Project Manager's Role in Change and Resistance

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Cite this paper:

Chahal S. K. (2025). Project Manager's Role in Change and Resistance, *Scientific Societal & Behavioral Journal*, 1(1), 66-77. DOI: 10.63329/av3nz1237

Abstract
Project managers play a critical role in managing change and addressing resistance within organizations. Project managers enhance the chances of successful project completion by proactively recognizing and reducing potential resistance, encouraging stakeholder support, facilitating effective communication, and consistently monitoring progress. Several theories on change and resistance offer useful frameworks for understanding these dynamics, but their practical implementation requires adjustment to specific organizational contexts. A comprehensive research approach that includes both primary and secondary data collection methods can provide thorough insights into the project manager's role in change management. The findings validate the significance of communication, leadership style, employee involvement, training, change agents, resistance management strategies, cultural sensitivity, feedback mechanisms, emotional intelligence, and change readiness evaluations in successful change initiatives.

Introduction

A project manager has a critical role in managing change and handling organizational resistance (Kumar, 2020). The primary objective is to ensure successful implementation of project by proactively identifying potential resistance, reducing its impact, and promoting adaptability culture among stakeholders. Change is a fundamental part of any project, bringing in new processes, systems, or structures that disrupt the current situation (Kumar, 2020). Individuals frequently exhibit reluctance to embrace change, stemming from apprehension about the unfamiliar worries regarding employment stability, or an insufficient understanding of the potential benefits associated with the proposed change. By not addressing this resistance can result in project delays, higher costs, and lower adoption rates, ultimately jeopardizing the project's success.

The ultimate objective of a project manager's role in change and resistance management is to ensure the successful implementation of a project by proactively identifying potential resistance,

mitigating its impact, and fostering a culture of adaptability among stakeholders (Kumar, 2020; Barrett, 2021; Panel, 2023). By developing a comprehensive change management plan, fostering stakeholder buy-in, identifying and mitigating resistance, facilitating effective communication, and continuously monitoring and adjusting the change management approach, the project manager aims to minimize project delays, reduce costs, and increase adoption rates. The ultimate goal is to lead the project team through the change process smoothly. It is done by ensuring that both the technical aspects of the project and the human factors are effectively addressed for successful project delivery and long-term organizational resilience.

The project manager's role in change management involves several key responsibilities:

Creating a Change Management Plan entails developing strategies for communication, training, engaging stakeholders, and addressing resistance (Creasey, 2024). This plan serves as a guide for effectively handling the change process and overcoming potential challenges (Creasey, 2023). Securing Stakeholder Buy-in is crucial, involving early engagement and maintaining open communication to build trust and tackle concerns. The project manager needs to collaborate with sponsors (Bertsche, 2024), change agents (Barrett, 2021), and affected teams to understand their viewpoints and tailor the change approach accordingly (Dye, 2011).

Identifying and managing resistance involves conducting readiness assessments and monitoring feedback to proactively spot sources of resistance. The project manager can then implement targeted strategies, such as providing extra training, clarifying the rationale for change, or addressing specific concerns raised by stakeholders (Creasey, 2023). On the other hand, for enabling effective communication, it is essential that the project manager must ensure stakeholders receive timely updates, comprehend the benefits of the change, and have access to resources and support during the transition (Creasey, 2024).

Transformation is an ongoing process, and the project manager needs to constantly track progress, gather input, and modify the change management strategy as necessary (Creasey, 2023). This flexibility ensures that the project remains attuned to organizational needs and promptly addresses emerging challenges. The project manager's responsibilities in change and resistance management cover all stages of the project, from beginning to end. During the planning phase, the project manager collaborates with change management experts to devise a thorough strategy and plan. Throughout execution, the project manager supervises the implementation of the change management plan, facilitates communication, and deals with resistance as it arises.

Successful change and resistance management necessitates a comprehensive approach that takes into consideration both the technical aspects of the project and the human elements involved. The project manager must find a balance between delivering the project's output and ensuring that stakeholders are prepared and ready to accept the change (Creasey, 2023). By actively addressing opposition and fostering an adaptable organizational culture, the project leader can improve the chances of the project being completed successfully (Suda,2007). Moreover, they can increase the rate of user acceptance (Newton, 2023). It also helps the organization become more resilient in the long run when facing changes (Panel, 2024).

