

Emotion-Centered Change Management For Public Sector Reform: Integrating Behavioral And Strategic Approaches

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Abstract

Public sector reforms often fail not because the technical design is flawed, but because leaders overlook the human side of change—how people feel, what they experience, and how those emotions affect their willingness to engage.

In countries like Georgia—a post-Soviet nation with a transitional democracy and developing governance systems—reforms are often pushed by outside actors, are highly visible politically, and must be carried out quickly. These conditions can create uncertainty, skepticism, and fear, especially among civil servants who worry about losing their professional identity or autonomy.

This article draws on a secondary analysis of the co-author's 2022 doctoral research, which included survey data from 581 people and 26 in-depth interviews. The findings show that anxiety about uncertainty and feeling a loss of control are strong predictors of low engagement with reforms. On the other hand, a strong sense of public service and recognition of one's work can help people stay engaged. Interviews reveal that building trust and offering emotional reassurance often need to come before any formal awareness campaigns—something that challenges the step-by-step logic of well-known change models like ADKAR or Kotter's Eight Steps.

To address this, the article introduces an emotion-centred change management framework. This model blends the emotional journey described in the Kubler-Ross Change Curve with the readiness-building strategies from ADKAR and Kotter. It uses them in a more flexible, adaptive sequence: starting with emotional recognition and empathy-based leadership, then moving to awareness-building, skills development, and embedding change in organizational culture.

The study shows that reform success depends on combining clear information, preparation, and strategic communication in a way that reinforces each element. For reform leaders, this means directly addressing fears, concerns about identity, and uncertainty—not just as obstacles to overcome, but as opportunities to build readiness and trust.

Keywords: Emotional Readiness, Public Sector Reform, Change Management, ADKAR, Kotter, Kübler-Ross, Georgia

1. INTRODUCTION

Public sector reform is often described as a straightforward, technical process—changing organizational structures, improving services, and making administration more efficient. But research shows that what often determines whether reforms succeed or fail is not the technical plan itself, but how well leaders address the human side of change (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006).

Over time, experts have moved away from seeing reform as a neutral, purely administrative task. They now recognize that it is deeply political, shaped by values, and influenced by the culture of the organization. Studies show that real success depends not only on changing laws or structures but also on transforming workplace culture, shared values, and everyday behaviour (Bouckaert, Nemec, & Hajnal, 2008, pp. 13-23).

One of the biggest challenges is emotional resistance from employees—feelings like anxiety, doubt, and reluctance to participate (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). This resistance often doesn't come from a rational disagreement with the goals of reform. Instead, it is rooted in fear, uncertainty, and a sense that one's professional identity is under threat (By & Ford, 2016). These reactions are even stronger in transitional governance systems, where political pressure is high and reforms are rolled out quickly.

In transitional political systems such as Georgia—a post-Soviet country working toward stronger democratic governance and European Union integration—the pressure to reform is especially intense. Reforms are often tied to political promises or international agreements and must be completed in short timeframes. This urgency can increase uncertainty, weaken trust, and intensify emotional pushback from civil servants. In addition, the long-standing bureaucratic traditions of post-Soviet systems tend to value stability and continuity over change (Hofstede, 2010), making reforms feel even more disruptive.

Georgia's public administration provides a clear example of these challenges. Since gaining independence, the country has launched major governance reforms to align with EU standards, improve services, and strengthen democratic accountability (European Union, 2014). But the reform environment is shaped by high political visibility, rapid cycles linked to elections, and deep-rooted bureaucratic habits. These factors create uncertainty and can lower morale among civil servants responsible for carrying out the changes (Giorbelidze & Odisharia, 2025).

This problem is not unique to Georgia, but its transitional political situation makes it more complicated. Frequent changes in political leadership often disrupt reforms, forcing agencies to adjust priorities and reorganize repeatedly. Many civil servants—especially in middle and lower management—receive little information about why changes are happening, what order they will follow, or how they will affect their work. This lack of communication breeds doubt and emotional resistance, even among employees who generally support reform.

This article draws on evidence from the co-author's 2022 doctoral research, which used surveys and interviews to examine the human side of Georgia's public administration reforms. The research involved 581 civil servants from central and local government and 26 in-depth interviews with senior officials, reform managers, and civil society experts. The findings showed that anxiety about uncertainty, feeling a loss of control, and mistrust in leaders were strong predictors of resistance to reform. In contrast, intrinsic motivation and symbolic recognition—such as acknowledgment of one's contributions—helped increase engagement.

The real challenge for reform leaders is to connect the behavioural side of change (how people feel and adapt) with the strategic side (how reforms are planned and executed). The evidence from Georgia shows why this matters.

Based on these findings, the article proposes an Emotion-Centred Hybrid Change Management Model. This approach combines behavioural insights—like the emotional stages outlined in the Kübler-Ross Change Curve—with strategic models such as ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006) and Kotter's Eight Step Model (Kotter, 1996). The model uses a “diagnostic adaptive” approach, meaning that reform steps are adjusted to match employees' emotional readiness. Trust-building and reassurance often need to come before the usual awareness campaigns.

