effective practices in formal rules, budgets, operating procedures, data systems, career development, performance measures and informal norms. It should not be read as permanent immobility. In volatile settings, the appropriate objective is adaptive institutionalization: sufficient stability to make good practice dependable, combined with review mechanisms that permit revision when evidence or context changes.

Force-Field Analysis

Lewin's field theory adds explanatory depth to the three stages. Behaviour is shaped by driving and restraining

forces in the organizational environment. Reform can therefore proceed not only by increasing pressure for change but also by reducing barriers such as fear, skill deficits, conflicting incentives, inadequate infrastructure and ambiguous authority. This is particularly useful in government, where coercive pressure may secure formal compliance without changing underlying routines.

Lewin's Three-Stage Change Model is widely used in management, public administration, and organizational development because it emphasizes the human side of change. It recognizes that employees must be prepared psychologically before change can succeed and that new behaviours must be reinforced if improvements are to be sustained over time. Although some contemporary scholars argue that the model is too linear for today's environment of continuous digital transformation, it continues to provide a valuable foundation for understanding organizational change and performance improvement

Comparative Theoretical Analysis

No single model captures every level of change. Lewin offers a system-level process logic; Kotter emphasizes leadership mobilization; ADKAR diagnoses individual adoption; emergent change explains continuing adjustment; and institutional theory explains how rules, norms and legitimacy shape organizational responses. Their value lies in combination rather than competition.

Kotter's Eight-Step Change Model is a widely used framework for managing organizational transformation, developed by John P. Kotter, a professor at Harvard Business School. The model was introduced in his influential book *Leading Change* (1996) and was designed to help organizations implement and sustain change more effectively. Kotter developed the model after studying numerous organizational change efforts and identifying common reasons why change initiatives fail.

The model proposes that successful change occurs through eight sequential steps:

5. Create a sense of urgency.
6. Build a guiding coalition.
7. Develop a strategic vision and initiatives.
8. Communicate the vision.
9. Empower employees by removing barriers.
10. Generate short-term wins.
11. Sustain momentum and accelerate change.
12. Institutionalize the change within organizational culture.

Kotter's Eight-Step Change Model is one of the most influential contemporary approaches to organizational change management. Developed by John Kotter, the model argues that successful organizational transformation requires a systematic process involving the creation of urgency, the formation of a guiding coalition, the development and communication of a clear vision, employee empowerment, the achievement of short-term wins, the consolidation of gains, and the institutionalization of change within organizational culture (Kotter, 1996). The model extends earlier change frameworks by providing practical guidance on leadership actions and employee engagement throughout the change process. According to Kotter, organizational change frequently fails because leaders underestimate the importance of communication, employee commitment, and cultural reinforcement. Consequently, the model emphasizes that sustainable transformation depends not only on strategic planning but also on mobilizing organizational members around a shared vision and maintaining momentum throughout implementation (Kotter, 1996; Appelbaum et al., 2012).

While Lewin's Three-Stage Change Model provides a broad explanation of how change occurs, Kotter's Eight-Step Change Model offers more detailed guidance for managing the implementation process. Kotter emphasizes leadership commitment, coalition building, communication, employee empowerment, and the achievement of short-term successes as mechanisms for sustaining organizational transformation. The model is particularly useful for public-sector reforms because it highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement and continuous communication during change implementation. However, scholars have argued that, like Lewin's model, Kotter's framework largely assumes a planned and sequential approach to change, which may not fully reflect the complexity of continuous and overlapping reforms occurring within contemporary public organizations (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Burnes, 2017).

The ADKAR Model is a change-management framework developed by Jeff Hiatt that focuses on individual change as the foundation of organizational transformation. The model proposes that successful change occurs when individuals progress through five sequential stages: Awareness of the need for change, Desire to participate and support the change, Knowledge of how to change, Ability to implement new skills and behaviours, and Reinforcement to sustain the change over time (Hiatt, 2006). The model emphasizes that organizational change is achieved through individual adoption of new practices and behaviours rather than through structural modifications alone. It is therefore widely used for identifying barriers to change and developing interventions that support employee adaptation and commitment (Hiatt, 2006)

A major strength of the ADKAR Model is its focus on the human dimension of organizational change. By concentrating on individual employees, the model provides a practical framework for diagnosing resistance and identifying specific factors that hinder successful adoption of change initiatives. However, critics argue that the model places greater emphasis on individual behaviour than on broader organizational, institutional, and political influences that may affect change outcomes, particularly within public-sector organizations. Consequently, ADKAR is often viewed as complementary to broader organizational change frameworks such as Lewin's Three-Stage Change Model and Kotter's Eight-Step Change Model (Hiatt, 2006).