From planning to execution, the project manager's responsibilities are evident at all key stages (Gurnvo, 2024). To develop a comprehensive plan, the project manager works with change management specialists throughout the planning stage (Kumar, 2020). They facilitate communication, deal with objections, and oversee the plan's execution during execution (Carroll,

2025). To ensure successful project delivery and stakeholder readiness, effective management change requires finding a balance between the project's technical and human factors. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore the project manager's role in effectively managing change and resistance to ensure successful project delivery and long-term organizational resilience.

Literature Review

Theories on Change and Resistance

Different theories have been suggested to comprehend the dynamics of change and resistance within organizations (Wren, 2024). Change process include several steps (Kaur & Ferreira-Sutherland, 2024). Lewin's Three-Step Model is a prominent theory that suggests the process of change encompasses three key stages: unfreezing the current state, implementing the desired change, and solidifying the new state (resistance to change) (Lewin, 1951; Burnes, 2020; Carroll, 2025). This model emphasizes the significance of preparing people and organizations for change by addressing potential resistance and cultivating a supportive environment to facilitate the transition.

Kotter's influential Eight-Step Process for leading change emphasizes the importance of creating a sense of urgency, forming a guiding coalition, establishing a clear vision, communicating effectively, empowering employees, achieving short-term successes, and integrating the change into the organization's culture (Kotter, 1996; Bedard, 2024). In other words, to understand ways to overcome the resistance to change (Council, 2017). This approach highlights the importance of leadership, stakeholder engagement, and continual reinforcement throughout the change process. The Theories of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior developed by Ajzen and Fishbein (1991) offer valuable insights into the factors that shape individuals' intentions and behaviors towards change (resistance to change) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1991; Aizen, 2012 LaCaille, 2013). These theories suggest that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly shape individuals' responses to change initiatives.

The existing theories on change and resistance offer valuable frameworks, but they often struggle in practical application. One common criticism is that these models oversimplify the complex and dynamic nature of organizational change (Sullivan et al., 2011; Legaspi, 2024), failing to consider the unique contexts and nuances of different organizations and projects (Ojiaku, 2024).

Lewin's Three-Step Model has been criticized for its linear and fixed approach, which may not adequately reflect the iterative and non-linear nature of change processes within contemporary organizations, especially regarding resistance to change (Cummings et al., 2016). Furthermore, the model presumes a certain degree of stability and equilibrium, which may not be consistent with the rapidly changing business environments of today. On the other hand, Kotter's Eight-Step Process, despite its wide adoption, has been questioned for its prescriptive nature and the assumption that change can be managed through a sequential and structured approach (Graves et al., 2023). Critics argue that change is often vague, unpredictable, and influenced by various external and internal factors (Sullivan et al., 2011)), that may not fit neatly into a predefined set of steps.

The Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behavior have been criticized for their focus on individual decision-making processes, potentially overlooking the broader organizational and contextual factors that shape change resistance (Madden et al., 1992; Hagger, 2019).

Additionally, these theories may not fully capture the complexities of group dynamics and the influence of social norms on individual behaviors within organizations. Despite these criticisms, these theories offer valuable insights and serve as starting points for understanding change and resistance. However, project managers must adapt and tailor these frameworks to the specific contexts and challenges they face, rather than treating them as rigid prescriptions.

Effective change management necessitates a nuanced and contextual approach that considers the unique organizational culture, stakeholder dynamics, and external factors influencing the project (Redman, 2021). Project managers must adeptly navigate the complexities of change, foster open communication, and actively engage stakeholders throughout the process (van Marrewijk, 2018).

It is important to recognize that resistance is not necessarily a negative thing. It can often arise from legitimate concerns or a lack of understanding about the change initiative. By embracing productive resistance and viewing it as an opportunity for dialogue and improvement, project managers can enhance the quality of the change process and increase the likelihood of successful implementation and adoption.

In summary, while existing theories offer valuable frameworks for understanding change and resistance, their practical application demands adaptation, flexibility, and a deep understanding of the specific organizational context. Project managers must adopt a holistic and contextual approach, using these theories as guiding principles while remaining agile and responsive to the unique challenges and dynamics of each change initiative.

