



Classificazione Decimale Dewey:

658.406 (23.) GESTIONE ESECUTIVA. GESTIONE DEI CAMBIAMENTI

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NAVIGATING ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

LESSONS FROM THE ITALIAN STORIES ON TRANSFORMATION

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Afterwards by

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ISBN
979-12-218-2138-3

PRIMA EDIZIONE
ROMA 11 SETTEMBRE 2025

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PREFACE

Organisational change has become a pervasive and defining feature of contemporary work environments. In response to rapid technological innovation, increasing global competition, digitalisation, and the continuous rethinking of business models, organisations are compelled to revise their strategies, structures, and identities. The literature on change management has attempted to respond to this complexity through a wide variety of approaches, ranging from planned, top-down interventions to emergent, bottom-up dynamics, and more recently, contingency-based and processual models. However, what many of these approaches lack is a situated understanding of how organisational change is experienced, constructed, and contested through the symbolic and discursive practices of individuals and professional groups.

Within this context, the volume *Navigating Organisational Change: Lessons from the Italian Stories on Transformation* by Maria Menshikova and Giovanna Afeltra makes a timely and original contribution to the study of change processes by placing the narrative dimension at the heart of organisational transformation.

While traditional approaches to change management, such as those derived from planned or linear models (e.g., Lewin, Kotter), continue to inform practice, critical perspectives increasingly highlight the limitations of such frameworks in dynamic and uncertain environments.

A growing body of recent scholarly literature calls for more context-sensitive and interpretive approaches that recognise the role of human agency and sense-making in the non-linear nature of change. This book aligns with that perspective, advancing a view of organisational change as a socially constructed, narrative-driven process, deeply embedded in cultural and historical contexts.

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What distinguishes this volume is its rich empirical grounding in Italian organisational settings. Through carefully selected case studies, the authors offer a deep exploration of how organisations and organisational actors in the Italian context have navigated change. Rather than abstracting from local realities, the book embraces the importance of context as an active and constitutive force in shaping change trajectories. These “Italian stories” are not merely illustrations but serve as analytical lenses that reveal how cultural codes, values, and collective imaginaries intersect with organisational realities.

Equally important is the methodological contribution of the book. Drawing on narrative inquiry and semiotic analysis, the authors provide a compelling interpretation of how transformation is discursively produced and symbolically negotiated. The narrative approach allows for the reconstruction of change as experienced and told by organisational actors. At the same time, semiotic tools make it possible to uncover latent structures of meaning, identity tensions, and power asymmetries. The combination of these methods enriches the interpretive depth of the analysis. It reinforces the idea that change is not merely something that organisations do, but something they narrate, contest, and perform.

The value of this book lies in its capacity to bridge theory and practice, offering insights that are both academically rigorous and practically relevant. For scholars, it provides an empirically robust and conceptually sophisticated account of how narratives function within organisations.

For practitioners, it opens up new ways of thinking about leadership, organisational learning, wellbeing, and happiness, highlighting the importance of listening to stories, interpreting symbolic dynamics, and co-constructing meaning with those involved in change.

In an era when organisations are constantly required to reinvent themselves, *Navigating Organisational Change: Lessons from the Italian Stories on Transformation* offers both a reflective and grounded perspective. It reminds us that successful transformation is not solely the outcome of planning and execution, but of sense-making, identity work, and symbolic negotiation, processes that unfold within specific socio-cultural frames and require careful interpretation.

This book is therefore a valuable resource for organisational scholars, change agents, and professionals who seek to deepen their understanding of how organisations evolve. It encourages a shift from managing change to narrating it, and, in doing so, provides both language and insight for navigating the complexities of transformation in contemporary organisational life.

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INTRODUCTION

The only constant in life is change
BUDDHA

From the dawn of humanity to the digital age, from individual life journeys to the rise and fall of entire civilisations, one force has remained constant: *change*. Nowhere is this more evident than in organisations, which today are facing an unprecedented acceleration of transformation. Whether triggered by technological innovation, global crises, evolving markets, or shifting societal expectations, change is no longer episodic. It is continuous, multidimensional, and often unpredictable. Organisations are not simply adjusting their strategies; they are redesigning many different elements. We are witnessing structural changes, such as new governance models, decentralisation, and agile or hybrid configurations. Strategic transformations reshape missions, visions, and competitive positioning, while operational shifts affect how work is performed daily, from workflows and digital tools to physical spaces and work schedules. Organisational change today entails the evolution of business models, the reconfiguration of workspaces, the redesign of processes, and, crucially, the transformation of people and the relationships among them.