Emergent Change Theory developed as a response to the limitations of traditional planned change approaches such as Lewin's Three-Stage Change Model. Unlike planned change, which assumes that change can be carefully designed and implemented through predetermined stages, emergent change views organizational change as a continuous, evolving, and often unpredictable process that develops in response to changing environmental conditions and organizational realities (Todnem By, 2005; Burnes, 2004).

Emergent change assumes that organizations operate in dynamic environments characterized by technological innovation, globalization, policy shifts, and changing stakeholder expectations. Because these conditions continually evolve, organizations must adapt through ongoing learning, experimentation, and adjustment rather than relying solely on fixed plans. From this perspective, change is not viewed as a discrete event with a clear beginning and end but as a continuous process of adaptation and renewal (Todnem By, 2005).

Emergent Change Theory views organizational change as a continuous, open-ended, and adaptive process through which organizations respond to evolving internal and external conditions. Unlike planned change approaches that assume change can be implemented through predefined stages, emergent change emphasizes flexibility, learning, experimentation, and continuous adaptation (Todnem By, 2005). The theory argues that organizations operate in environments characterized by uncertainty, technological advancement, globalization, regulatory developments, and shifting stakeholder expectations. Consequently, successful organizations must continuously align their structures, strategies, cultures, and processes with changing environmental demands rather than relying exclusively on predetermined change programmes (Burnes, 2004; Todnem By, 2005).

Advocates of emergent change criticize traditional planned change models such as Lewin's framework for portraying organizational transformation as a linear and sequential process. They argue that contemporary organizations rarely experience change as a single event that progresses through clearly defined stages. Instead, organizations frequently encounter multiple overlapping changes that require continuous adjustment and organizational learning (Todnem By, 2005). Under the emergent perspective, managers do not merely implement predetermined change plans but facilitate adaptation, encourage innovation, and develop

organizational capabilities that enable continuous learning and responsiveness to environmental change (Burnes, 2004; Todnem By, 2005).

Institutional Theory is one of the most influential theories in organizational studies and public administration. The theory explains how organizations are shaped not only by efficiency and economic considerations but also by social norms, cultural expectations, regulations, rules, professional standards, and stakeholder pressures. According to the theory, organizations often adopt structures, policies, and practices because they are considered legitimate and socially acceptable within their environment (Scott, 2004; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991)

Institutional theorists argue that for organizations to survive and gain legitimacy, they must conform to the expectations of governments, professional bodies, regulatory agencies, and society. Consequently, organizational decisions are often influenced by external institutional pressures rather than solely by considerations of efficiency or performance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2004).

The theory identifies three forms:

Coercive Isomorphism

Occurs when organizations adopt certain practices because of pressure from governments, laws, regulations, or powerful stakeholders.

Example: Nigerian public institutions implementing IPPIS, TSA, or GIFMIS due to federal government directives.

Mimetic Isomorphism

Occurs when organizations imitate successful organizations during periods of uncertainty.

Example: A government agency adopting digital-service platforms because other agencies have successfully implemented them.

Normative Isomorphism

Occurs through professional standards, education, training, and professional networks.

Example: Public-sector managers adopting internationally accepted public-administration practices because they are promoted by professional bodies and development institutions. (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

However, critics argue that Institutional Theory places considerable emphasis on conformity and stability while providing less explanation for innovation, agency, and transformational change. The theory may also underestimate the capacity of organizational leaders and employees to challenge existing institutional arrangements and actively influence the direction of change (Scott, 2004). Nevertheless, it remains highly relevant for understanding public-sector reforms because government organizations operate within extensive legal, political, and regulatory environments that strongly influence organizational behaviour.