This approach recognizes that emotions are not an afterthought—they are a main driver of whether people will engage with change. Managing those emotions alongside the technical and strategic work of reform is essential if reforms are to succeed.

By situating emotional adaptation at the core of reform strategy, this paper makes three contributions:

1. **Theoretical** – It advances change management theory by demonstrating how emotional and strategic processes can be synchronised to improve reform outcomes in transitional governance contexts.
2. **Empirical** – It draws on evidence from Georgia's governance reform to validate the importance of emotional thresholds as phase-gating criteria for reform progression.
3. **Practical** – It offers reform leaders a context-sensitive, actionable framework for reducing resistance, accelerating acceptance, and embedding reform sustainably in public administration systems.

This article makes three main contributions. First, in theory, it connects two worlds of change management—behavioural and strategic—by making emotional awareness and acceptance a core part of how reforms are planned and sequenced. Second, in evidence, it re-examines data from a 2022 doctoral study to explore how emotional barriers and motivational drivers interact in a transitional governance setting. Third, in practice, it offers reform leaders a context-aware guide for spotting, understanding, and addressing emotional resistance during public sector change.

Public sector reforms often fail not because people disagree with the goals, but because resistance is rooted in emotions rather than logic. In transitional governance contexts like Georgia, reforms are typically rolled out quickly, involve sensitive political issues, and are influenced by outside actors. This combination heightens uncertainty, fuels anxiety, and can make civil servants feel their professional identity is under threat.

Drawing on insights from Georgia's governance reforms, the article's model shows how combining emotional adaptation with structured readiness-building can lower resistance and encourage long-term engagement. The framework follows a phased approach—starting with emotional recognition and empathy-led leadership, then

moving into clear awareness-building, skill development, and finally, reinforcing the change within institutions.

This study contributes to public administration research by bringing together the human side of change (as described in the Kübler-Ross Change Curve) with the structured planning approaches found in ADKAR and Kotter's Eight Step Model. Tailored to transitional political and cultural settings, the framework gives reform leaders a practical roadmap for managing the uncertainty and emotional pressures that shape how people respond to change—and for delivering complex, high-stakes reforms with greater success and sustainability.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Change Management in Public Sector Reform

Change management in public administration is the organised process of planning, carrying out, and maintaining changes in government organisations to improve their performance, responsiveness, and value to the public (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006, pp. 168–176). While it builds on general organisational change theory, its use in the public sector is shaped by unique factors such as political oversight, public accountability, complex institutions, and high societal expectations (Van der Voet & Groeneveld, 2016).

Researchers agree that change management in the public sector has both structural and behavioural sides. Structurally, it means redesigning systems, policies, and workflows to match evolving government priorities (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 241). Behaviourally, it focuses on influencing the attitudes, motivation, and engagement of civil servants so they actively support reforms (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). Both elements are essential—reforms that are technically sound but fail to win people's support rarely lead to lasting change (Kotter, 1996; Bridges, 2009; Prosci, 2020; Beckhard, 1969).

The literature highlights several features that make change management in government different from that in business. First, reforms take place in a political-administrative environment where elected officials, public servants, and outside stakeholders often have overlapping—but sometimes conflicting—interests (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Christensen & Lægreid, 2013). Second, government organisations operate under greater public scrutiny and must meet high standards of legitimacy, transparency, and citizen trust (OECD, 2017). Third, the pace and focus of reform are often shaped by external pressures, such as donor requirements, international agreements, or crises, which can shorten timelines and change priorities (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

Classic models like Lewin's three-step process and Kotter's eight-step framework give useful sequencing and leadership guidance for managing change. However, as Kuipers et al. argue, these models must be adjusted to fit the realities of public governance, where change is often iterative—developing in stages rather than in a straight line—and shaped by negotiation rather than top-down orders (Kuipers & Van der Voet, 2014). Psychologically informed approaches, such as Bridges' Transition Model and ADKAR, stress the importance of readiness, emotional adjustment, and reinforcement—especially important in the relationship-focused and service-oriented world of the public sector (Bridges, 2009; Hiatt, 2006).

In recent years, there has been a shift toward integrated approaches that combine strategic and behavioural perspectives. These recognise that public sector change is not just about getting people to follow new rules but also about building emotional readiness, trust, and shared ownership of reform goals (Van der Voet & Groeneveld, 2016; Caredda, 2020). This reflects the growing understanding that successful reforms address both formal systems (laws, policies, structures) and informal systems (norms, identities, and emotional connections) that shape organisational life.

In transitional governance systems like Georgia's—a post-Soviet state with evolving democratic institutions—change management must be seen as both a technical and social process. It requires careful coordination of institutional redesign with human engagement strategies to create lasting reforms in a politically dynamic and culturally rooted environment. This view sets the stage for exploring emotion-centred change management as a way to turn resistance into readiness in public sector reform.

In transitional governance systems such as Georgia, reform challenges are further intensified by:

1. High political visibility and the symbolic importance of reform outcomes.
2. Compressed implementation timelines linked to political cycles and international commitments (e.g., EU integration).