Research Methodology

Depending on the type of study, there are several kinds of research philosophy (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013; Kaur et al., 2024). The interpretivism philosophy is employed in this study because it helps in the researcher's understanding of reality through qualitative analysis (Pervin & Mokhtarm 2022). Research design refers to overall strategy along with the analytical approach (De Vaus,2006). Data is gathered quickly by using a cross-sectional design (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). In other words, in one time lag data is gathered. As a result, cross-sectional design has been used. In an observational study, a research issue is addressed only by the researcher's observations. The research subjects are not manipulated or interfered with, and there are no treatment or control groups (Thamhain, 2006). In this study, many teams working on various projects were examined using observation techniques to understand how change impacts them and resistance to change (Thamhain, 2006). Being part of different teams working on different projects gives an opportunity to understand project manager's role in change and resistance. Observational techniques were employed to assess how the change is dealt by team members in different workplace settings (Abildgaard et al., 2016). A total of 20 sets of observations were carried out with the consent of the departments. Each set has 4-to-5 members working under a manager or a team leader. The observed groups were not controlled so that natural reactions are noted.

Secondary data is the secondhand data (i.e., preexisting information) already gathered by someone else (Haque, 2020; Haque et al., 2023). Such data is often helpful to gain a deep understanding of the research phenomena. In this article, secondary data is preferred because of the cost-effectiveness and limited timeframe. Using qualitative methods, thematic analysis was employed to examine the key variables. In this study, data has been collected from different sources, especially YU library and online database. A total of 132 articles were examined as the project manager's role in change and resistance. Moreover, the data was gathered through bibliometric

analysis, which helps in confining data specificity. It helps in selection of the papers and administering it closely. Only those papers were selected that were published in Scopus databases. The findings are also graphically represented based on the literature at hand.

Based on the available literature, a graphical representation is made to show the key aspects (Table 1).

Table 1: Key aspects identified in reviewed papers

Aspect	Frequency
Communication as Key Factor	98
Leadership Style Impact	85
Employee Involvement Importance	90
Training and Development Role	80
Resistance as a Major Challenge	110
Use of Lewin's Change Model	45
Use of Kotter's 8-Step Model	60
Use of Theory of Planned Behavior	30
Quantitative Studies	50
Qualitative Studies	60
Mixed-Methods Studies	22

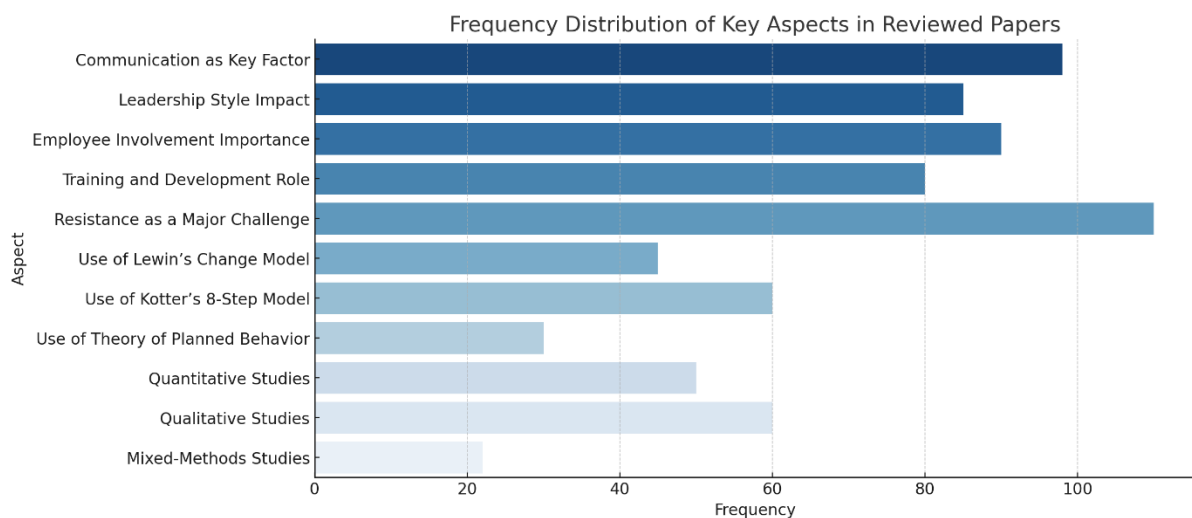Source: *own illustration based on the literature*

Figure 1: *author's illustration - key aspects in reviewed papers*

Explain the figure here- This figure presents a bar chart showing the frequency distribution of key aspects discussed in reviewed papers. The X-axis represents the frequency of occurrence, whereas the Y-axis lists different aspects related to organizational change.
Resistance as a major challenge appears to be the most discussed topic in the reviewed papers which is exceeding 100 occurrences.