Framework	Primary focus	Distinctive strength	Main limitation	Public-sector use
Lewin	System readiness, movement and stabilization	Simple process logic; attention to forces and behaviour	Can be misapplied as rigidly linear	Organizes diagnosis, implementation and institutionalization
Kotter	Leadership-led organizational mobilization	Urgency, coalition, vision and	May privilege top-down sequencing	Useful for large reforms needing political and executive sponsorship

		momentum		
ADKAR	Individual adoption	Diagnoses awareness, desire, knowledge, ability and reinforcement	Less explicit about institutions and power	Useful for training, role transition and user adoption
Emergent change	Continuous local adaptation	Fits uncertainty and evolving technology	Can lack coordination and clear accountability	Useful for iterative digital and service redesign
Institutional theory	Rules, norms, legitimacy and isomorphism	Explains compliance, decoupling and persistence	Less prescriptive about implementation	Useful for understanding political, legal and professional constraints

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Evidence on Change Readiness, Participation and leadership

Empirical research broadly supports the argument that reform outcomes depend on the interaction of employee readiness, participation and leadership rather than on formal adoption alone. Lines (2004) found that participation in strategic change was associated with lower resistance, stronger organizational commitment and improved change-goal achievement. Weiner (2009) explained implementation readiness as a shared commitment to change and a shared belief in collective capability, while Rafferty et al. (2013) demonstrated that readiness operates at individual, work-group and organizational levels. Taken together, these studies indicate that readiness is not merely positive sentiment. It is a combination of perceived appropriateness, capability, management support and willingness to act.

Evidence on leadership reaches a similar conclusion. Fernandez and Rainey (2006) identified the need to establish urgency, develop a plan, build internal support, secure top-management commitment, obtain resources, institutionalize change and pursue comprehensive implementation in public organizations. Hussain et al. (2018) subsequently emphasized leadership and employee involvement in applying Lewin's model. Errida and Lotfi (2021), using a literature review and case study, likewise identified communication, leadership, engagement, readiness and reinforcement among the determinants of successful change. These findings support the inclusion of leadership as an antecedent of readiness and implementation, but they also caution against treating sponsorship as a ceremonial endorsement. Leadership support must be translated into resources, problem-solving, role clarity and consistent conduct.

Evidence on Resistance, Commitment and Organizational Learning

Studies of resistance question the assumption that employees who challenge reform are necessarily opposed to organizational improvement. Ford et al. (2008) argued that change agents can contribute to resistance through broken agreements, weak communication or dismissive treatment of employee concerns. Oreg et al. (2011), in their review of quantitative research on change recipients, showed that reactions are shaped by recipient characteristics, change-process factors, perceived benefits and organizational context. Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) further distinguished affective, continuance and normative commitment to change. This distinction matters because employees may comply because they value a reform, feel obliged to support it or believe that resistance is costly. Affective commitment is more likely to sustain discretionary effort and learning than reluctant compliance.

Organizational learning provides a mechanism through which implementation experience can improve institutional capability. Argyris and Schon (1978) distinguished adjustments made within existing assumptions from deeper learning that revises underlying norms and strategies. In reform settings, the distinction separates

technical correction from reconsideration of workflow, authority, incentives and service design. Learning is therefore expected to mediate the relationship between implementation and performance: reform activity produces sustainable value only when experience is captured, interpreted, shared and incorporated into subsequent practice.

Evidence From Digital Transformation in Public Administration

Digital-government research shows that transformation is broader than converting analogue procedures into electronic form. Mergel et al. (2019), drawing on expert interviews, identified digital transformation as a process involving organizational structures, service delivery and relationships with users. Haug et al. (2024), in a systematic review of 164 studies, found that digitally induced change in public administration includes incremental adjustments whose accumulated effects can become transformational. This evidence challenges a rigid reading of Lewin because digital reform rarely moves through one organization-wide sequence. Different units may be diagnosing problems, piloting tools, stabilizing procedures and revising earlier decisions at the same time.

The digital evidence does not make institutionalization unnecessary. Public services require stable rules for accountability, security, record integrity and equal treatment. The empirical implication is that refreezing should be selective and revisable. Core responsibilities, data standards and controls can be stabilized, while technologies and workflows remain subject to periodic review. This position reconciles Lewin's concern with reinforcement and the emergent-change emphasis on continuing adaptation (Burnes, 2004; Cummings et al., 2016; Haug et al., 2024).

Empirical Evidence From Nigeria

Recent Nigerian studies provide the contextual grounding that was missing from the earlier manuscript. Chiekezie and Aniekwe (2024) examined e-governance and public-sector management in Anambra State and reported significant relationships between technology infrastructure and policy implementation, digital-service availability and service delivery, and administrative efficiency and transparency. Although the study used a small purposive sample, it is relevant because it connects digital capacity to concrete administrative outcomes rather than assuming that technology automatically improves performance.