3. Bureaucratic traditions shaped by post-Soviet legacies, privileging compliance over initiative.

Research shows that certain reform conditions—especially those marked by political sensitivity, rapid timelines, and external pressure—can intensify emotional resistance. Feelings like fear, uncertainty, and scepticism can slow down, distort, or even derail reform efforts (Eby, Adams, Russell, & Gaby, 2009). This has led reform scholars and practitioners to look more closely at behavioural change models that explain the emotional side of reform.

One of the most well-known of these is the Kübler-Ross Change Curve (Kübler-Ross, 1969/2005). Originally developed to describe the grieving process, it identifies predictable emotional stages people often move through during major change: shock, denial, frustration, depression, experimentation, decision, and integration. Its strength lies in its psychological realism—it validates emotional reactions as a normal part of adapting to change and helps leaders anticipate how people might respond (Bridges, 2009). In public sector reform, for example, denial may show up as avoiding reform-related meetings, while frustration may be expressed through public criticism of reform leaders. While the Kübler-Ross model offers valuable insight into these emotional patterns, it provides little guidance on how leaders can actively move people through the stages.

Bridges' Transition Model builds on this by distinguishing between external change (the technical or structural shift) and internal transition (the psychological process of adjustment). It emphasises that internal adaptation often takes longer than the external change itself. However, like the Kübler-Ross model, it is mainly descriptive—it explains what people feel but does not prescribe detailed strategies for leadership interventions.

This gap points to the need to combine behavioural insight with strategic management tools. One widely used strategic model is ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006), which conceptualises change as a sequence of five building blocks: awareness of the need for change, desire to participate in and support the change, knowledge of how to change, ability to implement the new skills and behaviours, and reinforcement to maintain the change. ADKAR's strength lies in its diagnostic clarity, helping leaders pinpoint where individuals or groups are getting stuck in the change process. Yet in transitional public sectors, emotional "gating" mechanisms such as fear, mistrust, and scepticism can block progress even at the first stage. Reform messages are often filtered through existing perceptions of institutional credibility, political motives, and personal risk, meaning that genuine awareness may never take root. As a result, ADKAR must be adapted to account for the non-linear, emotionally mediated nature of reform in complex political and cultural settings, with emotion-focused interventions frontloaded to break through these barriers.

While ADKAR focuses on the individual level, Kotter's Eight Step Model (Kotter, 1996) addresses organisational-level change. Kotter's approach is leadership-driven and organised into three overarching phases: creating the right climate (such as by creating urgency and building coalitions), engaging and enabling others (through developing and communicating a vision, removing barriers, and empowering broad-based action), and implementing and sustaining change (by generating short-term wins, consolidating gains, and embedding change into organisational culture). This framework provides a blueprint for mobilising large-scale reform but assumes that emotional commitment will naturally follow from leadership actions—an assumption that often does not hold in low-trust, politically unstable environments (By & Ford, 2016).

Ultimately, behavioural models such as Kübler-Ross and Bridges provide deep understanding of emotional reactions but lack strategic levers for driving reform, while strategic models such as ADKAR and Kotter offer operational structure but lack emotional diagnostics. In stable corporate environments, leaders can often bridge this gap through experience and informal practice. In transitional governance contexts, however, the absence of such integration has greater consequences: without strategic alignment, emotional insight remains inert, and without emotional mapping, strategic plans fail to connect with those tasked with implementing them.

2.2. Integrating Behavioural and Strategic Perspectives

The integration of behavioural and strategic approaches in change management is now widely seen as essential for tackling the complex realities of public sector reform, especially in transitional governance contexts. Well-known models such as ADKAR (Hiatt, 2006), Kotter's Eight Step Model (Kotter, 1996), and the Kübler-Ross Change Curve (Kübler-Ross, 1969/2005) have all been used extensively in both private and public sector

settings. However, each operates within its own conceptual boundaries and, when used alone, risks missing important aspects of how reforms actually unfold.

Recent scholarship argues for blending emotional intelligence with strategic execution (Caldwell, 2013; Vakola, 2014). Emotional adaptation and strategic readiness are not separate processes—they work best when they reinforce each other. For instance, a well-timed symbolic recognition of reform champions, which speaks to the emotional side of change, can make employees more willing to take part in skill-building programmes, which are part of the strategic side. Likewise, forming a coalition of respected internal leaders—primarily a strategic step—can create a safe environment for employees to voice concerns, which is a behavioural outcome. Bringing together the Kübler-Ross Change Curve, ADKAR, and Kotter's model offers a potentially powerful hybrid approach. The Kübler-Ross framework maps the emotional progression people experience during change, from shock and denial through frustration, exploration, and eventual acceptance. ADKAR provides a structure for building individual readiness through awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement. Kotter, in turn, lays out how to mobilise an organisation strategically, from creating urgency and building coalitions to embedding changes in culture.

Each of these models brings something distinct. ADKAR diagnoses readiness at the individual level, Kotter drives mobilisation at the organisational level, and Kübler-Ross charts the emotional journey that runs alongside both. In public administration reform, where changes often challenge deeply rooted professional identities and cultural norms, this emotional mapping is critical for anticipating resistance and designing interventions that resonate with staff.