Findings and Discussions

Below are the key findings availed from the detailed review of the existing literature (Table 2):

Table 2: Factors and key findings

Factors	Key Findings	Supporting Literature

Communication Role	Effective communication reduces resistance, builds trust, and keeps stakeholders informed and engaged.	Kotter (1996), Lewis (2011)
Leadership Style	Transformational leadership fosters a supportive environment, inspires commitment, and reduces resistance to change.	Bass (1999), Judge & Piccolo (2004)
Employee Involvement	Involving employees early in the change process increases their commitment and reduces resistance.	Burnes (2004), Armenakis & Bedeian (1999)
Training and Development	Offering training programs helps employees adapt to new skills, reducing resistance and increasing confidence in the change process.	Kotter (1996), Nadler & Tushman (1989)
Change Agents	Project managers acting as change agents play a key role in facilitating change, guiding employees, and addressing resistance effectively.	Lunenburg (2010), Caldwell (2003)
Resistance Management	Strategies such as negotiation, support, and education help manage resistance and encourage collaboration.	Kotter & Schlesinger (2008)
Cultural Awareness	Understanding and navigating organizational culture helps project managers reduce resistance by respecting norms and values.	Schein (1992), Cameron & Quinn (2006)
Feedback Mechanisms	Creating channels for employee feedback allows for addressing concerns early and making real-time adjustments to the change process.	Kotter (1996), Armenakis et al. (1993)
Emotional Intelligence	High emotional intelligence in project managers helps manage interpersonal relationships and effectively address employee concerns.	Goleman (1995), Clarke (2010)
Change Readiness	Assessing the organization's readiness for change helps anticipate resistance and prepare targeted strategies to address it.	Armenakis et al. (1993), Holt et al. (2007)

Source: *author's illustration*

The systematic review points to several important facets of project managers' approaches to dealing with organizational resistance and change management. The observations highlight how crucial staff engagement, training, communication, leadership style, resistance management, and other elements are in determining how successful change projects are. the examination of the available literature on the tactics used by project managers to effectively handle opposition and guarantee a seamless transition throughout organizational changes. The results show that project managers are more successful at managing change when they encourage open communication to resolve issues and lessen opposition. Communication is key to success (Haq & Faizan, 2023). Building trust and making sure that all parties involved are informed and involved in the process depend heavily on effective communication. The findings of Lewis (2011) and Kotter (1996), who emphasize the value of timely, clear, and transparent communication throughout organizational transformation, are consistent with this. Project managers reduce opposition and boost employee buy-in by clearly communicating the benefits of change while paying attention to their concerns. This communication strategy lessens uncertainty and increases employees' sense of support throughout changes.

In addition, the function of leadership style in handling resistance (opposition) is another important discovery obtained through systematic review. Observations revealed that resistance to changing efforts is lower for project managers using transformational leadership approaches. Our observation also confirmed therefore the findings are in line with other studies by Judge & Piccolo (2004) and Bass (1999), which emphasize how transformational leadership creates a motivating and encouraging atmosphere. By addressing their concerns and encouraging a feeling of ownership, transformational leaders help staff members embrace the company vision and navigate the process

of change. As a result, resistance is reduced and change implementation is more successful. Interestingly, the observation revealed that team members active engagement and participation is pivotal for the successful implementation of change. The significance of employee involvement in the transition process is also emphasized by the existing literature. The observation showed that employees' resistance to change reduces and their level of commitment to the project rises when they are actively involved in the process. This is consistent with the findings of Burnes (2004) and Armenakis & Bedeian (1999) whose studies found that employee participation increases employees' willingness to support change initiatives by fostering a sense of ownership and belonging. Early team involvement by project managers not only reduces resistance but also gives workers the confidence to participate in the change process, promoting easier transitions and better results.