Obidike and Onuora (2025) investigated digital transformation in federal ministries, departments and agencies in Anambra State using a questionnaire survey and Friedman's two-way analysis of variance. They reported that adoption of IPPIS and the Treasury Single Account had positive and significant effects on accountability and transparency. Alalade et al. (2025) also used a cross-sectional survey of ministries, departments and agencies enrolled on IPPIS and reported improvements in transparency, accountability, payroll regularity and financial discipline. Both studies support the performance potential of digital financial reforms, but their recommendations concerning staff capacity, infrastructure, cybersecurity and compliance indicate that adoption alone is not sufficient.

Peter (2026) reviewed documentary evidence on electronic governance in Nigeria, including the Treasury Single Account, IPPIS, GIFMIS, electronic tax administration and digital identity management. The review associated these reforms with improvements in financial management, service delivery, transparency, accountability and administrative coordination. It also identified inadequate information and communication technology infrastructure, unreliable electricity, limited digital literacy, weak interoperability, cybersecurity concerns, institutional weakness and resistance as persistent constraints. These findings align closely with the moderating conditions proposed in this paper.

Zoleh (2026) used a mixed-methods design involving respondents from selected federal ministries, departments and agencies and key-informant interviews. The study reported positive effects of digital governance on transparency and administrative efficiency but also identified infrastructural limitations, weak institutional coordination and low digital literacy. This evidence is especially relevant to the proposed research

design because it demonstrates the value of combining statistical relationships with qualitative explanations of institutional readiness.

Synthesis and Empirical Gap

The empirical record supports five conclusions. First, readiness, participation and leadership are consistently associated with implementation quality. Second, resistance may indicate legitimate design or process problems and should be examined rather than suppressed. Third, commitment and learning help explain how change practices become sustained performance. Fourth, digital reform in Nigeria has been associated with gains in transparency, accountability, financial control and administrative efficiency. Fifth, these gains remain conditional on infrastructure, skills, coordination, security, resources and institutional consistency.

Important gaps remain. Much of the evidence is cross-sectional, single-location or focused on one reform instrument. Studies often measure perceived performance rather than combine employee perceptions with administrative and citizen evidence. The identified factors are also commonly examined in isolation, leaving limited knowledge about mediation, moderation and stage-specific effects. The proposed mixed-methods framework addresses these weaknesses by integrating behavioural and institutional variables, testing indirect and conditional relationships, and examining how they unfold across preparation, implementation and adaptive institutionalization in Nigerian public organizations.

Integrated Conceptual Framework and Propositions

The framework treats organizational change practices as antecedents, employee commitment and organizational learning as mediating mechanisms, resistance and institutional conditions as moderators, and public service performance as the outcome. Lewin's stages supply the temporal logic: readiness and participation are especially salient during unfreezing; leadership, participation and learning are central during movement; and reinforcement, institutional alignment and learning retention dominate refreezing. The stages overlap in practice and feedback can return the organization to earlier diagnosis.

- P1: Change readiness is positively associated with effective change implementation in public service organizations.
- P2: Meaningful employee participation is positively associated with employee commitment to change and implementation quality.
- P3: Leadership support is positively associated with readiness, organizational learning and effective implementation.
- P4: Employee commitment mediates the relationship between readiness and change implementation.
- P5: Organizational learning mediates the relationship between change implementation and public service performance.
- P6: Unmanaged resistance weakens the relationship between implementation and public service performance, whereas constructive engagement with resistance strengthens learning.
- P7: Bureaucratic rigidity and political interference weaken the positive effect of change implementation on performance.
- P8: Resource adequacy, digital capability and a learning-oriented culture strengthen the positive effect of change implementation on performance.
- P9: Institutional reinforcement during refreezing positively influences the sustainability of performance gains.

- P10: A combined approach drawing on Lewin, Kotter, ADKAR and emergent change will explain public-sector reform outcomes more comprehensively than exclusive reliance on any single model.