Viewed together, the models complement one another: ADKAR offers micro-level diagnostics, Kotter provides macro-level strategy, and Kübler-Ross captures the emotional arc that shapes how reforms are received. In transitional governance settings, however, none of these models is sufficient on its own. An emotion-centred approach to change management can bridge this gap by embedding ADKAR's readiness stages and Kübler-Ross's emotional phases within Kotter's strategic sequence. This ensures that leadership-led mobilisation is reinforced by both measurable behavioural adoption and genuine emotional commitment throughout the reform process.

Contextual adaptation is key. In Georgia's governance reforms, evidence showed that trust-building and emotional reassurance often had to come before formal awareness campaigns—effectively reversing ADKAR's typical sequence. Similarly, coalition-building, which Kotter positions as an early strategic step, proved most effective when framed not just as a political necessity but as an emotional legitimisation of the reform effort. The literature recognises the importance of both emotional and strategic elements, yet a significant gap remains in practice. Specifically, there is a need to: synchronise emotional and strategic processes in politically volatile transitional contexts; re-sequence reform actions based on emotional readiness thresholds; and treat emotional recognition as a mandatory checkpoint before moving reforms forward.

Addressing this gap, the present study introduces an integrated, emotion-centred change management framework that aligns behavioural and strategic approaches, grounded in empirical evidence from Georgia's governance reform.

2.3. Emotional Resistance in Public Sector Reform

Research shows that resistance to change is often emotional before it becomes rational (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). In the public sector, organisational cultures tend to value stability and procedural predictability, which can make reforms—particularly those involving cultural or behavioural shifts—emotionally difficult for employees to accept. The Kübler-Ross Change Curve, adapted from its original use in grief psychology, has been applied to organisational change to describe the typical emotional stages people experience: shock, denial, frustration, depression, experimentation, decision, and integration.

Individually, behavioural and strategic models each offer important insights, but neither is sufficient on its own. Behavioural models help leaders guide individuals through the emotional journey of change, moving from denial and resistance toward exploration and eventual acceptance. Strategic models, on the other hand, focus on building readiness by ensuring that awareness, motivation, skills, and reinforcement are aligned with reform objectives.

This paper proposes bringing these perspectives together into an integrated framework that addresses both the emotional adaptation needed for individuals to engage with reform and the strategic readiness-building

required to mobilise and sustain action. By combining the emotional depth of behavioural models with the structured sequencing of strategic approaches, public sector leaders can better manage feelings while driving meaningful, lasting reform.

The Reform Process in Georgia: From Launch to Stagnation

When major reforms are introduced in Georgia's public administration, they typically begin with an externally driven policy push. These reforms are often initiated in response to international obligations, donor recommendations, or EU approximation commitments, rather than emerging organically from within the civil service. Early stages tend to focus heavily on technical and legislative tasks—drafting new laws, restructuring agencies, and setting performance benchmarks—frequently under tight deadlines set by political or donor priorities.

The launch of the EU–Georgia Association Agreement in 2016 marked the formal consolidation of Georgia's public administration reform agenda within the broader framework of EU integration (European Union, 2014). In line with accession-related conditionalities, the reform programme aimed to embed European governance principles through institutional restructuring, legislative modernisation, and capacity building (European Commission, 2021). Notable milestones included the 2015 Civil Service Law, which introduced competency-based recruitment, merit-oriented career systems, and standardised professional development frameworks (Civil Service Bureau, 2015). These measures were intended to professionalise and depoliticise the civil service, aligning formal structures with EU and OECD/SIGMA standards.

However, as comparative reform scholarship warns (Bouckaert, Nemec, & Hajnal, 2008; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), aligning legal and institutional frameworks with international standards does not automatically produce deep, systemic transformation. In Georgia, legal and structural reforms have outpaced the behavioural and cultural changes needed to sustain them. Implementation has been slowed by administrative inertia, hierarchical bureaucratic culture, and entrenched political influence—factors that weaken the internalisation of new norms and undermine civil servants' professional autonomy (Christensen & Lægheid, 2007; OECD/SIGMA, 2018). The result is a structural-behavioural gap in which compliance is often procedural rather than substantive, leading to incremental rather than transformative change.

In the past five years, reform momentum has been further challenged by politicisation and institutional instability. The COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 parliamentary elections, and repeated delays in adopting the 2021–2025 reform strategy all exposed weaknesses in reform coordination (European Commission, 2021; Georgian Institute of Politics, 2021). Although a new Public Administration Reform Strategy for 2023–2026 was eventually adopted, political turbulence and fragmented priorities continued to undermine delivery capacity.

The intensification of politicisation in 2024–2025 marked a turning point. The adoption of the Foreign Influence Transparency Law, restrictive amendments to the Civil Service Law, and the dissolution of the Civil Service Bureau signalled a departure from earlier commitments to professional neutrality and institutional independence (IDFI, 2024; Council of Europe, 2025). These were not merely technical changes but symbolic reversals that shifted the incentive structure of the civil service towards loyalty-based compliance. Such developments mirror broader patterns in hybrid regimes, where formal reforms coexist with informal practices that weaken institutional integrity (OECD/SIGMA, 2018).

