ADKAR Change Model

Many changes at work fail, not because the plan is bad, but because people do not change the way they work. Jeff Hiatt, the founder of the change management firm Prosci, created the ADKAR model to explain how one person moves through a change. ADKAR stands for five steps: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability and Reinforcement. Each step builds on the one before it, so one missing step can block the whole change. Leaders use the model to see where a person is stuck and what kind of help that person needs next.

1. Awareness

The first step is awareness of why the change is needed. People rarely accept a change when they do not understand the reason behind it. Awareness answers simple questions: what is changing, why now, and what is the risk if nothing changes? The message works best when it comes from leaders whom people trust, and when it is repeated more than once. Awareness is not the same as agreement; it only means that the reason is clear.

Example: A family doctor tells a patient that his blood sugar is too high. This builds awareness: the patient now knows why his eating habits must change. Without that reason, the advice to eat less sugar would feel like a random rule.

At work: Wael, a team leader in customer service, must move his team to a new customer system. He builds awareness first: he shows the team that customers wait too long because the old system loses their history. The team now understands why the change is happening.

2. Desire

The second step is the desire to support the change and take part in it. Understanding a reason does not mean wanting to act on it. Desire depends on personal questions: what will I gain, and what will I lose? People may resist because they fear more work, less status or failure. Leaders build desire by listening to these concerns, involving people early, and showing the personal benefits honestly.

Example: A smoker knows that smoking is harmful, but nothing changes. Desire grows when his daughter asks him to be at her graduation in good health. Now he has his own reason to quit.

At work: Some agents in Wael's team fear that the new system will slow them down. Wael works on desire: he listens to their worries and asks two respected agents to test the system first. When the others see that it saves them typing, more agents want to join.

3. Knowledge

The third step is knowledge of how to change. Once people want the change, they need to know what to do differently. Knowledge includes training on new tools, new processes and new roles. It should be practical, well timed, and adapted to what each person already knows. Training that comes too early, before people have the desire, is often forgotten.

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Example: Someone who wants to eat healthily needs knowledge, not only good intentions. A short cooking course teaches simple meals with less sugar. Now this person knows how to make the change.

At work: Wael arranges knowledge sessions: short training on how to find a customer's history in the new system. Each agent also gets a one-page guide with the main steps. The team now knows what to do.

4. Ability

The fourth step is the ability to apply the change in real work. Knowing how to do something is not the same as being able to do it under pressure. Ability grows through practice, coaching and time. Leaders remove barriers, give feedback, and accept that performance may drop for a short while. The gap between knowledge and ability is where many changes quietly fail.

Example: Someone who has read about driving still needs hours on the road before driving well. Ability comes with practice: a patient teacher sits beside the learner on quiet roads first. After many lessons, the learner drives safely in traffic.

At work: In the first week, the agents know the new system but are slow on live calls. Wael builds ability: he sits with each agent during practice calls and coaches on the spot. After two weeks, they handle calls with confidence.

5. Reinforcement

The fifth step is reinforcement, which keeps the change in place. Without it, people often slide back to old habits. Reinforcement can be recognition, rewards, sharing early successes, or checking that the new way is really used. It also means removing the old way, so that going back is no longer easy. A change is complete when it becomes the normal way of working.

Example: A person who has started running loses motivation after a month. Reinforcement helps: a running partner, a small reward after each goal, and a record of progress. Running becomes a habit.

At work: Wael uses reinforcement: he praises agents who solve problems faster, shares the team's customer results every month, and switches off the old system. Nobody goes back to the old way.

Conclusion

In summary, the ADKAR model describes five steps that every person goes through in a change: awareness, desire, knowledge, ability and reinforcement. The order matters, because training cannot help someone who does not want to change. When a change stalls, leaders can look for the missing step for each person and work on that step. Organisations change only when their people change, one person at a time.

Sources

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