The observations also revealed that availability of training and development initiatives work towards reducing change resistance. The observations revealed that resistance levels are often lower when project managers provide training programs by assisting team members in learning new skills and adjusting to change. This research supports the work of Kotter (1996) and Nadler & Tushman (1989) that training gives team members the skills required to deal skillfully with change. Project managers may reduce uncertainty and boost trust in the change process by addressing the skills gap and preparing team members for the changes. In addition to that, observation also revealed that the manager's role as a change agent is important. Hence, managing resistance is directly improved by project managers who take on the role of change agents. Our findings indicate that project managers who adopt the position of change agents facilitate communication, offer direction, and deal with resistance as it appears to make transitions go more smoothly. Hence, we oppose the work of Barrett (2021), who argued that project manager cannot be a change agent. On the other hand, our observation supports the work of Lunenburg (2010) and Caldwell (2003), confirming the need of change agents in ensuring that change projects are carried out successfully. In addition to offering the required guidance and assistance, change agents cultivate an environment of candor and openness among staff members, which lessens opposition and makes it easier for change to be successfully adopted. Observation also supports the work of Kaur & Ferreira-Sutherland (2024) that training enables employees to embrace change.

Findings from observations also revealed that project managers employ a range of tactics, such as assistance, education, and negotiation, to overcome resistance. The creativity of employees reduces in case of no guidance (Faizan et al., 2022). One important tactic for getting over resistance was to utilize negotiation to address issues and make concessions, as well as to give emotional and informational support. This supports the findings of Kotter & Schlesinger (2008) that applying these tactics can reduce conflict and promote teamwork. Project managers being adaptive and sensitive to resistance may modify their strategies to address issues, which lowers opposition and boosts change acceptability. In addition to that, observation revealed that cultural knowledge is important to overcome resistance during change. It became clear that controlling resistance required cultural sensitivity. Observations revealed that project managers with cultural awareness and knowledge are more effective in overcoming opposition. They can understand the values and views of the stakeholders. This is consistent with the work of Schein (1992) and Cameron & Quinn (2006) work that emphasize on how crucial it is to understand corporate culture to manage change. By addressing resistance in a way that respects organizational norms, a project manager's ability to handle cultural dynamics makes the change process more seamless and palatable.