The consequences are tangible. Public trust in state institutions dropped from 55% in 2021 to 41% in 2024, eroding both reform legitimacy and citizen engagement (Georgian Institute of Politics, 2024). International evidence shows that declining trust reduces policy compliance, undermines institutional learning, and weakens the long-term sustainability of reforms (Christensen & Lægheid, 2007; Caredda, 2020). In Georgia's case, political capture, institutional volatility, and cultural inertia have combined to reverse earlier gains, despite the formal framework of Europeanisation.

From a change management perspective, this experience reinforces the argument that structural reforms without emotional readiness and behavioural alignment are inherently fragile (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012; Kotter, 1996; Caredda, 2020). Widely recognised frameworks such as ADKAR and Kotter's Eight Step Model stress the importance of awareness, engagement, and reinforcement, yet these elements have been insufficiently embedded in Georgia's reform design. This omission matters: civil servants' fear of political reprisal, loss of

professional identity, and scepticism about reform motives create emotional “gating” effects that block adoption before structural changes can take root.

The sustainability of Georgia’s public administration reform therefore depends on aligning institutional and legal design with deliberate strategies to build trust, foster emotional commitment, and create shared ownership among those implementing change. This is the central premise of emotion-centred change management: durable reform is not simply the product of legislative precision or institutional architecture, but of embedding behavioural and cultural transformation into the strategic heart of change. Without this integration, reforms risk becoming little more than formal artefacts of Europeanisation—lacking the internal legitimacy and social resonance required for lasting democratic consolidation.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study builds upon the co-author’s 2022 doctoral research, which examined the role of the human factor in Georgia’s ongoing public administration reform. Adopting a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Caldwell, 2013), the original study integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both the prevalence and mechanisms of readiness for change. For the purposes of this article, the original dataset has been re-analysed through an emotion-centred change management lens, with the specific aim of investigating the interplay between emotional barriers, motivational drivers, and strategic change processes in shaping reform engagement. While the doctoral research addressed readiness, engagement, leadership, and institutional factors in a broad sense, this article narrows its focus to the role of emotional readiness and resistance in influencing reform participation, using these insights to develop an integrated behavioural–strategic framework for managing change in transitional governance contexts.

The quantitative component of the original study consisted of a structured survey administered to 581 civil servants representing central ministries, local self-government bodies, and autonomous public agencies. The survey instrument was anchored in the ADKAR change management model (Hiatt, 2006) – awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, reinforcement – and extended with measures of emotional barriers (e.g., uncertainty-related anxiety, fear of change, perceived loss of autonomy), motivational drivers (intrinsic commitment to public service values, extrinsic recognition and promotion opportunities), and organisational support factors (clarity of communication, leadership responsiveness). A purposive sampling strategy ensured representation from reform-intensive sectors such as education, healthcare, and finance. Data were collected electronically via the Civil Service Bureau between March and May 2022, with follow-up reminders to maximise response rates. Descriptive statistics identified the most prevalent emotional and motivational patterns, while Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression modelling assessed the associations and predictive strength of these variables in explaining reform engagement.

The qualitative strand comprised 26 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with senior civil servants directly engaged in reform design and implementation, representatives of donor and international organisations supporting reform, and civil society experts monitoring governance reform progress. The interview protocol drew on Kotter’s Eight-Step Model (Kotter J. P., 1996) to ensure systematic exploration of urgency creation, coalition building, and cultural anchoring, while incorporating targeted prompts on emotional resistance, trust in leadership, and motivational dynamics. Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and coded in NVivo 12 using a hybrid coding strategy – deductive codes derived from Kübler-Ross, ADKAR, and Kotter frameworks, combined with inductive codes emerging from participant narratives.

Data integration followed a triangulation protocol (Fetters, 2013), enabling quantitative results to determine prevalence and predictive relationships, while qualitative findings explained and contextualised these statistical associations. The integration process included theoretical mapping to identify convergence and divergence between empirical findings and established change management models. This revealed that in Georgia’s public sector reform, emotional reassurance and trust-building often needed to precede awareness-raising efforts – a notable reversal from ADKAR’s standard sequencing. It also underscored the role of symbolic recognition in accelerating progression from Kübler-Ross’s “frustration” stage to “exploration.”

The original doctoral research was conducted in compliance with the ethical guidelines of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation. The present study uses only anonymised secondary data from that research.

By reframing the 2022 dataset through an emotion-centred analytical lens, this study positions emotional readiness as a critical gating phase in reform progression, demonstrates the value of sequencing adjustments when applying established change management models in transitional governance settings, and produces an empirically grounded hybrid framework integrating behavioural and strategic approaches to managing change.

4. FINDINGS

The empirical results from the mixed-methods analysis illuminate critical factors shaping reform engagement in Georgia's public administration. They reveal that readiness for change is not merely a function of policy awareness or procedural compliance, but is strongly mediated by emotional, motivational, and contextual dynamics that influence how civil servants interpret and respond to reform initiatives.