For instance, hybrid work models challenge traditional notions of time and place. Teams are increasingly distributed, roles are in flux, and collaboration tools are constantly evolving. Navigating this complexity requires more than robust systems or advanced technologies. It demands a human capacity that is as old as it is essential: the ability to

adapt. Indeed, while change is inevitable, adaptation is not. The fundamental difference between organisations that thrive and those that falter lies in their people-leaders, teams, and individuals – who possess (or lack) the mindset, skills, and agility to evolve. As Charles Darwin famously observed: *“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”* In a similar vein, Albert Einstein remarked: *“The measure of intelligence is the ability to change when necessary.”*

This book starts from the premise that the human capacity for change is the key driver of organisational transformation. It explores the diverse nature of change and how it affects various dimensions of work and life within organisations. But above all, it focuses on the human side of change: the skills and competencies, the roles and professions that enable organisations to adapt, remain resilient, and succeed in increasingly complex environments. Drawing on academic research, grey literature, case studies, and stories of transformation, the book offers both theoretical frameworks and practical insights for managers, leaders, HR professionals, and policymakers. The goal is not merely to understand change as a technical process, but to approach it as a human phenomenon, because the actual engine of organisational change is not structure, process, or technology, but people.

In academic discourse, this human-centred view of organisational change has been examined through several complementary research strands. One influential research direction builds on the Human Resource-Based View (HRBV) of the organisation, which argues that employees’ unique knowledge, competencies, and capabilities are the foundation of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney and Wright, 1998). Applied to organisational change, this view suggests that HRM plays a strategic role by creating the conditions that allow employees to contribute effectively to transformation processes. However, scholars such as Doorewaard and Benschop (2003) have critically challenged the HRBV for its instrumental and utilitarian logic, which reduces human beings to mere resources and overlooks the emotional and relational dimensions of change. In response, they call for a more differentiated, ethically grounded model of HRM – one that embraces the complexities and contradictions of human functioning within change

processes. This critical lens is enriched by the relational theory of emotions, which provides an alternative framework for understanding the affective undercurrents of organisational life. According to Burkitt (1997), emotions are not simply internal or irrational responses but are socially embedded and shaped by interpersonal and institutional dynamics. Doorewaard and Benschop (2003) apply this theory to HRM, arguing that emotions play a central role in how individuals interpret and enact change. They advocate for an HRM approach that is sensitive to these emotional subroutines and capable of fostering environments of empathy, trust, and authenticity that represent conditions for genuine and sustainable transformation.

Another significant contribution comes from the field of Emotional Intelligence (EI), particularly in its application to leadership and personal development during change. Goleman (1996) argues that organisational change is fundamentally evolutionary and driven by individuals. Emotional intelligence, encompassing self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills, is presented as a set of competencies that can be taught and cultivated to enhance organisational flexibility. From this perspective, HRM becomes a facilitator of learning and development, helping individuals and teams build the emotional and interpersonal capacities needed to navigate complexity and uncertainty.

In addition to these theoretical frameworks, some empirical research has examined how HR professionals perceive and define their roles in change initiatives. Baran *et al.* (2012) conducted a large-scale study of HR practitioners across industries, finding that most viewed themselves as key actors in organisational change, taking on roles such as change agents, consultants, and facilitators. However, their research also revealed that perceptions of top-down, hierarchical change models were still dominant, and that some HR professionals saw their influence as limited. These findings underscore the importance of clarifying and expanding the strategic role of HRM in transformation processes.

Complementing this research stream, several studies on employee perceptions of change highlight the heterogeneous experiences of individuals at different organisational levels. Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2004), Jones *et al.* (2008) show how executives, supervisors, and non-supervisory staff interpret change differently.

While top managers often emphasise strategic planning and future-oriented outcomes, frontline employees are more likely to express anxiety, resistance, or scepticism. These differences reflect not only variations in access to information and power, but also distinct group identities and emotional investments. Recognising these dynamics is essential for designing inclusive and effective change strategies.