Another important discovery from observations was that the use of feedback systems to collect opinions and concerns from team members on the process of change is essential. It is observed that employees feel more engaged and felt being heard when project managers establish channels for continuous input, which reduces resistance. This is aligned with the work of Kotter (1996) and Armenakis et al. (1993), indicating that the importance of feedback in improving the change process and promptly resolving new issues. Additionally, feedback methods offer a chance for ongoing enhancement, guaranteeing that the process of change is swift. Additionally, our observation revealed that there are lower levels of resistance found to be linked with project managers' emotional intelligence. Observations showed that project managers with high emotional intelligence are more adept at recognizing and resolving team problems, which helps in controlling and overpowering resistance. This result is aligned with the work of Goleman (1995) and Clarke (2010) that emotional intelligence is crucial for resolving opposition during organizational transformation and managing interpersonal interactions. Thus, it could be narrated that emotionally intelligent project managers may successfully lead change initiatives and overcome resistance by demonstrating empathy, self-awareness, and social skills. Lastly, the observations showed that a key tactic for handling opposition (resistance) was evaluating change readiness. Project managers are better able to foresee any opposition and deal proactively with it when they evaluate an organization's preparedness for change. This supports the research of Holt et al. (2007) and Armenakis et al. (1993), highlighting the significance of determining change readiness to lessen resistance. Perhaps project managers can create focused plans to solve certain issues before they worsen by seeing possible opposition early on.
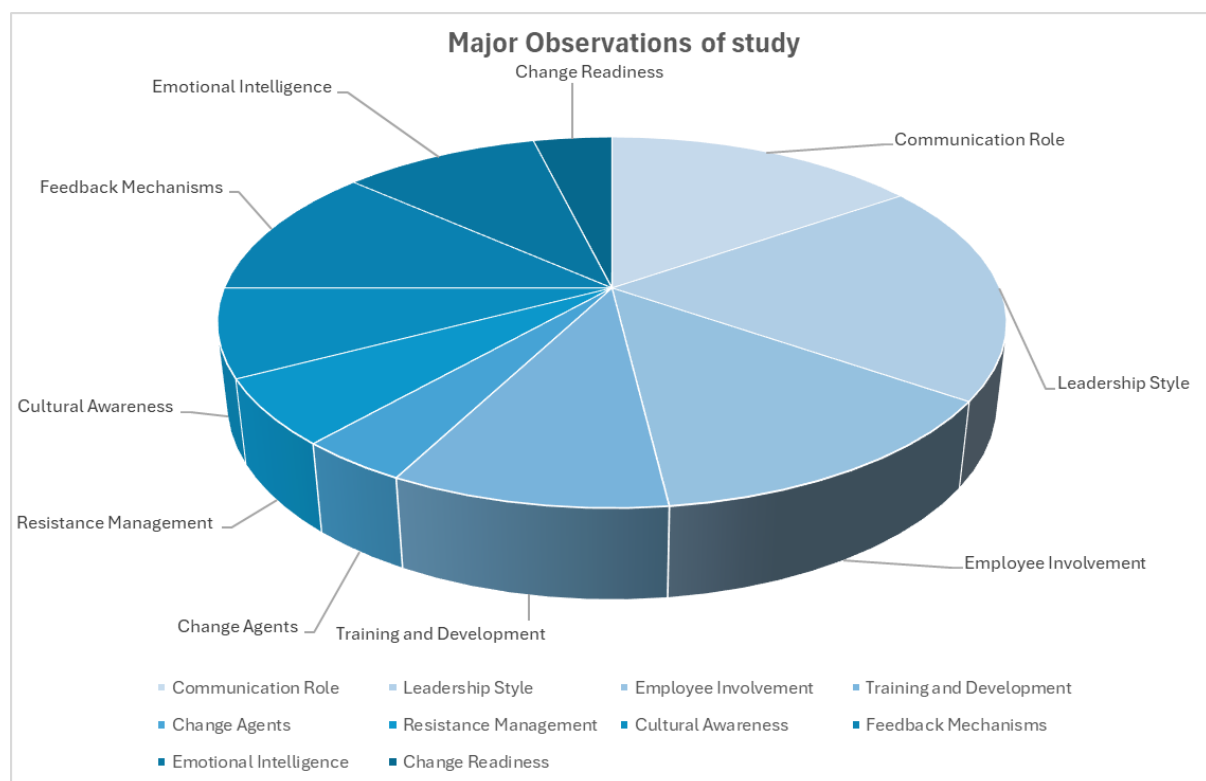

Figure 2: *author's illustration of major findings driven from observation*

The observational results of this study add to and validate previous research on the project manager's function in handling resistance and change. Project managers use a variety of tactics, including training, employee participation, communication, leadership style, and emotional

intelligence, all of which are in accordance with the best practices found in the literature at hand on change management. However, communication is the most important factor, followed by leadership, employee engagement, feedback mechanism, training and development, and so on (Figure 2). Overcoming resistance requires flexibility and adaptation because every business has different problems that call for different approaches. Although, if these tactics work, it's crucial to remember that their effectiveness varies depending on the situation. Implementing the best 'change management' techniques required project managers to be able to evaluate the requirements of their teams and organizations. Effective leadership, communication, feedback, and training may all greatly lower resistance and increase the likelihood that a project will be completed successfully.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, project managers play a pivotal role in navigating change and managing resistance within organizations. While existing theories offer valuable insights, their practical application requires flexibility and adaptation to the unique contexts of each project. Effective communication, leadership, employee involvement, training, change agents, resistance management strategies, cultural awareness, feedback mechanisms, emotional intelligence, and change readiness assessments emerge as key factors in successful change initiatives. By embracing a holistic and contextual approach, project managers can enhance the quality of change processes and increase the likelihood of successful implementation and adoption.

In the future, project managers must acknowledge the limitations of current theories and frameworks Reflecting the dynamic and intricate characteristics of organizational change. Subsequent research should prioritize the development of more adaptable models to address the diverse challenges faced in real-world change initiatives. Additionally, highlighting the significance of emotional intelligence and cultural awareness in change management training programs for project managers can improve their ability to navigate resistance effectively. Furthermore, organizations should give priority to establishing strong feedback mechanisms and investing in change readiness assessments to proactively identify and handle sources of resistance. Through continuous evolution and refinement of their approaches based on emerging best practices and lessons learned, project managers can enhance their effectiveness in leading successful change initiatives and contributing to organizational resilience in the face of change.

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