A substantial readiness gap emerged from the quantitative survey of 581 civil servants: while 64% reported being aware of ongoing reforms, only 38% expressed a clear willingness to engage actively in their implementation. Regression analysis confirmed that uncertainty-related anxiety ($\beta = -0.35$, $p < .001$) and perceived loss of autonomy ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < .01$) were the most significant negative predictors of engagement. These findings position emotional resistance not as a peripheral issue but as a primary determinant of whether reform participation occurs. Qualitative interviews reinforced this conclusion, revealing that reform communication often reached middle management late, leaving municipal and departmental staff in an information vacuum. Without timely explanation of the rationale and implications, reforms – even those technically well-designed – tended to be met with suspicion or resistance. This pattern resonates with Oreg et al.'s (2011) assertion that emotional sense-making frequently precedes cognitive openness to change.

Despite these barriers, the research also identified strong motivational drivers that can counterbalance resistance when appropriately activated. Seventy-one percent of respondents expressed strong intrinsic motivation rooted in public service values, while 65% cited extrinsic incentives such as recognition, career advancement, or status improvement. Correlation analysis demonstrated that intrinsic motivation ($r = 0.46$, $p < .001$) was a stronger predictor of engagement than extrinsic motivation ($r = 0.38$, $p < .001$). Interviews illustrated how symbolic recognition and visible leadership gestures acted as emotional accelerators, shifting attitudes from Kübler-Ross's "frustration" stage toward "exploration." This aligns with Kotter's (1996) emphasis on securing short-term wins but extends it, showing that in transitional governance contexts such wins must be emotionally framed to resonate with staff.

Leadership emerged as a decisive factor, but the findings challenge the linear sequencing assumed by both ADKAR and Kotter's models. In practice, trust-building often had to precede awareness campaigns. High-level political turnover repeatedly disrupted reform momentum, requiring leaders to restart emotional alignment efforts. Integrated analysis of qualitative and quantitative data revealed three consistent patterns: (1) the sequence "Trust-building → Awareness → Desire" proved more effective than starting with awareness alone; (2) symbolic recognition events reinforced acceptance more effectively than technical training; and (3) cultural anchoring required sustained emotional reinforcement to prevent regression.

The role of organisational culture and political context was also prominent. Respondents perceived that political influence over senior appointments undermined reform credibility, as leadership changes often reprioritised or reversed initiatives. This disrupted institutional memory, weakened reform legitimacy, and mirrored Fernandez and Rainey's (2006) warning that inconsistent leadership signals erode commitment. Many interviewees described reforms as "done to" rather than "done with" civil servants, particularly in the initial technocratic phases, which were concentrated at senior political or administrative levels. Early engagement of those responsible for day-to-day implementation was limited, leaving them detached from the reform's design logic.

The prevalence of emotional barriers was substantial: 62% reported uncertainty-related anxiety, 54% feared loss of autonomy, and 48% anticipated increased workload or performance scrutiny. Left unaddressed, these concerns fostered passive resistance – minimal formal compliance while informally preserving old practices

— or outright disengagement from reform-related activities. In some cases, scepticism was rooted in previous experiences of reforms that promised transformation but delivered only symbolic or partial change.

The qualitative narratives underscored that without parallel investment in two-way communication, trust-building, and participatory problem-solving, emotional resistance became entrenched. Strategic initiatives such as training and formal communication proved insufficient when emotional needs were overlooked. As one senior official reflected:

“I only started taking the reform seriously when I felt the leadership genuinely cared about how the changes would affect us, not just about ticking boxes.”

Overall, these findings confirm that reform engagement in Georgia’s public administration depends on synchronising emotional reassurance, motivational activation, and strategic sequencing. Emotional readiness functions as a gating condition for subsequent reform steps; when it is absent, even well-structured strategies risk being perceived as externally imposed and fail to achieve sustained buy-in.

Sequencing Insights

The integrated analysis showed that the standard ADKAR sequence—beginning with awareness and moving toward desire—did not fully fit Georgia’s transitional governance context. In practice, trust-building often needed to come before awareness campaigns, emotional reassurance acted as a gatekeeper for progress, and short-term, visible wins helped move people from frustration toward acceptance. These patterns confirm the importance of sequencing flexibility and reinforce the case for merging behavioural and strategic models into a single adaptive framework.

In the initial phase of reform, momentum was visible but largely technocratic, concentrated at senior political and administrative levels. Civil servants—the people ultimately responsible for implementation—were often not engaged early on. As a result, many experienced the reform as something imposed on them, rather than developed with them.

When implementation began, structural and procedural changes were introduced quickly, but without matching investments in communication, training, or emotional preparation. Civil servants were often unclear about the reform’s purpose, benefits, or implications for their daily work. In this climate, predictable emotional and behavioural responses emerged: uncertainty and anxiety about new expectations, perceived threats to professional identity if long-standing roles or skills were altered, fear of losing autonomy if decision-making became more centralised, and scepticism shaped by previous reforms that promised transformation but delivered only partial or symbolic change.

When these feelings went unaddressed, passive resistance took hold. This could mean minimal compliance—formally following new rules while informally keeping old practices—or disengagement from reform-related activities altogether. Without open, two-way communication, trust-building, and opportunities for joint problem-solving, resistance became entrenched.

Over time, the initial momentum driven by political or donor priorities faded. Leadership attention shifted to new agendas, reform champions left key roles, and implementation energy weakened. What remained were partially implemented frameworks—new laws, restructured departments, and policy statements—unsupported by the behavioural or cultural change needed to make them stick.

