

Step Two: Considering Existing Theories of Change

The next step is to try to see where and how your ideas about change align with elements of existing theories. We find Kezar’s “Theories of Change” (a chapter in *How Colleges Change*) a useful overview. That chapter includes a chart outlining (briefly!) characteristics associated with six dominant theories of change, which we’ve adapted in the table below.

Directions

Read over your own examples and start to highlight the characteristics that best align with your approach in each row. Don’t fret if these aren’t in a straight line— they probably won’t be! The idea is to start to attach some names to your idea(s) about change: why and how you think it happens, through what processes, with what outcomes and effects, through what tactics.

Table 3.1. Learning Theories and Leadership Practices

	Scientific management theories	Evolutionary theories	Political	Social cognition	Cultural	Institutional/ neo-institutional
Examples	Organizational development; strategic planning; reengineering, total quality management	Resource dependency; strategic choice; population ecology	Empowerment; bargaining; political change; Marxist theory	Single- and double-looped learning; organizational learning; paradigm shifting; sensemaking	Interpretive strategy; paradigm shifting; process change	Isomorphism; institutional entrepreneurship (see DiMaggio, 1988 ¹ , e.g.); academic capitalism
Why change occurs	Motivated by leaders/ supported by internal environment	External environment	Dialectical tension of values, norms, or patterns	Cognitive dissonance; appropriateness	Response to alterations in environment	External pressure combined with institutional norms
Process of change	Rational, linear, purposeful. Motivated by leaders/ organizations, not externalities/ context	Adaptation, slow, gradual, non-intentional	First order, then occasional second order, negotiation, and power	Learning; altering paradigms or lenses; interconnected and complex	Long term; slow; change in symbolic processes; non-linear; unpredictable	Exchange of adaptations and schemas; norms

¹ DiMaggio, Paul. 1988. “Interest and Agency in Institutional Theory.” In *Institutional Patterns and Organizations*, edited by L. Zucker, 3-21. Ballinger.

Outcomes of change	New structures and organizing principles (e.g., new “org chart”)	New structures and processes; first order	New organizational ideology	New frame of mind	New culture	New schema and norms
Type of change	Planned, organizational, first order (see Kezar, <i>How Colleges Change</i> ; also see Wardle, this collection)	Unplanned, external	First and second order; organizational and enterprise	Second-order and more individual in focus	Second-order; organizational; planning and unplanned	Unplanned; organizational changes tied to external environment
Tactics	Create infrastructure to respond to changes; strong steering committee; nimble/flexible structures	Create infrastructure to respond to changes; strong steering committee; nimble/flexible structures	Create coalitions; identify allies; build agenda; create collective vision; negotiate	Create data teams; build data infrastructure; enhance systems thinking through training; facilitate interaction	Appeal to values; examine history and context to understand underlying values; alter mission; create new rituals	Understand external forces; buffer institutions; analyze schemas and norms; align external interests
Context	Largely ignored	Systems approach with emphasis on external pressures and interactions with organization	Different settings/different politics, but politics are transcendent of some contexts to some degree	Context largely ignored	Historical, social, environmental, organizational; multiple levels and types of context explored	Internal environmental schema and interaction with external environment are focus of context
Key metaphor	Change master	Self-producing organism	Social movement	Brain	Social movement	Iron cage (isomorphism) (see DiMaggio and Powell, 1983 ²)
Criticisms	Lack of human emphasis; deterministic	Lack of human emphasis; deterministic	Deterministic; lack of attention to environmental	Deemphasizes environment and overemphasizes	Impractical to guide leaders; focus on universalistic	Hard to document external forces; does not account for agency; often

² DiMaggio, Paul and Powell, Walter. 1983. “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields.” *American Sociological Review* 48 (2): 147-160.

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			concerns; little guidance for leaders	ease of change; ignores values and emotions	culture; mostly untested	overemphasizes lack of change or static nature
Benefits	Environmental emphasis; systems approach	Environmental emphasis; systems approach	Change not always progressive; irrationality; role of power	Emphasizes socially constructed nature; emphasis on individuals; habits and attitudes as barriers	Emphasizes context; irrationality; values and beliefs; multiple levels of change	Attention to macro context; norms and power, irrationality; fields and complexity of power

Adapted from Kezar, Adrianna. 2018. "Theories of Change: A Brief Overview," in *How Colleges Change: Understanding, Leading, and Enacting Change*, 2nd ed. Routledge. 42–64.

If you find that you need more information on theories of change than what's included in the adapted chart above, we strongly encourage you to read Kezar's "Theories of Change," a chapter in *How Colleges Change* (2018). This excellent synthesis also includes references to multiple other papers on change theory.