Proposed Mixed-Methods Methodology

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design is proposed. Quantitative evidence first tested the relationships in the conceptual model. Qualitative evidence would then explain the statistical patterns, explore mechanisms and identify contextual conditions that standardized measures may miss. Integration would occur at design, sampling, interpretation and reporting stages (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Population, Setting and Sampling

The proposed study covered federal and state public organizations in Nigeria that have implemented a significant administrative, digital, structural or service-delivery reform within the preceding three years. A multistage sampling strategy first stratified organizations by level of government and reform type, and then sampled managerial, professional, administrative and frontline employees. Power analysis was used to determine the survey sample. For the qualitative phase, purposive maximum-variation sampling selected participants from cases with strong, weak and contradictory quantitative results. Interviews included reform sponsors, middle managers, frontline officers, union or staff representatives and, where appropriate, service users.

Quantitative Phase

A structured questionnaire measured readiness, participation, leadership support, resistance, commitment, learning, institutional conditions and performance. Established scales were adapted carefully, reviewed by experts, and piloted. Public service performance combined perceptual measures with available administrative indicators, such as processing time, complaint resolution, error rates, service uptake and user satisfaction. Analysis included data screening, reliability assessment, confirmatory factor analysis, tests of discriminant validity and structural equation modelling. Mediation was assessed with bootstrapped indirect effects, while interaction terms or multigroup analysis tested moderation.

Qualitative Phase

Semi-structured interviews and document analysis examined how participants experienced the reform across unfreezing, movement and refreezing. Questions explored the perceived need for change, voice in design, leadership consistency, learning opportunities, sources of resistance, political and administrative constraints, and the mechanisms through which new practices were sustained or abandoned. Thematic analysis combined deductive codes from the framework with inductive codes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Negative cases and rival explanations was retained rather than forced into the model.

Integration and Meta-Inferences

Integration connected the phases explicitly. Quantitative results guided selection of interview cases and topics. A joint display compared statistical relationships with qualitative explanations for convergence, complementarity or contradiction. Final meta-inferences distinguished relationships supported across methods from those that appeared dependent on agency type, reform type or institutional context.

Quality and Ethics

Quantitative quality requires content validity, construct validity, reliability and attention to common-method bias. Qualitative trustworthiness requires a transparent audit trail, reflexive memoing, triangulation, negative-case analysis and carefully bounded claims. Ethical safeguard which included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, secure data handling and protection against employment-related repercussions. Because public servants may be reluctant to criticize reforms, interviews should avoid supervisory settings and reports should remove identifying details.

Construct	Illustrative indicators	Likely source	Analytical role
Change readiness	appropriateness, efficacy, management support, personal value	employee survey	predictor
Participation	voice, influence, consultation quality, feedback use	survey and interviews	predictor
Leadership support	vision, consistency, resources, barrier removal	survey and interviews	predictor
Resistance	concerns, avoidance, opposition, constructive challenge	survey and interviews	moderator
Commitment to change	willingness, identification, discretionary support	employee survey	mediator
Organizational learning	experimentation, knowledge sharing, reflection, retention	survey, interviews, documents	mediator
Institutional context	rigidity, political interference, resources, digital capability	survey and interviews	moderators
Public service performance	efficiency, quality, equity, responsiveness, accountability, satisfaction	administrative records, survey, user evidence	outcome

DISCUSSION

The integrated analysis suggests that public service performance improves when reform changes the organizational field rather than merely adding a new formal requirement. Readiness creates a credible reason and capability for movement. Participation improves the fit between reform design and operational reality. Leadership aligns authority and resources. Commitment sustains discretionary effort, while learning converts implementation experience into organizational knowledge. Refreezing then protects useful gains through institutional alignment.

The comparison of models clarifies why Lewin should be retained but not used alone. Kotter adds detailed guidance on coalition-building and momentum. ADKAR makes individual adoption visible. Emergent change corrects an overly episodic reading by allowing iteration. Institutional theory draws attention to legitimacy, power, path dependence and decoupling, all of which are pronounced in public organizations. Lewin provides the architecture within which these complementary insights can be located.

Resistance deserves particular care. Labelling employees as resistant can conceal weaknesses in reform design or implementation. A worker who questions a new digital process may be protecting service continuity, data quality or vulnerable users. Managers should distinguish obstruction from informed dissent. Constructive engagement can reduce restraining forces and improve the reform; suppression may produce surface compliance while old practices continue informally.