Finally, Finstad's (1998) rhetorical and contextual approach provides a further layer of analysis. This study distinguishes between isomorphic (externally imposed) and eruptive (internally driven) change processes, showing how different narratives and symbolic framings influence organisational responses. He argues that the rhetoric of change, the language and metaphors used to describe transformation, can either mobilise support or provoke resistance, depending on how well it resonates with the lived experience of organisational members.

Regardless of the theoretical approach, we must keep in mind that the human side of organisational change is a complex, multifaceted domain that encompasses strategic perspectives, emotional processes, identity dynamics, and symbolic meaning. Understanding and managing change, therefore, requires more than structural redesign or process optimisation. It demands a deep engagement with the people who experience, enact, and give meaning to change. This book aims to contribute to this area by offering knowledge, tools, and inspiration to those who lead transformation not only through systems and structures, but through people.

The case studies collected in this book adopt a narrative methodological approach to investigate the human side of organisational change, recognising that transformation processes are not only structural or strategic phenomena, but also profoundly emotional, interpretive, and experiential. Each case was chosen for its illustrative power in revealing specific dimensions of organisational change: digitalisation, leadership, learning, or well-being. The aim of the cases selected and described in this book is not statistical generalisation, but the construction of meaningful, context-rich narratives that illuminate how change is enacted, experienced, and contested within organisational life.

Rooted in narrative inquiry (Czarniawska, 1997), this methodological framework enables researchers to explore how organisational

actors perceive, interpret, and engage with change by reconstructing their lived experiences. Unlike quantitative approaches that may reduce the complexity of organisational life to measurable variables, narrative analysis allows for a holistic, multidimensional understanding of change. It captures the ambiguities, contradictions, and emotional textures that often characterise transitions, while giving voice to different actors' perspectives, including those that are frequently marginalised or suppressed.

As Rhodes (1996) has argued, organisations can be viewed as verbal systems composed of competing stories, discourses, and texts. Through storytelling, individuals make sense of their environment, negotiate power relations, and position themselves within broader narratives of identity, progress, and resistance. In this view, narratives are not merely reflections of reality; they are constitutive of how organisational change is constructed, justified, and lived. This makes narrative analysis particularly well-suited to studying change processes that affect not just operations, but also the organisational culture. To ensure analytical depth, each case study is based on multiple sources of data, including in-depth interviews, participatory observation (where possible), and secondary document analysis (such as internal reports, strategic plans, institutional publications, official websites, social media pages).

The analysis of the collected organisational narratives was conducted using Greimas's structural method, particularly the actantial model (Iannotta and Polidoro, 2023). This model goes beyond surface-level thematic coding by revealing the deep structure of meaning embedded in each narrative. It identifies six core actants—Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, Opponent, which serve to map the relational and symbolic roles that characters (human or non-human) play in the pursuit of organisational goals. By analysing how these actants interact across the axes of desire, power, and value transmission, the research uncovers the narrative logics that structure organisational change: *Who is driving the change? What is at stake? Who supports or resists it, and why?*

In addition to this structural lens, a pragmatic analysis (Poggio, 2004) was also conducted to examine the perceived risks and benefits of change from the organisational actors' standpoint, particularly in cases involving technological innovation. This allowed us to capture

not just the narrative structure, but also the emotional and evaluative layers of employees' experiences, highlighting how change can simultaneously provoke hope, fear, enthusiasm, and resistance.

The narrative-based methodological design provides a rigorous and human-centred framework for analysing organisational change. By treating stories not just as data but as meaning-making devices, we can construct in-depth interpretations that reveal how individuals navigate and co-construct change within their specific cultural and organisational contexts. Through this lens, the complexity of transformation is not simplified but embraced, offering readers a deeper understanding of what it means to change from the inside out.

The book is structured into six chapters, each dedicated to a core theme related to organisational change.

Chapter 1 offers a critical review of the academic and policy literature on competencies, professions, and organisational transformation. It establishes the theoretical basis for understanding the shifting landscape of work and learning in response to technological, cultural, and strategic pressures.