The stagnation of reforms in Georgia is therefore less about flaws in technical design and more about a consistent failure to integrate emotional readiness, strategic communication, and staff engagement from the very start. Without addressing these human dimensions, reforms remain visible on paper but shallow in practice, unable to take root in the culture of public administration.

Re-examining the 2022 doctoral research dataset through the lens of emotion-centred change management confirms that, in transitional public administration contexts like Georgia’s, the human factor—and particularly emotional readiness—is not a secondary or “soft” aspect of reform, but a primary driver of success or failure.

This article makes three main contributions. Theoretically, it integrates behavioural models (Kübler-Ross) and strategic models (ADKAR, Kotter) into a hybrid framework that positions emotional readiness as a prerequisite for strategic reform actions, challenging the linear sequencing assumed in many existing models. Empirically, it demonstrates that uncertainty-related anxiety and perceived loss of autonomy are the most common emotional barriers, with statistically significant negative effects on engagement, while both intrinsic

and extrinsic motivation can help counter resistance if supported by leadership. Practically, it offers reform leaders a context-sensitive roadmap that begins with trust-building and emotional reassurance, uses recognition as a catalyst for engagement, and embeds change into organisational culture to sustain acceptance over time.

Policy and Practice Implications

In transitional governance contexts, these findings highlight that emotional readiness should be evaluated and addressed with the same rigour as technical capacity and institutional preparedness. Reform leaders need to incorporate systematic assessments of the emotional climate into the earliest stages of planning, identifying signs of anxiety, perceived loss of autonomy, and scepticism before these concerns solidify into entrenched resistance.

Sequencing of reform communications is equally critical. Evidence from this study shows that in low-trust environments, building trust must come before broad awareness campaigns. Leaders should focus first on visible engagement, open dialogue, and transparent explanations of reform objectives, ensuring that technical measures are introduced only after this foundation is in place.

Recognition mechanisms—ranging from symbolic gestures to formal performance awards—should be embedded into the reform process to maintain emotional commitment and sustain engagement during periods of uncertainty. Recognition serves both as a motivator and as a public signal of organisational values, helping to align individual identity with institutional goals.

Finally, to protect reforms from political volatility, change must be anchored in both organisational culture and formal policy frameworks. Embedding reforms into everyday practices, performance systems, and leadership expectations strengthens resilience and continuity, even in the face of shifting political leadership.

Future Research

The emotion-centred hybrid framework developed in this study should be empirically tested in other transitional and developing governance contexts to evaluate its transferability and adaptability. Comparative research could help determine whether the sequencing patterns and emotional activation mechanisms identified in Georgia are consistent across different administrative cultures.

Further sector-specific studies are needed to examine how emotional resistance and motivational triggers vary by policy area. Reforms in health, education, or finance, for example, may provoke distinct anxieties, identity concerns, and incentives, each requiring tailored leadership approaches and engagement strategies.

Finally, the role of digital engagement tools in fostering emotional readiness at scale merits closer investigation. Virtual platforms, online dialogue spaces, and AI-assisted sentiment analysis could support real-time monitoring of the emotional climate, enabling reform leaders to adjust communication and engagement strategies dynamically as reforms progress.

5. DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Re-analysis of the 2022 doctoral research dataset through an emotion-centred change management lens confirms what much of the recent literature has proposed, but what few studies have empirically examined in transitional governance contexts: emotional readiness is not a peripheral factor in public sector reform—it is a phase-gating determinant that can accelerate, stall, or completely derail reform trajectories.

The conventional ADKAR sequence assumes that awareness naturally precedes desire. Our findings challenge this assumption. In the Georgian public sector, reform messages often failed to resonate until trust in leadership intentions had been established. This reversal aligns with Oreg et al.'s (2011) argument that affective reactions often precede cognitive openness to change. The implication is clear: without laying emotional groundwork—through reassurance, empathy, and visible signals of credibility—awareness campaigns risk being dismissed as bureaucratic exercises rather than genuine invitations to participate.

5.1 Emotional Resistance as a Strategic Variable

The empirical evidence indicates that uncertainty-related anxiety and perceived loss of autonomy were the two most significant emotional inhibitors, both statistically and in narrative accounts. This finding is consistent with Fernandez and Rainey's (2006) observation that reforms perceived as imposed or lacking transparency tend to generate resistance, regardless of their technical soundness.

Interviewees often described adopting a defensive posture when reforms were introduced without prior emotional engagement. As one participant reflected:

“They were explaining the technical part, but I couldn’t hear them – all I was thinking was: what does this mean for me, my role, my career?”

Such responses suggest that emotional resistance functions as a strategic bottleneck: if left unaddressed, it can undermine even the most carefully planned technical interventions. In practical terms, this means change leaders must approach the emotional climate not as a peripheral “soft” issue, but as a core strategic variable that shapes the viability of reform from the outset.