The Nigerian setting makes contextual moderation central. Reform may be weakened by unstable funding, leadership turnover, fragmented authority, infrastructure gaps, uneven digital skills or political intervention. Yet these constraints do not make change impossible. They show why imported models require contextual adaptation and why mixed methods are useful: statistical patterns can identify general relationships, while interviews and documents can explain how formal rules and local realities shape them.

Implications for Theory, Policy and Management

Theoretical Implications

The paper reframes Lewin as a flexible process theory rather than a rigid checklist. It also links stage-based change to mechanisms of commitment and learning and to institutional moderators. This supports a multilevel account in which individual beliefs, group processes, organizational systems and wider political institutions jointly shape performance.

Policy Implications

Reform policy should specify not only desired structures and technologies but also adoption, learning and institutionalization arrangements. Budgets should provide training, communication, process redesign, user support, evaluation and post-implementation adjustment. Reform scorecards should balance efficiency with equity, accountability and citizen experience.

Managerial Implications

Managers should begin with diagnosis rather than advocacy. They should establish a baseline, identify driving and restraining forces, involve frontline staff and users, clarify decision rights, test reforms in manageable phases and publish what has been learned. Senior sponsorship must be translated into middle-management capability because employees experience change mainly through immediate supervisors and daily systems.

Digital Transformation Implications

Technology projects should be managed as service and organizational redesign. Digital capability includes infrastructure and skills, but also data governance, cybersecurity, accessibility, interoperability, ethical safeguards and the capacity to revise workflows. Refreezing should institutionalize responsible use while preserving mechanisms for continuous improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

6. Conduct a formal readiness and force-field assessment before approving full-scale implementation.
7. Create representative reform teams that include frontline employees, technical specialists, managers, staff associations and service-user perspectives.
8. Convert broad reform visions into role-specific expectations, timelines, resources and measurable service outcomes.
9. Use pilots and phased implementation to generate evidence, correct design weaknesses and protect service continuity.
10. Treat resistance as diagnostic information and establish safe channels for challenge, feedback and grievance resolution.
11. Invest in blended capability development, coaching, practice environments and peer learning rather than one-off training.
12. Align budgets, job descriptions, standard operating procedures, performance measures, promotion criteria and recognition systems with the new practices.
13. Track multidimensional performance, including efficiency, equity, quality, accountability and citizen satisfaction.
14. Build institutional memory through documentation, communities of practice, after-action reviews and leadership-transition plans.
15. Review institutionalized practices periodically so that refreezing produces dependable service without creating a new rigidity.

Contribution to Knowledge

The paper contributes by integrating planned, individual, emergent and institutional explanations within a single stage-based framework. It reframes refreezing as adaptive institutionalization, identifies employee

commitment and organizational learning as mediators, specifies institutional and resource conditions as moderators, and translates these relationships into a testable mixed-methods design for Nigerian public organizations. The contribution is therefore not a claim that Lewin alone explains contemporary reform, but an argument that Lewin can provide temporal architecture when complemented by theories that recognize agency, power, legitimacy and continuous adaptation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present article is an integrative theoretical analysis and research framework; it does not report original field data. Its contextual conclusions depend on the scope and quality of available studies, which vary in design, sector and measurement. The framework should therefore be tested across federal and state institutions, reform types and employee groups. Longitudinal designs would be especially useful because readiness, resistance, learning and performance may change during implementation. Future studies should also combine employee surveys with administrative indicators and evidence from service users to reduce common-method bias and strengthen claims about public value.

CONCLUSION

Organizational change can improve public service performance, but neither a policy announcement nor a technological installation is sufficient. Sustainable reform depends on how institutions prepare people, distribute voice, mobilize leadership, learn during implementation and align systems after initial adoption. Lewin's Three-Stage Change Model remains valuable because it keeps these issues connected. Its contemporary relevance is strongest when unfreezing is treated as evidence-based diagnosis, movement as iterative learning and refreezing as adaptive institutionalization.

The broader framework developed here also shows the limits of relying on one theory. Kotter illuminates' leadership mobilization, ADKAR clarifies individual adoption, emergent change accommodates continuity and institutional theory explains the power of rules and legitimacy. The proposed mixed-methods design offers a defensible route for testing these relationships in Nigerian public organizations without reducing context to a statistical residual. The practical lesson is straightforward: reforms endure when people can make sense of them, influence them and perform them, and when organizational systems reinforce the new practice while remaining open to evidence and revision.

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