Chapters 2 to 6 are organised thematically. Each chapter begins with a theoretical background section that contextualises the focus topic (e.g., emerging professions, leadership, digitalisation, learning, or well-being). This is followed by a detailed case study drawn from an Italian organisation actively engaged in transformation. Each case is analysed through a learning-oriented lens, highlighting how roles, skills, and values evolve within change processes. Finally, each chapter closes with a discussion section, where findings are interpreted considering the theoretical framework, with attention to transferable insights and limitations.

For example, Chapter 4 explores how organisational learning is embedded in systems and culture through a case study of Ecostruct Italia. Chapter 5 examines digital inclusion and change in SMEs via the "*Crescere in Digitale*" (Growing Digitally) initiative, integrating analysis with a narrative and actantial model. Chapter 6 turns attention to well-being, exploring the human dimension of change in the case of CDA, where environment, people and territory become key pillars of organisational transformation. In the conclusion section of the book

the cross-cutting insights from all instances are synthesised, arguing for a paradigm shift in how we conceive of organisational change, not as a top-down imposition or technical adjustment, but as a co-constructed process grounded in learning, trust, wellbeing and human development with human values and needs at the centre of the transformation.

This methodological structure ensures coherence across chapters while allowing for depth in each case. It reflects an understanding of organisational change as a complex, situated, and often non-linear phenomenon, best captured through contextual, qualitative inquiry. By focusing on real-world stories from the Italian context, the book contributes to both academic debates and practical conversations on the future of work in transformative environments.

CHAPTER I

ROLES, SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES FOR THE ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE: AN OVERVIEW

In recent years, both academic and professional communities have shown growing interest in understanding how organisations can effectively navigate change. Research has explored a wide range of triggers, from technological advances to evolving employee and customer expectations, and the conditions that enable successful transformation. A particularly insightful contribution comes from Errida and Lotfi (2021), who reviewed 37 change management models and distilled 74 influencing sub-factors into 12 key areas, including a clear and shared vision and strategy of change, change readiness and capacity for change, change team performance, activities for managing change management, resistance management, effective communication, motivation of employees and change agents, stakeholder engagement, leadership and sponsorship, reinforcement and sustainment of change, approach and planning for change, monitoring/measurement. This research reveals that successful change is not just about good planning; it requires specific skills, support, and a capacity for adaptation across all organisational levels. Some studies also highlight the importance of clearly defined roles to drive managerial change. For instance, Crawford and Hassner Nahmias (2010) differentiate the roles of project and change Managers. While both deal with communication and planning, project managers tend to concentrate on delivery and risk, whereas change managers focus on people and behavioural shifts. According to the

authors, key skills across both roles include leadership, the ability to engage stakeholders and cultural awareness. Beyond these specific roles, effective change demands the active development of the organisational leadership. Scholars such as Heilmann (2007) argue that leaders must be flexible, emotionally intelligent, and continuously learning to manage change efficiently. The leadership framework described by the study of Aitken and Von Treuer (2021) identifies competencies across four domains: strategic vision, relationship-building, operational coordination, and personal resilience, which are essential not only for guiding change but also for fostering trust and a sense of belonging among employees during the period of transformation. In fact, on the employee side, emotional intelligence is increasingly recognised as vital to dealing with organisational change. Jordan (2004) notes that self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy can significantly enhance employees' adaptability and engagement, helping to create more resilient and learning-oriented organisations.

Beyond academia, practitioners have taken part in this discussion. The Italian blog *risorseumane-HR.it* has been exploring in recent years the role of general managers and HR professionals in supporting ongoing organisational changes. One prominent theme that emerges from the blog is the shifting role of managers, as depicted in "Managers in crisis when faced with change" (2025), where leaders are under pressure to juggle performance goals, digital innovation, and the expectations of a new generation of employees. This article emphasises that today's managers have to be strategic, empathetic, and digitally competent to address organisational transformation. The importance of monitoring and evaluating change is highlighted in "Monitoring and Evaluating Organisational Change" (2024), which argues that data-driven decision-making and continuous feedback are critical for successful transformation, but to be able to do this, specific preparation and skills are required. The article "Change: Adapt, Resist, Depend on..." (2023) reveals through survey data that most workers favour adaptive approaches to change, while others adopt more situational or resistant stances, suggesting the need for different personalised leadership styles that respect diverse perspectives of their followers. In the article "Business Anthropology" (2023), a cultural and psychological perspective has