5.2 Motivation as a Counterbalance

The data also show that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations can act as counterweights to emotional resistance. High intrinsic motivation – rooted in public service ethos – allowed many civil servants to persevere through discomfort when they believed reforms aligned with long-term public good. Extrinsic motivators such as recognition, promotion opportunities, and visible appreciation functioned as short-term accelerators, particularly effective in moving individuals from Kübler-Ross’s “frustration” stage into “exploration.”

This interplay between emotional barriers and motivational triggers reinforces Kotter’s (1996) assertion that *short-term wins* are critical, but it extends it: in transitional governance, such wins must be emotionally framed as symbols of appreciation and legitimacy, not merely as performance milestones.

5.3 Sequencing Flexibility: From Theory to Practice

Perhaps the most significant implication of this study is the need for sequencing flexibility when applying established change management models. While ADKAR’s logical flow and Kotter’s structured steps offer valuable guidance, their practical application in politically sensitive environments requires adaptive sequencing. Our mapping exercise revealed that in low-trust settings, trust-building and emotional reassurance often need to come before awareness-building efforts. Symbolic recognition can serve as a bridge between emotional resistance and cognitive openness, helping individuals move from defensiveness to engagement. Finally, cultural anchoring—ensuring that change survives shifts in political leadership—demands sustained emotional reinforcement over time.

These findings point to the necessity of a hybrid model that deliberately synchronises behavioural and strategic tracks, adjusting both the pace and order of interventions based on real-time emotional diagnostics—a recommendation that echoes Vakola’s (2014) work on individual readiness for change.

5.4 Contextualising Within Transitional Governance

These findings align closely with the realities of post-Soviet and other transitional administrative systems, where bureaucratic cultures value predictability and hierarchical stability. In such settings, reforms are often externally driven—such as those linked to EU integration—adding a layer of political visibility that can intensify employee anxiety.

Our data suggest that effective change leadership in these contexts must strike a careful balance between maintaining political momentum through quick, visible reform wins and creating psychological safety for employees, allowing them to experiment and adapt without fear of sanction. When this balance is not achieved, the result is often performative compliance: employees may appear to follow reform protocols publicly while privately resisting, disengaging, or simply waiting for political turnover to reverse the changes.

5.5 Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretically, this study contributes to change management literature by providing empirical support for integrating behavioural and strategic models in a non-linear, context-responsive manner. It challenges the universality often assumed in established change models and highlights the need to embed emotional diagnostics as a standard component of reform planning.

Practically, the findings offer reform leaders an evidence-based sequencing principle. In low-trust, politically sensitive contexts, the first priority is to secure emotional readiness through trust-building and reassurance. Once that foundation is in place, awareness campaigns and skill-building initiatives can be introduced more effectively. The final step is to anchor acceptance by integrating reforms into organisational culture and sustaining them through ongoing recognition.

This sequence is not intended as a rigid prescription, but as a diagnostic and adaptive approach. It enables reform leaders to adjust the timing and nature of interventions in response to the organisation's evolving emotional climate, ensuring that reforms are both technically sound and behaviourally sustainable.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research

While this re-analysis provides deep insight into the emotional-strategic interplay in Georgia's governance reform, it is context-specific. Further comparative studies across transitional governance systems are needed to test the generalisability of the hybrid model. Additionally, longitudinal research could examine whether emotional readiness built early in reforms sustains engagement through later phases of implementation.

DISCUSSION

Public sector reforms are often undermined not by technical flaws, but by resistance rooted in emotion rather than reason. In transitional governance contexts such as Georgia, reforms tend to be rapid, politically sensitive, and externally driven—conditions that heighten uncertainty, fuel anxiety, and create perceived threats to the professional identity of civil servants. These emotional dynamics frequently erode engagement before implementation even begins, making technical readiness insufficient on its own.

This paper proposes an emotion-centred change management framework that combines behavioural approaches—represented by the Kübler-Ross Change Curve—with strategic change management models—represented by ADKAR and Kotter's Eight Step Model. The aim is to bridge the gap between emotional alignment and technical execution.

Empirical evidence from Georgia positions the emotional climate created by uncertainty as a critical precondition for initiating and sustaining public sector reforms. Quantitative analysis shows that uncertainty-related anxiety and perceived loss of autonomy are significant negative predictors of engagement, while intrinsic motivation is the most powerful positive driver. Qualitative findings reveal that trust-building must precede awareness-raising and that symbolic recognition can accelerate the shift from resistance to acceptance. Together, these results confirm that emotional alignment is not a secondary or “soft” issue but a decisive factor in determining whether reforms gain traction.

The proposed emotion-centred hybrid model sequences emotional alignment, trust-building, and recognition alongside technical reform measures. It challenges the linear application of models such as ADKAR and Kotter in transitional contexts, arguing instead for adaptive sequencing that protects momentum in politically volatile environments. By integrating emotional diagnostics into reform planning, leading with trust before awareness, recognising contributions to sustain morale, and embedding reforms into both organisational culture and policy, reform leaders can transform resistance into commitment and safeguard reform achievements from the disruptions of political turnover.

Ultimately, reforms falter when they overlook the emotional realities of those tasked with implementing them. Effective reform leadership in transitional political and cultural environments must address not only systems and structures but also the fears, motivations, and aspirations of the workforce. Success depends as much on winning hearts as on designing technically sound reforms.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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